

“It wasn’t funny,” Jackal grumbled in response to the chuckling as they walked to the next house.

“It sort of was,” Don said, between chuckles. “You, made to quiver by a dog; not a big one at that.”

The fighter rounded on the sorcerer. “You have no idea what those things are capable of. I don’t care how small it was. They’re a danger to anything decent.”

“You should be fine, then,” Mez said, as Don stepped back, hands raised, but grinning.

“These things aren’t normal.” Jackal looked up. “One of you made them! Come on, fess-up! Nothing that evil comes about naturally!”

“You have experienced little of the world,” Khumdar said. “If you had found yourself facing a badger, you would not think so.”

“I don’t know what those are, but they’re probably dungeon creations, too.” Jackal shuddered, and Tibs fought against smiling.

The lock on this door was like the previous ones, and Tibs realized those had only seemed complex because they were different from the ones he had encountered before. Now, he could envision the type of tools a thief would need to get through them.

“I’ll stand guard,” Jackal said. “In case one of those things comes back.”

“You know,” Don said. “It’s unlikely there will be another one inside.”

There was nothing there with essence, but Tibs kept that to himself.

“Then you’ll be fine, right?” the fighter replied.

Inside was much like the others. A living room with stone and metal furniture, and an area to prepare food. This room was smaller, making space for a third one. It reminded Tibs of Zacharia’s art room. Bowls contained dried colors, brushes lay scattered on the bench and metal frames rested against the wall.

“It’s going to take until the abyss gets here to go through every building,” Mez said, poking into the room. “Can’t you tell where the important stuff is, Tibs?”

“No.” He picked up a frame and wondered what it might have been used for and reflexively extended his sense. “There isn’t anything that—There is something,” he said in surprised as a difference registered at the edge. He couldn’t make out what it was, other than it wasn’t like anything else he sensed.

“Loot?” Jackal asked, looking into the art room

“What happened to standing guard?” Don asked.

“Got bored.”

Tibs walked out of the room. “I don’t know.” Don was looking over a translucent container. “The essence doesn’t... I don’t have words to describe it. Flow is the best I can think of.”

“We shouldn’t just go there,” Don said as Jackal opened his mouth, expression eager. “One of these houses might have something important. A clue to where the boss room is.”

“We’ll come back after checking what Tibs is sensing.” Jackal exited and with a shrug, Tibs followed.

He sensed the houses they passed, and they registered much like the others. Some were larger, some smaller. Some had shelves and counters near the entrance that reminded Tibs of the shops in Kragle Rock. He also sensed four-legged creatures moving about between houses, but unlike on the previous floors, they didn’t seem to react to their

presence. As if they were just dogs like those in his town.

What he sensed didn't become easier to explain as it got closer. It was a structure in the center of a large plaza, one story in height and made of a black...something. It had to rough look of stone, but he couldn't sense the essence that made it. What he sensed didn't.... Flow was still the only word that came to him, even if it wasn't the right one. The essence didn't flow right to his sense.

"I wouldn't touch it," Don said, as Mez reached for the wall. "This doesn't..." he trailed off.

"You can sense it too?" Tibs asked.

"No." Don looked at Tibs, surprised. "I can't sense anything, and that's what bothers me. You can sense something?"

"Something...yes." Tibs shrugged.

"It just means there isn't any corruption," Jackal said, putting a hand on the wall next to Mez's. He frowned. "Or stone."

"Or fire," the archer said. "It's cool to the touch."

"That's the problem," Don said, before Tibs pointed out that he could sense the elements, just behind this...weave? No, that wasn't the right word, again. "We should all be able to sense our element within it. They are present everywhere."

"I didn't sense fire in those houses," Mez said.

"Then it's because you weren't paying attention." Don glared at the wall. "There might not be a lot in objects that aren't burning, but it's stills there. You just have to focus. Whatever this is, it's like some... opposite of elements."

"Is that a thing?" Jackal asked.

"Not that I've read. It reminds me of containers made to hold a concentrated essence, only this seems to hold everything back, which shouldn't be possible. Nearly every elements go into making the containers since that's basically what you need to ensure one element will be contained."

Tibs walked around the structure, which was only slightly larger than one of the houses, but more round. He narrowed his sense, trying to find a difference in the essences. What he found, he saw, instead of sensing, and he didn't think it was a good thing.

"There's a door," he called. "It doesn't have a lock."

"Is it trapped?" Don asked, the first to reach him. "How about triggers?"

"There aren't any essence triggers outside," Tibs replied. "And I can't tell anything about what the essence in the wall can do."

"What is it doing?"

"I don't know," Tibs snapped, then took a breath. His annoyance was at the situation, not Don. "The...flow isn't...right." He shrugged again. "Maybe that's why none of you can sense your element?"

"Or you are simply stronger than we are in this area and it lets you sense deeper."

"I can't sense anything inside the building," Tibs pointed out. It wasn't that it was empty; his sense stopped within that odd flow.

"That's not what I mean." Don studied the door while the others arrived. "Essence can be layered within the same space and—"

"Stop. I'm not dealing with that kind of headaches while on a run."

