

The hall stretched far ahead of them with lots of doors in it facing each other. Unlike in the lobby, the floor was made of wood slats arranged at an angle to the direction of the hall. The silence made Tibs want to sense around to confirm where the people golems were, but the memory of his sense brushing against what was under them kept that in check.

Each door had a polished metal plaque next to it with words had been stamped into them. The letters were Arcanus, but Tibs couldn't tell what it said. Don shook his head when he glanced at him. Did it mean that they were part of the original building, unlike the plaque to the boss room in the permit office? Of were these rooms not important enough overall to bother having the letters say actual words?

He moved the dust in the process of checking the floor to the closest door on his right, and approached it. The lock was simple, more so than the ones protecting the houses. Unlocking it only took seconds; and wouldn't take much longer with only lockpicks. There was a sense to them of only serving as an indicator people shouldn't enter, instead of actively preventing anyone from doing so.

The room was quite small. A desk of polished stone, a chair behind, two before, a cabinet behind that, and barely enough room to move around them. If they were slightly larger— if they were made for normal sized people—Tibs wasn't sure how anyone would move through the room. Next to the cabinet, a thin but tall window let him look out onto the road that lined the building. The stone floor had no dust and had lost its polish on a path around the desk and to the back.

"Is that what to take," Jackal asked, "or what to avoid?"

"It just shows where people have stepped on repeatedly," Don said. "Like how the floor at the inn is scooped around tables and to the kitchen."

Tibs studied the floor. Without tiles, there were no simple ways to tell where triggers might be. He extended a narrow portion of his sense before him and there were no essence triggers. He iced the floor.

"Stay outside. I can only sense a two paces ahead with what's under us."

"It's not like we can fit in there," Mez commented.

"Is that thing directly under us?" Don asked.

"I don't know, and I'm not risking sensing to find out."

He took his time, conscious that the smallness of the room could be a way to make him be careless, but in no time he was behind the desk and there had been no triggers. A stack of papers were on the left of the chair, bound between leather. Next to it was a . . . tube with a tapered end that reminded him of the nib of a quill, but there was no ink pot, so it might be some other tool.

The three drawers were locked, but like the door, easy to open. The top one had papers in neat stacks, with an open wooden box on top containing more of those tubes. The second one was empty, and the third had a pouch.

Tibs barely pulled his hand away, on the way to grabbing it, before the thin blade slammed into the front of the drawer.

Sto chuckled.

Hadn't he just reminded himself not to get careless as he crossed the room? He checked for a second trap before taking the pouch. It contained seven unstamped silver coins and a small brass key with an odd arrangement of teeth. He put the coins back into the

pouch and lobbed it at Don, but Jackal caught it, quickly pulling one, grinning as he looked it over.

“Does it mean anything?” Tibs asked as he surveyed the cabinet. He inserted the key in the lock and it clicked when he turned it. With the recent reminder, Tibs took his time looking for traps.

“They could be part of the theme,” Don offered.

“Wouldn’t every other coin we’ve found be like those, then?” Mez asked.

Tibs opened the cabinet and looked at three elegantly worked crystal bottles. One contained a green liquid, one yellow and the other blue. Tibs didn’t recognize the way the essences mixed in them, but the colors were indicative of what he could expect.

Why had Sto gone back to those instead of continuing with the pastries?

“They hold a secret,” Khumdar said as Tibs searched for another trap. He found it, but it was deactivated.

Sensing, he traced the mechanism to the lock. He filled it with water to understand how it worked.

“Do you have a sense of what it is?” Don asked.

That explained why the teeth were so odd. There was a lever the key moved as it was put in which slipped a panel out of the way, allowing the last three teeth through, and those disarmed the trap. Even knowing those were there, Tibs couldn’t think how he’d get to them with regular lock picks. Especially getting the entire lock to turn as one.

“It does not extend beyond this building. More than that, I cannot tell.”

“Are you sensing as far as you can?” Tibs asked. Opening the door with the trap active would have shattered the bottles. Was that ‘part of the theme’ or because the bottles were important to solving this building?

“Of course.”

