

The second office had shelves against the back wall with a lock box on the lower one. An easily defeated lock and Tibs had another healing potion in a crystal bottle, while the desk provided one unmarked coin.

The next four rooms were unremarkable and only had a single coin each.

The gong sounded as he exited the room.

“Don’t let them touch you!” Jackal called as golem clerks returned from where they had gone to. Don’s reply was cut short by the need to dance around them.

Tibs suffused himself with water while Khumdar did something with his essence that made him darker, and at times Tibs thought he saw through parts of the cleric. He was certain that he also saw an arm pass through him, while the golem clerks who got too close to Tibs simply slide aside.

Once they were all back within their offices and the doors closed, Jackal, Mez, and Don leaned against the wall, panting. Khumdar stumbled and slid down against the nearest one. As the darkness left him, his skin was pale.

Tibs was at his side.

“I will be fine,” The cleric said, his voice strained. His essence was thin. As if most of it had leaked away. “I simply did not expect this to be quite so exhausting.”

“What did you do?” Tibs gently let his essence flow into Khumdar and decided not to mention that what the cleric had done hadn’t been tiring, it had nearly killed him.

“I pushed myself further than was wise.”

“That’s not what I mean.” Tibs tried to keep his tone neutral. “I saw an arm pass through you.”

“Merely the edge of me.” Some of the color was returning to him. “Altering more than that was not possible, and simply this has left me in the state you see me in.”

“But what did you do?”

Khumdar smiled and patted Tibs’s shoulder. “I feel it is wiser I not explain. Should I do so, you will then attempt to recreate it without care for the consequences to yourself.”

“I saw you do it,” Tibs insisted.

The cleric’s smile broadened. “But you do not know what the it is.”

“I’ll figure it out, so it’s safer if you tell me how I should do it.”

Khumdar laughed. “No, it is not.”

Tibs considered stopping the flow of his essence.

“A threat will not make me more inclined to tell you.”

“I’m not going to do it,” Tibs muttered. “I’m not going to let you die doing this. How is your reserve?” Tibs could sense there was a lot there, but he didn’t know how that compared with it being full. There was too much variation between his friends for him to keep track.

“Higher than I expected. Considering how exhausted it left me.”

“What you did used up your life essence. That’s what you feel lacking.”

“I see.” He closed his eyes. “As I have no way to judge how much of that essence I have, there is a danger I will kill myself if I attempt this too long.”

Tibs nodded, then added. “Yeah.”

“I thank you for the warning.”

“If you tell me how to do it, I can work out how much it uses. I can sense my reserve

and I have a lot of it, so I wouldn't be in danger."

Khumdar smiled. "You are certainly right. But I will still not risk your life on you miscalculating what cost the experiments would demand. Too many depend on you."

"You two okay?" Jackal asked, still sounding winded.

"We are," The cleric replied, pushing himself to his feet.

"Anyone needs a purity weave to catch their breath?" Tibs offered.

The others shook their head.

"With the golem people in there," Jackal said. "How do we handle the other rooms?"

"There's a danger the golems will attack as soon as the door is opened," Don warned.

"Or they'll follow the same trigger as when they walk in the hall," Mez said. "We won't know until we open a door."

"Did anyone time how long it was before the second gong?" Don asked.

"I thought you'd do it," Jackal replied.

"I can't keep time in my head."

"The time it took for the six rooms," Tibs said. Trying to get a sense of how long that had been.

"Is it important?" Mez asked.

"If it's consistent," Don said. "It will tell us how long we have to go through rooms without interference."

"Hey Dungeon," Jackal called to the ceiling. "How about you put those time shields down here, like you have on the third floor? Stop making our lives to abyss hard."

"He doesn't know I can hear them," Sto said defensively. "Plenty of Runners do the same."

"I am well aware of human's need to believe they can exert their will on things they have no control over. You are not the first I have had to bring back into line."

"If there are so many of us," Sto grumbled, "maybe it's because the rules are stupid."

"Rules are there to protect you from yourself," the Them stated.

"Sure," Sto replied derisively.

Tibs let the water move through the lock, hoping for more from them. When the silence stretched, he focused on what he sensed there. "It isn't locked."

"Are the others?" Don asked, and Tibs tested the next six, shaking his head when he returned. "Then, this aspect might be like with the guild. They only lock the doors when there's no one in them."

"Do they leave the doors wide open when those places don't have people in them?" Jackal asked.

"No..." The sorcerer hesitated. "Maybe that's an aspect the dungeon doesn't know about. After all, I doubt anyone's been talking in details about how the guild work during their runs."

"These locks aren't going to stop anyone," Tibs said. "Those in the guild ate a lot tougher." He looked at the others. "Do I open the door?"

"We aren't getting the loot otherwise," Jackal said, grinning. A flaming arrow formed in Mez's bow.

Tibs crouched, unlatched it, and pushed.

Inside, three golem people sat at the desk, unmoving.

“Why aren’t they doing anything?” Mez whispered.

