

Tibs's strength lasted until he made it up the stairs. Then his legs gave out, and he slumped against the wall.

"Are you okay?" Jackal asked.

He shook his head, hugging himself. He tried not to think about it. He wanted to forget about that wrongness. How could anything be that wrong? It was beyond something that had been done incorrectly. This was a wrongness that registered almost at the level of the elements.

A gong sounded.

"Tibs. Get up," Jackal ordered.

Whatever was in that room shouldn't exist in the world.

He was yanked to his feet. "Tibs, snap out of it. We have incoming."

Jackal was worried, and with reason. That thing would end them all if—his head rang from hitting the wall and before he could wonder why, a crowd filled the hall. One brushed against him and then they roared and Tibs was defending himself, understanding the clerks had returned.

He blocked with his shield, then stumbled against the wall from the punch. He slashed with his sword and missed.

What was the point?

Three came at him and Tibs had no idea how to—Jackal barreled through them.

"Get your head in the now, Tibs!"

"Sorry." They were fighting. He had to help. Pull his weight. What was the best way to help his team now? Other than Jackal, he couldn't see them.

Had it gotten them?

Jackal punched the closest one, staggering it into others and faced Tibs. "You need to fight, Tibs. We're going to die if you don't." A sword came down and sliced through the fighter's side.

"Jackal!" Tibs's etching formed ice on the golems it touched, slowing them. A flaming arrow shattered many and corruption melted more. Tibs stepped between the golems and Jackal, his cuts leaving ice spreading in the wounds.

He blocked another sword, then a punch in the shoulder left the arm dangling, his sword remaining in his unfeeling hand purely through holding onto its essence.

"Leave him alone!" Jackal broke the golem's head, then had his back to Tibs. "You good?"

"No. But this is more important than how I feel right now. Don is so going to hate me for this." He added air to his sword. Ike would be needed in the filigree. Gur because otherwise it would still be too heavy, probably. Then fey to counteract Gur's etherealness, and he really hoped this didn't blow up.

His sword launched forward, pulling him off balance until he disconnected it from his hand. He regained his footing in time to catch a blow with his shield and shoved the golem clerk away. He couldn't do more. Most of his attention was on keeping control of his sword. Ike had given it the motion it needed to fly, along with air, but he didn't know of an Arcanus that let him control how it flew, so he needed to will it, and changing the direction it went in felt like fighting someone else's arm.

It certainly did damage. From what Tibs saw, the blade cut through the bodies with

ease, leaving pieces falling as it—

“Mez, down!”

The archer dropped, and the sword flew over his head.

“Tibs!” Don yelled. “What are you doing?”

“I have it under control.” Well, mostly. It was turning around. “Just make sure you aren’t in the way.”

“That isn’t ‘having it under control’,” the sorcerer countered.

A staff caught a blow meant for Don’s head. “It would be wiser to focus on surviving so you can then chastize Tibs on how he is removing many of the golems.”

He had it now. Well, mostly. He needed to help it along where it wanted to go and use that to get to in the direction he needed it. It meant long loops, but also a sliced parts in the process.

He smiled as, finally; it was returning to him.

“Tibs?” Jackal asked, sounding worried. “What are you doing?”

“Getting my sword back.” There were only a few golems left.

“That thing cut through golem flesh. It’s going to slice you up.”

“Not if I catch it.” He could feel the way it wanted to turn. All he had to do was push there, and it would land hilt first in his hand.

His hand didn’t rise. Actually, he couldn’t feel his arm.

A blast of darkness and corruption sent the sword into the wall, its edge passing close enough to Tibs’s face he made out how sharp it was.

“That was—”

“Stupid, I know,” he finished for Don. “I should just have let the essence go instead of trying to catch it.” He suffused himself with purity.

“What you should have done is—”

“How about you let it go, Don?” Jackal said. “That trick made winning a lot easier.”

“You don’t usually like easy fights,” the sorcerer countered.

“I also don’t usually feel like...” he motioned toward the still open door and the stairs. “Let’s just collect the coins they dropped and go into the rooms they would have...” he looked up. “None of them made it to their room!”

Other than the door leading down, they were all closed.

“Their break is over,” Don said. “So I expect the dungeon put them back in, that we kill them or not. No making this easy on us. All these are simply tests for us to pass. Remember that.”

Jackal smiled. “And a chance to get more of those sheathed sword to sell.”

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Tibs opened the door and started. After so many small offices, looking at this vast open space after the short corridor simply didn’t feel real. And it was high enough for a balcony held up by four gray columns inlaid with metal. The large stairwell going up them was to his left, blocking his view of that side of the room; desks with chairs were spread throughout.

“Looks like we’re back in the lobby,” Jackal said.

“Good,” Tibs said, what the space was finally registered. The lobby was safe. Or as safe as any place within Sto. “I need to rest.”

“Just do the purity thing,” Jackal said, turning back to the door.

“I’m taking a break,” Tibs stated, dropping on the closest bench and resting his head against the cool stone wall. “How long have we been at this?”

“Can’t see the sky,” Jackal replied, sitting next to him. “So I have no idea.”

“I’ll go check,” Mez said and headed to the double doors.

Tibs took the package of dried fruits out, and before he could eat some, Jackal offered him bread.

“The ‘sun’s’ a hand’s span past the zenith!” the archer yelled from the doors.

