

The door proved to be a challenge.

The lock was like those on the houses, but with more tumblers with a weave through them, forcing him to manipulate that, along with physically moving them. Because he used his ice, and the weave reacted to that element, it was easier than it would be for another rogue. Unless they too had worked out how to use their essence to manipulate the tumblers, they would have to pick them normally, while also getting the weave to move. He expected it would be delicate, frustrating work.

Unless they went in the opposite direction. Delicate could often be beaten through brute force. Nothing he sensed of the weave led him to think Ganny had considered that when she made the lock, so at least one rogue would be able to simply blast their way through.

The elemental tumbler moved into place, and the door unlocked.

The corridor was larger than those in the Guild. There, three people could comfortably walk side by side. Here, his whole team would manage it. It went left and right, with doors facing each other. On the right side, it ended after a set of two doors, while on the left, after five set, the hall turned left.

“Which room is it?” Jackal asked.

Tibs sensed, but the walls of the rooms were woven in such a way he could only get a vague impression of what was inside. A few golem people in each.

“It is my experience,” Khumdar said, “that people in authority reside higher within their organization.”

“We should still check all the rooms,” the fighter said. “Just in case.”

“Just in case there’s loot, you mean?” Mez replied.

“In case the dungeon is tricking us,” Jackal countered, sounding too innocent.

“He’s the leader,” Tibs said to the look the others gave him.

“But this is about loot,” Mez said. “We can’t trust his judgment.”

Tibs sighed and went to the window at the end of the hall. He’d been right, he could see through, but he couldn’t tell where the orb was, and he wasn’t getting close enough he’d risk touching the ‘glass’. How much of ‘all day’ did they have left?

“I think we should go for the boss,” he said, facing his team. “Getting Don out of the trap is more important. On the next run we can—”

A door opened between them and a woman carrying papers stepped out. She paused, looking left and right, as if she was taking them in. Then, with a sudden silent scream, she ran at his team, papers fading into essence as they flew out of her hand.

Jackal’s skin turned stone gray as he stepped forward and punched her. She flew back to Tibs’s side and stopped against the wall, where she crumbled away, leaving a silver coin and a piece of paper behind.

“This is going to be easy,” the fighter said, sounding disappointed.

“This is a dungeon,” Khumdar said, as Tibs bent to pick up the loot. “I would be wary of making assumptions.”

The coin was a coin; the sun on a side, Claria and Torus on the other. He’d seen coins stamped like this in loot and people’s pockets before. The paper was... he turned it over, blank.

“A prop in the play that is the theme of this building?” Khumdar asked.

“Those she was holding disappeared,” Mez said. “This dropped after she was dead.”

“It,” Tibs corrected. “But you’re right. Ga—the dungeon doesn’t have things dropping that don’t matter.”

Jackal took the paper. “It leaves loot.” He looked at it this way and that. “Maybe this is a note of promise.”

“A what?” Mez asked, while Tibs stared at his friend.

“It’s a paper that says you get coins when you give it to the right person,” Tibs answered. “I didn’t know you knew about those.”

Jackal shrugged. “My dad dealt with those.”

“Shouldn’t there be something written on it, then?” Mez said, taking it from Jackal.

“It could be some sort of magical paper,” Jackal said. “With how many coins we get appearing once we leave.”

“I don’t know...” Mez handed it back with a shrug.

“There’s no essence in it,” Tibs said. “I mean no more than what make it. It’s just dungeon made paper.”

“You sure?” Jackal turned it over again. “Why would it bother with that? It’s not like the meat and herbs of the first two floors. No one needs paper.”

Tibs shrugged. It was the only answer he could give until he was able to ask Ganny or Sto about it.

“People need papers,” Mez said. “It would be extra money from the runs, since the guild isn’t going to care about ordinary paper.”

Jackal put the paper in his pouch. “We’ll see how many coins Darran will give us for it. How do we make it to the next floor? Since Khumdar says it’s where we’ll find the boss.”

Tibs sensed ahead. He couldn’t make out anything behind the doors that felt like stairs, but there was one, nearly to the other side of the building, that had no door.

“Around the turn, I think, then at the end of that corridor.”

They reached the turn when a door opened behind them. Before they reacted, a golem person was on them. Khumdar struck it while Jackal stepped to the front and Mez stepped back, arrow in his bow. The golem barely reacted to the blows.

“Something—” Tibs yelled as he sensed air essence gather at the golem’s hands, then it shoved it forward before Tibs could disrupt it and they flew back. He etched a water wall behind them with filigree of Kha, and instead of hitting stone, they were caught in sticky water that slowly lowered them to the ground.

Tibs dropped as he absorbed the essence holding him. He ran as soon as his feet hit the floor, forming a jagged ice and metal sword and shield. He etched air over his shield, lines moving away, filigree of Dhu in a spiral through it, and when he caught the next blast of air, the etching ripped it apart, and yet still slowed Tibs.

The sword bit deep into the golem, then was wrenched out of his hand as it jumped back. He made another as fire arrows flew over his head, only to be flung aside by the torrent of air that followed the golem’s wave of a hand.

Darkness hit it, and it staggered. Jackal was on it, but his strikes blocked and diverted by air. The golem stuck him and Tibs dropped as Jackal flew over him and sent a sheet of water over the floor. The water rose over the golem’s boots as he deflected arrows and Khumdar’s blasts. Tibs turned the water to ice as he got to a knee, then exploded it.