“They’re props,” Don replied at his usual volume. “They’ll probably move only if they’re triggered.”

Tibs carefully sensed the floor a head of him. “I don’t sense a trigger at the doorway.”

“I’m ready.” Mez pulled on the bowstring and the arrow flared.

Tibs stepped in and waited.

“Should I shoot them?” Mez asked when they didn’t react.

“Wouldn’t that trigger them?” Jackal asked.

“What would a thief do in a situation like this, Tibs?” Don asked.

“Get out. The one behind the desk is looking at me. A real person would be screaming for the guards.”

“It’s possible they are on the same trigger as when they exited the rooms,” Don mused. “Can you get the pouch without touching them?”

Tibs studied the space around the desk and judged what he’d have to work with behind the chair. Even if there was a safe, he could work around that. “So long as they don’t move, it’ll be easy.”

“How about the cache?” Jackal asked.

“If there’s one here, it’ll be the safe, and that’s against the wall, so yes, I’ll be able to get in that too.”

Jackal gave a nod, but Tibs realized he had a potential problem. Normally he’d go against the wall to keep his distance, but that would take him off the scooped path on the floor. Would that trigger them?

“I’m going to test something. Mez be ready.” He stepped onto the polished floor.

“Was something supposed to happen?” The archer asked.

“Looks like the path is just for the looks of things,” Tibs said, remaining against the wall as he moved. There was a safe, and he started with it. Unlocked and untrapped, it revealed papers, one of the quill-like cylinders, and a stack of copper coins. He had closed the door when he frowned. Was he really dismissing them just because they were copper? In his pouch they went.

He stepped over it and reached for the top drawer. He paused as he noticed the pouch at the golem clerk’s belt. It was the same as the ones he’d found in the drawers before. He couldn’t remember if any of those walking the hall had had them.

All three drawers opened easily. None of them contained a pouch.

“We have a complication,” he called, watching the golem for a reaction. “The pouch is on his belt.”

“Can you get it without touching them?” Jackal asked.

“It’s on its belt,” Tibs repeated.

“Does it look to have coins?” Don asked. “Some have been empty,” he added in a defensive tone.

He hadn’t paid attention to how they’d rested in the drawers, but the leather was supple. This one hung low, and the bottom pulled on the knot.

“It does.”

“I can put an arrow into it,” Mez said.

“Golem people crumble when they die,” Jackal replied. “Won’t it only leave normal coins then?” There was a pause. “We need the blank ones for the boss room, don’t we?” he added defensively.

“I worry when you make sense,” Don said.

“Try it, Tibs,” Jackal said.

“On it.”

The top of the pouch went under the belt before the strings keeping the opening closed were looped and tied around it. Pulling on it would alert the golem. Unlike the pouches most of the townsfolk had, this one was made of one piece, so no seams to cut. How tough was the leather? It seemed normal enough to his sense.

“Mez, Don, Khumdar. Be ready for them to move.” He made a metal knife with as thin an edge as he could, adding a filigree of Duh. He thought Fey might help too, but Don’s warning came to him.

He wouldn’t be able to slip the knife between the pouch and the golem as it was, so, in a quick motion, he grabbed it and cut it off.

Bouncing aside to avoid the chair screeching back landed Tibs on his side. It was pulling a sword from a too small scabbard on its other side as its head and shoulder were engulfed in a fiery explosion. More chairs screeched, then the smell of corruption filled the room.

“Tibs?” Jackal called in the following silence. “What happened?”

Tibs raised his hand, so the pouch was visible above the desk. “The pouch only crumbles with them if it’s still on them. I cut it off before Mez destroyed it.”

“I’m pretty sure the point of the room is to test your skill at getting them without being noticed at all,” Don said.

“Rogues,” Tibs replied, standing, “cheat.” The pouch contained three coins.

“This does simplify things,” Mez said. “He gets in the other rooms, pulls the pouches off, and we kill them before they can do anything about it.”

“You kill them,” Jackal said, disappointed.

The archer patted the fighter’s shoulder. “I’m sure the dungeon will give you something to fight soon enough.”

“They might not all react this way,” Don warned.

“Only on the next run,” Tibs said, exiting the room.

“How does he know that?” the Them demanded as Don stared at him.

“The dungeon only makes changes after we find ways around his tests,” Tibs explained. Hopefully, it would keep Sto from having to come up with a reason.

“Quigly’s ream could have gone through this building before us.”

“Arbiele’s his rogue. She’s good, but she’s direct. If she did this. She found a way to get the pouches off without being noticed. And she’ll have figured it out.” Tibs grinned. “I’m not that patient. Also, if she’d done like I did, the dungeon would already have changed how the rooms work.”

Don studied him. “Don’t take for granted things can’t change on you.”

“I won’t,” Tibs replied. He didn’t have to, the Them had confirmed he was right already.