Don nodded as Jackal stepped between them, and before Tibs could stop him, pushed the door in.

“What?” the fighter asked in response to the glare.

“You do that again, and I’m telling Kroseph.”

“You said there aren’t any traps.”

“I said I can’t sense triggers outside. There’s no telling what the essence does.”

“It doesn’t explode,” Mez said.

“Or melt our esteemed leader’s hand off,” Khumdar offered. He smiled. “Maybe it summons dogs?”

“Don’t even joke about that.” Jackal looked around.

Tibs ignored the lack of anything happening with the building and extended his sense until it was beyond the plaza. He sensed the creatures whose essence was like dogs moving about, and he considered keeping what he could tell to himself, but Jackal’s worry was increasing.

“They aren’t coming here. They’re just wandering between the houses.” He made a ball of light and pushed it into the building’s darkness. As soon as it crossed the threshold, the essence grew until Tibs lost hold of it and the others backed away with surprised cries.

“What was that for?” Jackal asked, rubbing at his eyes.

“It wasn’t me.” Tibs tried to understand what had happened. “Cover your eyes.” He made another ball of light.

“I don’t think that’s…” Don cursed as Tibs sent it in.

It started before it was fully in. The part of the packed essence that crossed the threshold immediately grew, and try as he might, quickly there was too much of it for him to keep hold of. As far as he could sense, the essence within the wall hadn’t reacted. Even the light within it was still as it had been.

A hand pulled him back. “I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Jackal said.

Tibs’s foot had been raised to cross the threshold.

“It would be interesting to find out if it reacts to something containing essence,” Don said in a musing tone, “or only exposed essence.”

“You’re welcome to go in and find out,” Jackal replied harshly.

“You can’t send a teammate to his death,” Mez said, pulling an arrow from his quiver.

“That is definitely a bad idea,” Don said. Fire dances over it as the archer wove essence into arrow.

Mez grinned, putting the now ordinary looking arrow to the bowstring. “I can’t let Tibs have all the fun.” Don and Jackal moved away as he let it loose.

It happened nearly too fast for Tibs to sense, but the arrow ceased to be as the weave within it expanded, consuming it, then the heat rushed out of the door and surrounded Tibs and he couldn’t breathe. In that moment, he was back in the inferno, fire consuming him. Then he was cold, staggering away.

“Why did you stay there?” Jackal demanded, catching him.

“I forgot how hot fire gets,” Tibs replied, catching his breath.

“This hurt you?” Don asked, surprised.

“It’s fire,” Jackal snapped.

“But Tibs told me his elements can’t hurt him. He didn’t flinch at the light. Why

would this hurt him?"

"Well, fire does." Jackal glared at the archer. "That was stupid, Mez. Whatever's inside is probably destroyed now."

"I'm okay," Tibs protested and stepped to the doorway. "Nothing's changed in what I sense." He took a step back and pulled light essence to his hand.

"Tibs," Jackal warned.

"I'm not throwing it in." What he needed was something that should behave in a specific way without needing him to maintain control. He formed the weave, kept it purposely thin, barely more than a strand, wrapped it in a filigree and gently pushed it at the opening.

The light that bloomed inside had the others cursing and looking away.

"Why isn't it doing anything?" Don asked, at his side, while the others were still turned away.

"It is. The strand shouldn't be any more visible than it is next to my hand."

The building was a single room with a central column of what looked like the same dark material as the wall. Benches surrounded it, and at what could be the four corners, gray columns were topped with a large, clear crystal each.

"How much more essence is it producing?"

Tibs stared at the sorcerer. "How would I know?"

"The increase might be proportional to the concentration of the essence sent it."

Don pulled an amulet from a pocket, but Jackal caught his hand.

"You aren't throwing that inside."

"We should be safe," Don said. "The building contained the other outbursts. So long as we're out of the way from the opening, it'll be fine."

"Should?" Mez asked.

The sorcerer shrugged. "I can't be certain without testing it. But I'm confident that whatever else this is for, it isn't to damage the surrounding area."

"You can't be sure of that," the archer said. "For all we know, the dungeon rebuilt all this from something that building destroyed."

"I doubt the essence in this amulet would be enough to cause that level of destruction." Don looked at Tibs.

He was curious about what might happen, and he agreed with Don. The walls would contain whatever happened, but the worry on Jackal's face was loud.

"We should continue with the run. Once we know how the floor works, we can come back and see what happens."

"Can you sense other buildings like this one?" the sorcerer asked.

Tibs extended his sense as far as he could. "Not like this one. There are some that feel...different, not like the houses, I mean."

"Are those the dungeon rooms?"

Tibs tried to identify something that felt like the previous floors. "I'm too far to get details. The closest is in that direction." He pointed toward the glowing orb that was a full hand span over the buildings. "But it's always," he told Jackal.

"If you can tell what is and isn't a dungeon room," the fighter mused. "That would speed things up."

“Might that not result in walking by potential loot?” Khumdar said. “I am certain the dungeon is sufficiently clever to add cache to structure that were already here without attracting attention. As it did for the Ratling camp and Bunnyling burrow.”