Carefully, he took the bottles one at a time and placed them on the desk. “Can’t you sense what’s under us, then?”

“I cannot.”

Did this mean Sto was lying when he said it was an accident, and this was targeting him specifically? No, Sto had mentioned the accident a long time ago, and the Them has sounded surprised it had affected him. If no one had expected it, then it had to be the result of having all his elements. Something about that let him sense it.

“Are we storing those?” Don asked.

“Take the essence one,” Jackal replied. “Mez, Khumdar, which one of you wants the healing? The other can take the stamina one.”

A quick consultation and the cleric took the healing one.

The room opposite was a mirror of the previous one, minus the pouch and cabinet. Instead, the corner held a small safe, its door open. The papers in it were written using the Arcanus, and the placement of the ‘words’, how they mostly looked the same from page to page along to the embellishment, reminded him of the Promises he stole from the Brokerage.

He stored them in his pouch. Maybe Darran would know the language and tell him if they were worth something.

Jackal looked down the corridor. “If all the rooms are like this, it’s going to take a

long time.”

“You’re just annoyed there’s no one to fight,” Mez said.

“Oh,” Ganny said, “are they in for a surprise.”

Jackal stared at the archer. “Well, yeah.”

“Tibs did sense people on this floor,” Khumdar said.

“And if we have to fight through each of the room,” Don said, “this is going to take even longer to find the boss room.”

“Which is on the floor above us,” Jackal pointed out.

“We don’t know that for sure,” the sorcerer replied as Tibs headed for the next door.

A gong sounded as he sent water into the lock, and before he wondered if he’d triggered it, doors opened and disgorged golem people who headed in their direction with the dispassion he’d seen on clerks after a long day. They were so many it would be impossible not to—

“Do not let them touch you,” Khumdar yelled as Jackal punched one.

The change was immediate. The dispassion was replaced with rage. Some pulled swords, others knives, more simply snarled and made claws of their fingers.

“Someone keep an eye on Don,” Jackal said as the mass rushed them.

Tibs used his shield to block attack after attack, but was still pushed until he lost sight of the others.

A sword tip pieced out from Tibs’s chest, then was hurriedly yanked out.

“Meant to keep that one focused on me,” Mez said, his bow passing over Tibs’s head to hit the golem before him. “This is too close quarters.”

Tibs suffused himself with earth and shouldered his way through those before him, then turned and readied himself for their attacks. Instead, they remained focused on the archer, and there were more at Tibs’s back.

With a curse, he placed the etching within his forming sword and didn’t bother with precision. The golem clerks wore normal looking clothing, so it easily cut through and the line left behind on the gray stone-like flesh iced, spreading quickly.

He swung as wildly as the clerks tried to claw at him. Any cut slowed them as ice spread, but they stepped on each other raging to reach him. He blocked a knife, slapped a sword aside with his. He willed etchings and sent them at others, and still more came.

Fine.

An etching of light, only a little of it, with a filigree Ike and Fey to—

The collision against the wall made his head ring, but the golems weren’t there anymore. He shook his head and regretted it. He suffused himself with purity and it cleared. He had to remember there was no delay with that etching. He wanted to make it well away from him next time.

“Save the potions and pastries,” he told the others. “I can heal everyone.” He stared at the one golem still standing, unmoving under the sheen of ice.

“I managed to only get small cuts,” Mez said.

“I could use your help,” Don said in pained tone. Tibs pulled his attention from the frozen golem. The sorcerer had a hand over his stomach and the fabric was damp. “I hate being this close to the fighting.”

Tibs had a weave of purity on the wound, while the others confirmed they only had

minor injuries.

“How come that one’s still standing?” Jackal asked.

Tibs looked over his shoulder as he sensed purity spread through the wound. “I didn’t have time to make the etching destructive. I figured the fighting would break them.

“So, I just punch it?”

“That’s how you started this,” Don said bitterly. “You might as well end it the same way.” He looked at Tibs. “That was a new etching, wasn’t it?” Don asked as the golem shattered under the punch. “The ice, not the explosion.”

“A variation on something I’ve done before.”

