

Tibs returned to the hall and unlocked the next door to look at yet another small office. This one with only a woman golem clerk seated behind the desk and no apparent cache. It didn't even have a safe, he noticed, once he'd made his way around the desk. He almost continued around her for the side with the pouch, but realize this would break the pattern of how he'd done things since realizing the sheath was enchanted. It and the coin pouch were attached to the belt, so he'd gone for that instead.

He made a knife, all metal essence, and readied himself. The golems were quick to react, but once he had hold of the belt he could hang on as it was hit and slice it off. A glance over the desk showed Mez, flaming arrow ready.

He quickly took hold of the belt, only for it to be yanked out of his fingers as the golem jumped to its feet, then it staggered back as heat bloomed. Tibs jumped as it fell against the wall and sliced the belt off as a second arrow destroyed its torso. Then he rolled away and was sprawled in the corner, watching it crumble, sword in hand.

"Tibs?" Jackal called, and he raised his hand to show the belt. "That's good. Are you okay?"

He stood. "The sword was in its hand. It's gone now."

"Isn't it the sheath that's enchanted?" Mez asked.

"The sword had a weave on it too," Tibs said. The pouch contained a blank silver coin and a ring.

"I don't know," Don said. "Making the two one item should mean it's less costly to make from what I read, but that was only about sorcerer's work."

Sto was right, the difference between this and gold was minor, and he'd held gold coins. The only gold Sto had made was part of decorating items.

The weave was too dense for Tibs to think it was a useless enchantment, even without a sense of what Ganny was aiming for, but if it was possible to add uselessness to a weave, then he certainly would be fooled by this.

"That's new," Jackal said, at his side.

Tibs grinned. "It's gold."

Jackal took it and turned it over. "Are you sure?"

"Or course." Why wasn't he impressed. "And there's a weave on it. Darran's going to give us a lot of coins for it."

His friend studied the ring closer. "What does the weave do? Because I don't think it's—"

"Trust me," Tibs said, fighting to sound casual and staring at the fighter. "I know what Darran is looking for. That's going to help make sure the guild doesn't own us once we reach Epsilon."

Jackal searched his face.

Just how well did the Them know people? They'd travel, and had been in the town, but they were dismissive. Could they read Jackal uncertainty? He'd never asked Sto how he saw them. Was it the same way Tibs saw the world, or was it more like how he sensed thing? Forms without the details that let him know how someone felt?

The fighter shrugged and handed it back. "Okay. You're the one who knows that stuff. So long as it's good loot, I'm happy."

"What happened?" Mez asked. "I saw the belt on its hip as I loosed the arrow."

“I think the golems are more alert in this part. Or it was just this one. I wasn’t ready for how fast it reacted.” He looked at Don. “Do the people in offices get more important as you go further in?”

“I don’t know. Tirania has her office in the back, but most of the others seem to be for regular clerks. But that’s the guild, and this isn’t a real city office. There’s no telling how the dungeon set it up.”

The next office was unoccupied. Books were lined up in the bookshelf. “I’ll check them for traps,” Tibs said before Don commented. There had been three ‘real’ books among all the previous bookshelf, each trapped with a vial containing a lot of fire and air essence set to break if not disarmed. Fire loved paper, Tibs knew.

The books weren’t trapped, and when Tibs tried to open one, he couldn’t; props again. The second drawer contained the pouch, but it only had two rings. The others had papers and more of those quill-like cylinders.

Jackal overplayed being excited at the rings, but the Them didn’t comment, so maybe they couldn’t tell.

The next office had two golem people. Only the one behind the desk, the clerk, was armed and had a pouch, but they both reacted when Tibs grabbed the belt, holding on when the clerk jumped to its feet and he had it cut before it reached for the sword. It crumbled, covered with fire, while the other one was partially melted with corruption by the time it crumbled away.

This pouch had four rings and Jackal’s grin was so broad and stiff Tibs figure his mouth had to hurt.

The next office had no clerk, and the pouch only had two blank silver coins. Tibs acted disappointed and hoped Jackal was paying attention.

“This won’t work once they reach the next floor,” the Them said as Tibs unlocked the next office. “You can’t know which direction they’ll take.”

The office had one clerk.

“It doesn’t matter what direction they go in,” Sto replied. “The pouches are caches, so I can adjust them so it will follow Ganny’s pattern.”

“Which means,” Ganny continued, “that since they check one room, then the one facing it, even if they go left, which is the shortest way to the boss room, they won’t reach it before the door closes, and well before that, the fighter’s going to push them for more offices so he can get more of the rings.”

They’d go right, Tibs decided, grabbing the belt and cutting it. Let the Them think they couldn’t win. He raised his hand to show the belt to the others as the golem crumbled away under the fire. Then, it was just a question of decided how long it should take before Tibs had worked out the pattern.

And then, things would go quickly.

“Eight rings!” Jackal exclaimed. “We’re going to be rich!”