The golem didn't react to how painful losing both legs would be to anyone else, but the air essence it used as its defense shattered as it focused on trying to remain standing. It shattered under the volley of arrow that hit it in the chest before it reached the ground.

"Everyone okay?" Tibs called.

"I'm good." Jackal got to his feet and stepped away from the floor to ceiling crack the impact had left in the wall.

"Thanks for the save," Mez said, walking by Tibs.

"Did how difficult this proved to be meet the requirements to fill your thirst for battle?" Khumdar asked.

"Wish I'd gotten to do more." Jackal grinned. "But yeah."

"Another blank page." Mez handed it and the silver coin to Tibs.

"Maybe we can fight enough of the golems, Darran will give us gold for the papers," Jackal said.

"You are simply reaching for an excuse to fight more of these golems," Khumdar said.

"No, I'm looking for a way to get more coins," the fighter replied.

"Then make sure to have Tibs ask the merchant," Mez said, starting down the hall. "He always gives him more for what is handed in."

They proceeded cautiously, but made it to the empty doorway without doors opening, only to find an empty room.

Tibs sighed as the others looked at him. "It's a decoy." He should have thought of that. Ganny knew how he could sense, had probably realized that the haze she'd created on the third floor wasn't all that effective anymore. Or maybe the city was too vast for her to be able to make is as concentrated. He'd ask; if he could.

"Maybe they're outside?" Jackal offered.

"Is that a thing where you're from?" Mez asked.

"I saw something like that in MountainSea. They went up to a terrace and continued to another floor of the building."

"Doesn't that feel too simple?" Mez pointed out.

"It's in a room," Tibs said with another sigh. He focused on the one facing the decoy. But whatever Ganny had used to create the fog on the previous floor, she'd concentrated it here. No matter how narrow he made his sense, he hardly got anything from it. "All I can tell is that there are two golem people in the room. If there's anything else, it's masked, somehow."

"Isn't it strange that the dungeon can hide something like stairs from Tibs, but not the golem?"

"A golem's complexity in the essence that composes them may make them harder to camouflage," Khumdar said. "Stairs are nothing more than the same as the walls, arranged in a different shape. I expect it would take little to have one bleed into the other."

"Or it wants us to know how much fun we can expect to have," Jackal said, stepping to the door. "We hit them hard and if there's no stairs, we get the loot and go to the next one"

"I wish you weren't so eager to get into more fights." Mez pulled the string of his bow and an arrow formed.

"What can I say. I love myself a good time." He kicked the door in.

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“So,” the archer said, standing over Jackal as Tibs applied a weave of purity over the break in the stone arm. “How much of a good time was it this time?”

The first two rooms had been simple. Jackal rushed in, Tibs on his heel, then moved out of the doorway so Mez and Khumdar could get in attacks while they closed the distance.

In the first room the two golem people hadn’t had time to stand before the arrows and dark blasts shattered them, leaving a paper and silver each to fall on the desk they had sat behind.

In the second, the desks had been on each side of the room, instead of before the door, so Jackal and Tibs did the dispatching. Again, one strike from each and the golem person died, as if they were less than normal people.

The third room had a lone occupant behind a more impressive desk. He used crystal essence to fracture the fire arrows and dark blast, redirecting some of them at Tibs and Jackal. The darkness that his Tibs did nothing, but the fire hurt even as he wrenched control away and absorbed it. Jackal had trouble keeping standing from the darkness draining him, but he forced himself to the golem, and on punch shattered it. A potion of the yellow liquid while Tibs opened the trapped cache masquerading as a cabinet and his energy was back.

It was the fourth room that caused them trouble as those in it exited just as they stepped up to it. Jackal took the brunt of all the attacks, which left him on the ground, with only his will and earth essence keeping him together, while Tibs, Mez, and Khumdar struggled to take down the coordinated attacks.

“I’ve had worse days,” Jackal said through greeted teeth. “Back in the pits.”

“He’s fine,” Tibs commented darkly. He was now. Jackal had a wrap of Tibs’s element holding everything in place while purity did its work. He wanted to blame Jackal for this, but it was all of them who had been careless. They’d been too sure of what they’d encountered. They’d been ready for hard fights, but not attackers on their levels.

If it had been anyone other than Jackal in front, Tibs didn’t know if they would have survived.

“I’ll be fine,” Jackal said, sounding better. “I’m not dying, Tibs.”

“You could have.”

“We’ll be more careful.”

“Not having Don is costing us,” Mez said, and Jackal nodded.

“Then I am please to inform you that the search is over,” Khumdar said from inside the room. “Although I believe having found the stairs will not be as helpful reaching the other floor as you may expect.”

Tibs focused on making sure Jackal was healing properly to keep from rushing in and seeing what Khumdar meant. He breathed, acknowledged his curiosity, then concentrated on the more important task. Once Jackal was able to move, they entered the room.

Unlike the others, with their desks and the one cabinet, this one has stairs to the next floor and a table beside them with two trays. One of which was piled high with papers. Tibs joined Mez and Khumdar before the stairs and found out why they weren’t going up.

An unseen wall kept him from setting foot on them