

“Quigly!” Jackal announced on entering the inn and silencing it. Tibs had confirmed the warrior was there beforehand. “You are going to be amazed by the fourth floor!”

The chair scraped loudly as Quigly stood and said in disbelief. “You didn’t. No. You’re making this up.”

“Me?” Jackal said, sounding hurt. “Make up something like that? I would never.”

“You would,” Mez replied, without the usual amusement. “But this time he isn’t. It’s...” he trailed off.

“Impressive,” Khumdar said, “does not do the sight justice.” He headed for their table. Tibs hurried after him, wanting to be out of the knights’ sight. The pride in their eyes as they raised their tankard to him was...disconcerting.

“So pay up,” Jackal said. “If I remember correctly, it was one gold coin, wasn’t it?”

Quigly snorted. “Not without proof. Tell me what’s there.”

“Can’t talk about the floors outside the dungeon. You know that.”

“You’ll get your proof at your next run,” Don said. “The guards will let you know the fourth floor has been breached. You can resolve your bet then.”

Jackal was the last to sit down, still straight from his strutting to their table.

Quigly’s glare at the fighter was dark the entire time, but finally he sat and huddled in quiet conversation with his team.

Tibs was considering what he’d need to do with air to hear them without also bringing all the other voices within the inn to him when Kroseph placed tankards on the table.

“Did you really clear the boss room?” he asked.

“Oh yeah,” Jackal said, beaming. “Don worked out the last of the puzzles to making it easier, then it was just about pounding the creature into rubble.”

Kroseph kissed the top of Jackal’s head. “I knew you’d manage it.” When he returned with their meal, he pulled a chair and they quietly recounted the run. By the time they were done, Kroseph was called back to work.

Tibs told the others what Sto and Ganny told him.

“Do you believe them?” Don asked.

“They don’t lie,” he replied. “If they don’t want me to know something, they say that.”

“But they’re a dungeon. Shouldn’t they try to trick you? Maybe they aren’t there to kill us, but just telling you things as they are sounds like it’s too easy.”

“The dungeon likes Tibs too much,” Jackal said, while Tibs considered what Don said. There was never light on any of Sto or Ganny’s words, but was that because they didn’t lie? Or because, as a dungeon with all the elements, they could keep them from glowing? In the end, because there was no way he could think of finding out, he decided that as his friends, Sto and Ganny wouldn’t lie to him.

“We have all benefited from the dungeon’s affection for Tibs,” Khumdar said, after something from Mez, about Jackal, from the fighter’s smirk, that Tibs missed. “That it be our intent or not.”

“What do you think it is?” Tibs asked after forming a bubble around them to keep their words from reaching others.

“A city,” Don replied confidently,

“Inside a mountain?” Tibs asked in disbelief.

“Why not?”

Tibs stared at the sorcerer, trying to come up with a way to explain just how impossible it seemed to him.

“The dungeon said there were no ways in or out,” Mez said, “until me made the stairwell.”

“But it was there before they did anything,” Don countered. “They don’t know how long it’s been there. Passageways could have collapsed and been sealed over time until it was impossible to tell them apart from the rest of the stone.”

“That can happen?” Tibs asked in surprise. Trust Don to come up with an answer he couldn’t understand anymore than the previous problem.

Don tapped a knuckle on the table. “While this is solid and fixed to you and me, the essence it’s made of isn’t. We all know essence can be made to flow, but it also does it without help.”

“Like water,” Tibs said.

“And air, fire,” Don replied, “and every other element.”

Jackal pressed a hand on the wooden table. “This doesn’t feel like it’s flowing.”

“Because it isn’t happening at a speed we can understand. You, more than anyone else, should understand that. Earth is slow, but it can still crack mountains and continents.”

Tibs almost asked what that last word was, but decided he wanted this resolved before he tackled something he was sure would result in a bigger headache.

“But there was no one in the world before the dungeons, wasn’t there?” Mez asked. “Aren’t they how everyone was created?”

“That’s highly debated,” Don said. “There are books that claim that, and bring forth evidence to support the claim, while others claim that we, as in people, made the first dungeon, and that it then went wild and caused the others to happen. And they provided evidence to support that theory.”

“Purity clerics,” Khumdar said, his tone almost forcefully dispassionate, “will tell that Purity created everything. That it made us so we would stand between it and the other elements, which exist only to corrupt and destroy its creation.”

“Clerics claim a lot of things,” Don replied dismissively, “and don’t offer evidence to support their claim. There’s a reason there are no cleric academies. I expect that even if they allowed other academies access to all books they claim to have written, proving all they say. Not one of them would be accepted as being anything more than unsubstantiated imagination.”

Tibs caught the twitch from Khumdar at the mention of cleric academy, but the cleric immediately made his face impartial again.

“Hasn’t someone with void written anything?” Mez asked. “Carina said at one point how their element lets them know things out of order.”

They fell silent, and Tibs listened to his breathing. There was regret she wasn’t with them, and some pain that he was the reason Sebastian had targeted her, but it was manageable.

“There have been experiments,” Don said, once Tibs drank. “I read mention of them, but not the details of the result. When we’re allowed to travel again, I’ll see about locating the books mentioned.”

“That’s going to be awhile,” Jackal said with a chuckle. “We need to clear the fourth

floor first.”

Don nodded. “One thing I have read about regarding void and your question, Mez, is that one problem the users encounter is that they don’t gain a frame of reference for what time they know. The note didn’t mention any times when the reference came with the knowing.”

“I don’t see how that means anything,” the archer said.