“You really want to make me sick, don’t you?” Jackal complained. “It’s check everything in case there’s loot, and miss out on whatever is in those special places, or do a lot of those and miss out on loot.”

The cleric shrugged.

Jackal sighed. “We go check that one. If we get something good out of it, we do these this run, and on the next one we check the houses on the way to them.”

Tibs led the way, uncomfortable at the silence. Sto should have commented on what had happened; what they’d said. He would have, before. Tibs couldn’t believe he wouldn’t watch their first run on this floor if he could help it. What could be going on that would take precedence over that?

“A door—”

The doorway disgorged the thugs.

“—way!”

They looked like they’d come from Tibs’s street, muscular, wearing rags, but looking like they had been pressed down and their skin was pale, almost white. For weapons, they held planks.

The first swing he blocked with his bracer sent him off his feet.

“Don’t underestimate them!” Jackal yelled as Tibs landed. They might look like thugs from his street, but they hit like adventurers. “We’re in a dungeon, not the alleys of MountainSea.”

Tibs had to ask what Jackal had been up to the last time he’d gone there.

He formed a sword of ice and metal, then added a filigree of Bor to the edge. When he struck the thug, the edge bend under the impact until the ice chattered.

The thug smirked at him.

Barely a thought and the ‘x’ etching sent the thug flying off.

He caught the next swing with his shield. A woman who, if he imagined her extended to a proper person’s height, would look underfed. She hit hard enough he thought of Cross punching Quigly across a street. He added Kha to the etched ball of fire and exploded it in its face, then cursed as the more intense than expected fire burned him too, before he absorbed the essence.

Now was not the time to experiment.

He stepped out of the way of the returning thug, planting a fully metal sword in it, and ending up with a rusted knife in his side. A kick and hard swing lobbed the head off and Tibs hurried to put a weave of purity over the heavily bleeding wound, absorbing the corruption it had contained.

His distracted parry sent him staggering, and planting the sword through the woman’s chest did no good. Neither did the kick in the nethers. The punch it landed on him caused him to let go of his sword.

“Fine,” he growled in pain as he regained his footing. If it didn’t have a heart to stab, how about everything else? He reformed the essence in the sword, made it an etching, and it exploded; the shards taking pieces of it along.

As the pieces fell, Tibs saw that for as real as they looked, as much the essence within them flowed like his, they were still golem people. They were flesh-like, but there was no blood or the insides of people and even the pieces that fell at Tibs's feet crumbled away. Unlike what happened when a runner died near one still living.

The others were done, so Tibs suffused himself with purity, then healed them.

"The dungeon is clearly going with the theme of a city," Don said, while Tibs healed the gash in his forearm. "But not respecting how weak back alley thugs should be."

"The quality of your back alleys leave something to be desired, then," Jackal said, emptying the pouch one of the thugs had left behind.

"You were on your ass with that first punch," the sorcerer said. "You weren't expecting them to be as tough as you are."

Jackal grinned. "But I never expect anyone to be as tough as I am. The first hit often lands me on my ass."

"You're saying I've become overconfident," Don said, carefully moving the healed arm.

"I said no such thing."

Don sighed.

"You and him have that in common," Tibs said. "Only he takes pride in it."

"Are you saying I should take pride in it? Or stop being overconfident?"

Tibs smiled. "Which one keeps you alive?"

The sorcerer sighed again. "I'll work on that."

"These are also a more successful breed of thugs." Jackal handed a dozen silver coins to Tibs. "Where I'm from, a group like this would barely have that in coppers."

"In my Street," Tibs said. "They'd be broken coppers, and if one of them had two, he'd be rich."

"I really want to see that street one day," Jackal said.

"Nothing worth seeing." Tibs put the coins away and moved on.

"We stay on guard this time," Jackal said, just as Tibs sensed the form running in their direction. He moved, forming a shield as the large dog jumped out of the alley.

Jackal let out a curse as the impact pushed Tibs back.

"Stay!" Tibs yelled, trying how Serba went about ordering dogs.

It lunged at him, foaming jaws snapping. His sword left shallow cuts into its hide, removing any doubt this was anything other than a dungeon creature. His thought of bringing jerky on the next run might not help as much as he hoped.

The stone fist smashed in its back, and the snapping in reply had Jackal backpedaling.

The distraction let Tibs plant his sword in its side. Then spikes of ice erupted. Its dying whine sounded too much like Thump's, when it wanted an extra piece of jerky.

Jackal shuddered. "It hates me."

"I'll keep you safe," Tibs told him.

"I'm surprised you had to fight it," Mez said. "Dogs usually like you."

"No jerky."

The archer stared at Tibs. "Since when do you not carry jerky?"

"We were going to be in here all day. I didn't know S—there'd be dogs here."

“You could have offered it some of the food Russel gave us for the run,” The archer said.

“Dogs don’t like the spicy stuff,” Tibs replied.

“Dogs in a dungeon,” Jackal grumbled, looking around. “I hate my life.”