“A fight isn’t the place to try something new,” Don said with a tired sigh. “I told you before.”

“I know.”

“And yet, here it is again.”

Tibs shrugged. “It’s when I think about it.” He moved on to heal Mez.

“Then you keep them in mind for when you train after the run.”

Tibs snorted. “What training? I can’t do this with Alistair, and the rest of the time, I’m busy with everything else.” The archer’s injuries healed faster.

“The Oneness exercises?”

“I breathe,” Tibs replied noncommittally. When he thought about it. And he probably had done it enough since most of the time it helped.

“These coins are stamped,” Jackal said, picking up those left behind from the fighting.

“Which means the one Tibs found are part of something else in the building.” He looked at Tibs. “You can’t simply breathe and consider it enough.”

“It’s letting me control my emotions.”

“How about the big ones? The ones where you go out of control?” the sorcerer asked. “Like when you get a new element? This isn’t about dealing with all this.” He motioned around them. “It’s about learning to maintain control under extraordinary circumstances.”

“Are the coins to unlock the boss room?” Jackal asked, placing himself between the two of them.

The sorcerer glared at the fighter. “Maybe.”

“They might make the boss easier,” Tibs said, happy for the reprieve and thinking of the cabinet key. Finding the exact way to open a lock might be what that had been hinting at.

“We won’t know until we reach that door and work out the puzzle,” Don said.

“What was this attack about?” Mez asked. “That gong, was that us triggering something?”

“All the doors have opened,” Khumdar said, returning from the intersection. “There are too many for all of them to have been part of this attack.”

“Maybe this was a timed event,” Don said.

“I agree.” The cleric glared at Jackal. “And as I attempted to warn you, the trigger was touching them, as it was in the permit office.”

“It’s not like we could have not touched them,” Jackal protested. “There were just too many of them.”

“So what decides when the gong sounds?” Mez asked.

“The arenas use something like that to mark the start and end of fights,” Jackal said.

“It’s early for the end of a day,” Mez pointed out.

“You are forgetting that the orb representing the sun was set earlier on our first time here,” Khumdar said. “The dungeon might have yet to adjust this building to reflect the adjustment.”

“But how would the dungeon know businesses work based on when the sun’s up?” Jackal asked. “It’s not like there anything in here that would tell it that.”

“But you Runners do love to talk,” Sto replied.

“Why are you responding?” the Them demanded.

“Because I’m bored. Normally, I’d be working on something during these boring parts, but you are forcing me to stay at your side when you’re in here. The way this is going, because of you, I won’t have a fifth by the time they are ready for it.”

“You are staying here because I do not trust you not to cause another room like the one here. Left on your own you’ll simply go back to throwing essence together without care for the result.”

“It was one room,” Sto protested. “And only one time.”

“I don’t understand how you became so wild in how you handle the essences you have.”

Ganny chuckled and whispered. “Oh, I have a good idea where he got that from.”

“And you,” the Them snapped. “You are supposed to ensure things are done the way they have been established. How could you lose control of him like this?”

“Hey, don’t talk to Ganny like that,” Sto objected angrily. “You have no idea how hard I made things for her. You have no idea what I’d have done if she hadn’t been here to stop me.”

Tibs rubbed his temple in response Don’s raised eyebrow and hoped he’d get the significance.

“I have seen the mess of the rules you’ve made under your assistant’s tutelage. I can well imagine what you’d be without. You are this close to me deciding you are wild and ending you.”

“And we’re grateful for the opportunity to show that we can work within the rules,” Ganny said in a placating tone. “But aren’t we here to observe this run? Arguing like this made you miss that the fighter and cleric when through a few of the rooms.”

Jackal exited a further room, rubbing his wrist.

“The drawer was trapped, wasn’t it?” Tibs asked, as Khumdar exited another one.

“It broke on my wrist, but it still stings. There were three of those faceless coins.”

“One in the room I searched.” The cleric handed an essence potion to Don.

“Did it have a trap?”

“Indeed.” Khumdar smiled. “But it was secreted away, therefor plain for me to sense.”

“I’m first in the other rooms,” Tibs said. “Just to make sure no one gets hurt.”