The next two rooms got them three coins this way, and the second had a cabinet,

which Tibs opened after the golems were dealt with, earning them one of each potion in the crystal bottles. In the next one, Tibs stared at the clearly empty pouch on the belt and decided to test something.

The sheath attached to the belt on the other was sized for a knife. Even the handle looked to be one. If he was wrong, Jackal was going to laugh at him even with the essence woven through it. Like all good sheaths, it had slits for the belt to pass through and hold it. Or, since everything about the golem was dungeon made, it might be part of the belt, so they wouldn't be able to sell it.

But he first needed to get it.

"Ready?" he called.

"Been for a time," Mez replied.

As soon as the knife was under the belt, the golem stood, pulling him up. He grabbed the sheath as fire exploded behind, its heat uncomfortable. Then the golem's punch had Tibs's head ringing as he staggered and fell. Before it could attack again, it exploded.

"Tibs? What happened?" Jackal called.

He raised his hand to show the scabbard and belt, then noticed the pouch still attached to it. He grinned.

"That doesn't look like a pouch," the fighter said.

Tibs suffused himself with Purity, then stood. He grabbed the pommel as he approached and pulled. It shifted in his hand and he almost dropped it as became thicker and he eventually held a sword.

The others stared at it with a lack of comprehension that amused Tibs.

"Extra loot," he said, grinning.

"That's not something they are supposed to get," the Them said angrily.

"Rogue's cheat," Ganny said.

"And Ti—this one is cleverer than most," Sto added.

"We'll think of something and add that to the changes for tonight," Ganny said.

"We could attach the pouch to another place," Sto mused. "Force them to choose between getting the swords and not having enough coins to unlock the boss room, or sacrifice the loot for a larger price."

"They've all worn something like that," Mez said as Tibs silently thanked Sto for the information.

"At one per room, it's a lot of them," Tibs said.

Mez nodded. "And knowing what you're doing, I can make sure I don't miss next time."

Jackal rubbed his hands together. "Let's get us all the loot!"

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Tibs stared into the darkened space behind the door.

Instead of an office, this door had stairs going down.

They were somewhere behind the stairwell in the lobby, Tibs thought. He'd lost track of how many swords they'd collected on the way, and had managed to avoid the exodus that had followed the gong.

This door had been the one door not to open. It had been the one door to have a lock worthy of the name. Now he regretted cracking it.

He had a sense of what was down there.

“Do we wait until they come back?” Jackal asked.

He really, really didn’t want to go down there.

“Tibs?” Jackal asked. “The rooms, if you get in them now you—”

“I need to check something.”

He cursed his curiosity the entire way down the stairs. He shuddered at the simple idea he might sense it, even with his sense so tight against him it might as well no longer exist.

“You gave them a way down?” the Them demanded.

“I didn’t give them anything,” Sto snapped. “The building’s away from everything. The door was as locked as I could make it without it screaming for one of them to unlock it. How was I to know he’d find it? You think I want him down here with us?”

“I think him being down here might work out for the best,” the Them said, as Tibs tentatively stepped along the hall.

“Why?” Sto demanded suspiciously.

“It would remove him before he can cause you actual problems.”

“It’s not part of the tests,” Sto exclaimed. “If that thing kills him, it’s not worth anything. It’s not like I bested him.”

“Like you could,” the Them sneered.

“I can! He isn’t—” Sto shut up.

The walls were unfinished stone. Whatever the plan had been for this hall, they hadn’t gotten to finish it, and because Sto hadn’t planned on anyone coming here, he hadn’t done anything about it.

He really should turn around and leave.

The door frame became visible on the right wall in the distance, and Tibs told himself that was far enough. He’d seen it. He didn’t have to get any closer.

Only his feet weren’t obeying.

Unlike the walls, the door frame was finished with intricate designs. He made out Arcanus among what might be nothing more than decoration. It might have a weave and he nearly extended his sense, then pulled it in even tighter.

He could now sense the wrongness emanating from behind the wall there.

“We shouldn’t be down here,” Don whispered and Tibs startled. He turned to glare at the sorcerer and found the entire team with him. Jackal held a crystal and Tibs realized it had to let out light for them to see.

They all looked worried and actively avoided looking at the door.

“Can you sense it?” Tibs whispered.

Jackal’s shrug didn’t look convincing.

“I don’t know if I’m sensing anything,” Don answered, the concern audible in the low voice. “But there is something very wrong here.”

“Shouldn’t we see what’s there?” Tibs asked, knowing it was the worst idea he’d ever had, but...

“Ganny, what happens if they open the door?” Sto asked, more curious than concerned.

“They die,” the Them answered with satisfaction.

“Yes, I know that,” Sto replied harshly. “But I’m just down the hall from them. What happens to me, if they open the door.”

The Them’s silence was ominous.

Tibs looked at the door and swallowed. There had been no doubt in the Them’s voice about what would happen.

“I think Don’s right,” he whispered, forcing his feet to back away. “We really shouldn’t be down here.” His feet finally obeying him, it took all his willpower to not simply run and leave everyone behind.