Khumdar offered Tibs a slice from the cheese. “Unless we move on to another building now, this will be the only one we explore, if even that. We have only done half of this floor, and we can expect as many rooms and fights on the upper floor.”

“We could spend the night,” Jackal offered, taking the slice from the cleric.

“Oh yes,” the Them said gleefully. “Please do.”

“They won’t,” Sto replied as the fighter added meats from Don. “They aren’t the first team to talk about it, but they’ve been warned. When they started coming in, they talked about how they were going to be left in past the closing door if they didn’t do what they were told. A few were thrown in, too. They also threw in bodies. I didn’t really like those since there was nothing to them but absorbing them. They’ll leave before what they call the sun gets close to where it disappears.”

“This team seems like it could be made to not check where it is.”

“Are you telling me to cheat so they’ll stay too late?” Sto asked, tone suspicious.

“No. That isn’t allowed. But that one is greedy, and they don’t look outside when they are searching for that ‘loot’ he loves. With the right distraction, they might forget to pay attention.”

“But you’re not saying I need to cheat,” Sto stated flatly.

“No, you cannot cheat.”

“But you’d like it if they were distracted...” Sto mused. “I’m allowed to adjust the loot distribution for the rest of the building?”

“That is within the rules.”

“Sto,” Ganny warned. “Whatever you’re planning, don’t do it. They aren’t here to—”

“Think of it as a test,” the Them said. “What can you accomplish within the constraints of the rules?”

“They aren’t allowed to be in here when the doors are closed,” she stated.

“That is not a rule we have implemented,” the Them replied smugly.

“It’s okay, Ganny,” Sto said. “You know me. I like tests.”

Tibs paused his chewing, trying to work out what Sto was on about. Anytime they found a way around his tests, he complained about having to change them. He suspected it was why Ganny had handled them after a while. Of the two, she was the one who enjoyed them.

“I can’t use coins,” Sto said. “I’d need to use gold to catch their interest, and as best as I’ve worked on from their conversation, those shouldn’t appear until my fifth floor’s been around for some time.”

“That is correct. It’s the rare dungeon who had a windfall like this city to build up their reserves.”

“Sto,” Ganny warned again, in exasperation this time.

“Okay, then I use rings. I’ve been dropping those here and there, and them being gold will appeal to the fighter’s greed... No, gold’s still going to get expensive... Ganny, what’s the name of that mix you talked about, the one that looks a lot like gold.”

“Brass?” she replied uncertainly.

“Yes! They aren’t smart enough to tell it isn’t gold, so that’s.... No, that won’t work, that rogue of theirs, the way he senses things, he might.... Okay, what if we distract him with some weave? Ganny, is the one you started working on earlier usable? He won’t know it’s just a minor thing, so he’ll also think it’s valuable if the fighter asks.”

“What?” Ganny asked. “That’s isn’t...” she fell silent. “Are you talking about that weave?”

“Yes, that one. We’ve been playing with making useless weave look like complex ones without making them do anything more. What was that weave doing? Make them feel happier or something simple like that?”

“Yes,” she answered with more confidence.

“So they’ll think they are valuable, and secret them away. They’re all doing that now because the guild that sends them in is always taking items with weaves from them once they leave. I really don’t get why. I mean, I understand they’re valuable, but the way they talk about it, it sounds like it doesn’t need for—”

“I don’t know,” Ganny cut off Sto’s wondering and Tibs forced himself to continue eating. Was Sto doing what Tibs thought he was; and telling the Them he was going to do it? “If the goal is to distract them, I don’t think adding a ring like that here and there will do much to distract them. You’re always putting a variety of items in the loot, they’ll just think it’s something they hadn’t gotten before.”

“Right. I hadn’t thought about it that way. I mean, I could just put a lot of them, but that’ll make them suspicious, wouldn’t it?”

“Even the fighter’s clever enough to worry what it means. But if we do it in a way where they start expecting the quantity to be ever larger, then I can see him demanding they stay even if they realize the door’s closing.”

“Are you going to just give them the rings?” the Them asked.

“The rules say I can’t change the building, so it’s that or we let them leave and they might not come back here and we have the same problem next time. And I’ll be absorbing them again when they die, so I’m not actually using up any essence.” Sto paused. “But they make a good point. If we put them in every room, they’ll work it out and just go to the last room where there will be the most of them, then they’ll leave.”

She chuckled. “That one’s easy to solve. We don’t put them in every room. We skip some.”

“They’ll work it out, Ganny. It’s going to take them six rooms at most to figure the pattern and we’re back to the same problem.

“Set them to be random,” the Them offered.

“We can’t do that,” Ganny stated. “Sto is a dungeon. The sorcerer said it. There are always patterns, and once they notice it, they’ll think it’s a test. Him and the Rogue will be busy working out what that is, the fighter is just going to see loot and the other two just go along with the others. So, set the next room to have a ring. Then jump one room and put two

rings there. After that you jump two rooms, and four rings, then three and—”

“That’s too simple again, Ganny. They’ll know it’s the fourth next door after that by then.”

“Not fourth, fifth.”

“Why the fifth?” Sto asked, while Tibs worked the puzzle.

The Them chuckled.

“After that one, it’s the eighth door.”

“I don’t get it,” Sto said and Tibs hid his smile by shoving food in his mouth.

He got it.

“Trust me,” Ganny said. “Even they won’t get it either.”