He so had to teach his friend how to act.

The eighth office had two clerks and a pouch heavy with one and six rings. Jackal only grinned, seemingly unsure of how he was expected to act.

As he expected, the next room’s pouch only contained coins, three of them.

“Wait,” Don said as Tibs stepped to the next door. He looked along the hall. “I want to

test something.”

Tibs stopped the sorcerer. “What do you want to test?”

“I’ll explain afterward. I need you to make sure the floor’s safe until we reach the door I need.”

By now, Tibs was confident the hall was devoid of traps, other than the gong, but he still checked. Ganny depended on them making assumption to get them.

“It’s this one,” Don said, one door short of the one Tibs knew contained the rings.

Tibs wondered if he should correct him. Was this too soon for him to have worked it out? If Don had it wrong, then Tibs couldn’t have it right yet. He unlocked the door to the small office, which had three golem people in it.

“Just get the pouch,” Don said.

“The sheath’ll bring us good coins,” Jackal objected.

“We have enough of those,” the sorcerer countered dismissively. “And Tibs said those rings are worth enough to buy our freedom. So they have to be the priority.”

“It seems the fighter’s not the most greedy one of them,” the Them said with mirth.

Jackal looked at Tibs, and he wasn’t sure how to instruct him to react. Don was going to be annoyed at being wrong, and it would be Tibs who made that obvious. The sorcerer hadn’t blown up at something like that since joining the team, but...

No, he was missing something. Don didn’t need the coins. He already had an agreement for his freedom from the guild.

“We can go back to the offices we passed if we have to,” he said before making his way to the back. He added a filigree of Duh to the point of the knife, and he hardly had to touch the pouch to open it and catch the two coins that fell out.

“That’s all that was in it.” He showed Don once he was back.

Don nodded with what looked like satisfaction, stepped past the one containing the rings, and pointed to the door. Yeah, he had the wrong pattern.

“Don,” Jackal said cautiously. “There weren’t any rings here. It might be best to go back and do those we passed by.”

“Checking all of them is going to keep us here well past the door closing, and there’s no telling if the pattern is going to be changed for our next run.”

And glance at him, and Tibs could only shrug. His biggest concern was Don’s disappointment.

“What if it doesn’t have any rings?” Jackal asked, his tone even more cautious.

“I need you to trust me,” Don replied in a surprisingly understanding tone. “Just because you aren’t seeing the results you want to see, it doesn’t mean this experiment isn’t giving me results I can use.”

Jackal looked at the others.

“Don’t look at me,” Mez said. “I’m only smarter than you in this group.”

As usual, Khumdar remained silent.

“Don’s smarter than me,” Tibs said, stepping to the door. He’d explain it, and how it was he knew the pattern once they were outside, and if he could make sure the Them wasn’t watching. Hopefully, Don would be bearable until then.

The office only had the golem clerk behind the desk and a cabinet behind it.

“Get the sheath too,” Jackal said.

“That isn’t needed,” Don replied.

“Don, I want something out of this in case you’re wrong. Again.”

“Then the cabinet’s better,” Tibs said, surprised Don didn’t protest. “It has potions we can use in the boss fight, and it means we don’t need to fight the clerk.”

“Which you don’t take part in,” Mez said as Jackal opened his mouth to protest.

“Fine. The cabinet, then the pouch.”

Even looking at the pouch, Tibs could tell it had no coins. He still cut it open, catching the key that fell out and used it to unlock the cabinet. He took the three potions and exited.

Instead of being annoyed, or even disappointed at the news there were no rings, Don stepped back one door and motioned to it.

“Why didn’t you pick that one first, then?” Jackal asked with enough annoyance to make up for what the sorcerer wasn’t showing.

“I wanted to make sure I was right.”

“You weren’t! There weren’t any rings in that one or that one. We might as well go back in case one of them will have them.”

“Trust me,” the sorcerer said.

Jackal threw his hands up. “Why am I even surprised? It’s not like you’ve ever given a fuck what I think.”

Tibs studied Don, who looked back at him. He was hiding his concern well. He was worried Tibs would side with Jackal, as he usually did. But Tibs knew he was right about the office. He just didn’t understand why the subterfuge.

This room was empty, and the pouch was in the seconds drawer, definitely filled. He undid the trap and retrieved it.

He lobbed it at a triumphant Don.

“Why did you waste time with the other two?” Jackal demanded in exasperation.

“Because without testing it, all I’d known was that there were rings in this office. And that could have been at random. Which would mean there might have been others before, and I wouldn’t actually have known where the office with them was. Now, if that one has rings. I know where they all are.”

“You said they wouldn’t be able to figure it out,” the Them said angrily.

“I didn’t think he’d work it out,” Ganny replied, mystified.

Tibs was happy and proud that Don had worked it out ahead of him figuring he could justify having the answer. He was happier when Don led them to the two and first room, which had a pouch nearly bursting with rings.