“Alright. Keep in mind that this is a supposition on my part built from what I read. Imagine that a void sorcerer uses their essence to see another time and they see buildings around them, a road and people walking it. How do they tell what time they are seeing? Or that they aren’t now, but far away? Or maybe they are in a later time.”

“But it’s essence,” Tibs said. “It can be woven and etched to do what they want.”

“But they need to know what it is they want, and come up with a way to make it happen. Maybe there are books documenting that happening; I’ll have to look for those too. But the mentions I have come across in my reading indicate that void isn’t as simple to control through weaving or etching as the other elements.”

“Maybe it’s because those who have void go strange,” Mez offered.

“Possibly, or it’s the attempts that have made them so. Nothing I read speaks to that.”

“What about that thing about the dungeon saying there are rooms it doesn’t understand?” Jackal asked.

Don shrugged. “I have no idea. What I read is based on dungeons being, at best, animals. Nothing I’ve come across suggests they are capable of more than animalistic cunning. Even things like rooms and camps are explained as something it could sense around it, although exactly how dungeons can do that none of them seem to agree on.”

“It’s how far they can influence,” Tibs said.

“Yes, you and I know that because they told you. But they aren’t changing more than the stairs. If they are simply an animal, why stop there, unless that is the limit of what they are capable of doing. The scholars studying them are missing information that is vital to their understanding, and filling that with theories and supposition they try to support through evidence.”

“Well, you have the information,” Jackal said. “How do you explain it?”

Don laughed. “I don’t. I thought that the tunnels and halls were part of the dungeon’s body, so they should...” he tapped a finger on the table as the silence stretched, then nodded. “Actually, that might still be true. It’s not like I know everything that goes on inside my body.”

“Tibs knows,” Jackal said.

“No, I don’t.”

“Your essence lets you see in our bodies,” the fighter insisted.

“That isn’t what it does,” Tibs replied, annoyed. “I sense it inside you. It reacts to what happens to you, and that way I know if you’re injured. But it doesn’t let me know what happens to the food we eat, or why it comes out looking like it does at the other end.” He raised a hand to stop Don. “I don’t want to know.”

The sorcerer chuckled. “No, I suppose you don’t.”

“Any idea on how we’ll find the boss room?” Jackal asked.

“Going house to house,” Mez replied unhappily. “The dungeon said there were going

to be clues. So until Don or Tibs figure those out, we don't have a choice." He looked at the others. "Do we?"

"Will each house be like a dungeon room?" Jackal asked, his eagerness showing. "With something to fight and loot as reward?"

"It's...doubtful that every room will be like that," Don said. "Everything a dungeon makes is an expenditure of the essence it has accumulated. That is still true here. Now, the dungeon didn't have to make this floor, but anything they change is something they have to make. What I saw of the city scape makes it vast. Too vast for a dungeon to have enough essence to redo entirely. Yes, I am making a supposition with less than ideal information since I don't know exactly how much changes cost the dungeon, but going by the first three floors, I think my supposition is sound. Tibs said the floor come with its own way of generating essence, somehow, so that means we can expect more rooms than what would be normal for a fourth floor, but that can't be enough for the whole city. Especially since they need to keep some for the next floor, and they are going to have to put a lot of essence into making something that comes close to surpassing this one. On average, floors about double in size and difficulty with each time."

"The third floor is a lot larger than that compared to the second one," Mez said.

"Only in actual area. If you look at the challenges it poses, I'd say it's closes to one time and a half as difficult. There are four actual rooms, three puzzles and the boss room. Then there are what, a dozen fights throughout the halls?"

"That's more than twice the number of fights on the second floor," Jackal said.

"But how do they compare?" Don asked. "We had hordes of creatures to defeat there. Here, they are teams of five people golems, one of two with added Gnolls. I'll average it to twelve fights per run, that isn't—"

"You're wrong," Jackal said, stunning the sorcerer silent. Even Tibs stared at the fighter. That was quite a statement for him to make, all things considered. "Yes, the groups we've had to fight are usually smaller, but they all come with essence users, and the use of team tactics. Numbers don't represent how easy or hard a fight is going to be. Cross is one person without an element, and she'll kick your ass if you try to take her on."

"I'm not fighting her," Tibs protested when Jackal looked at him.

"I am nowhere near that stupid," Mez said under the look.

"I have no interest in attempting to demonstrate superiority over her," Khumdar said.

Don was silent when Jackal looked at him, thoughtful.

"You make a valid point," Don finally said with reluctance. "The books I read must have only focuses how using the geography of a dungeon floor to calculate its rating." He smiled. "But if you thought this up. Better people than you must have done so before, and I simply haven't come across those books."

Jackal grinned. "Thank you."

Don looked at the others. "Didn't I just insult him?"

"There are times when our dear team leader takes incalculable delight in being insulted."

"True," Jackal said, "but this isn't one of them."

Khumdar shrugged. "If that is the case, I am as perplexed as Don."

"What are you thanking me for, then?" Don asked cautiously.

“You said smarter people than me will have thought about that.”

Don’s nod was hesitating.

“But you didn’t think about it.” Jackal grinned. “And I never read one book in my life.”

Tibs snorted his ale, then glared at the fighter.

Don stared, mouth agape.

Mez patted the sorcerer’s shoulder. “Don’t let it get to you. It helps to remember Jackal isn’t the idiot he wants you to think he is.”

“I should be offended at that,” Jackal said, raising his tankard to his lips. “But I feel too abyss good right now to let that insult bother me.”