

Following Don, and the pattern of where the rings were, quickly took them to the second floor, and, because of how far apart they now were, they would have passed this door if not for Tibs staying close to the wall, in preparation for whenever the gong would sound the next exodus, and sensed the weave in it.

He paused in surprise, then looked at the door. It was like the others. Even the lock looked as simple, but the weave flowed around and through it.

“Tibs? What is it?” Jackal asked.

He did the numbers as he looked back to the room with the rings, counting where the next one should be, one and seven further. Which meant...

“This is the boss room.”

“How?” The Them snapped.

“They can count,” Ganny said, sounding annoyed; and slightly mirthful too?

“And this rogue can sense the door isn’t like the others,” Sto added in a suspiciously neutral tone. Had he done this to ensure Tibs would notice it?

“How could you overlook something so simple?” the Them demanded.

“Oh? Like you realized it was mistake?” Sto replied, annoyed.

“And will unlocking this door just let them in to fight your creation?”

“No,” Sto said, and Tibs heard the smile. “He can tell there’s something there, but not what it does.”

Sto was right. There was another weave behind the door, but he had no idea what it did yet. First, he needed to get through this lock.

The weave there had strands going through and around the tumblers. He considered using water, as he’d done with the other locks, but was the weave there to interact with that? There was earth, metal, air, some water and plenty of the other elements he couldn’t sense. So maybe Ganny had built this specifically to force rogues who’d grown to dependent on their essence to go back to basics.

“Lockpicks?” Jackal asked as Tibs formed them with ice.

“I don’t want to risk the weave in the lock deactivating the puzzle if I use essence directly to open it. If we come back, I’ll try it with essence, then.”

The Them snorted.

The weave moved as he adjusted the tumblers, but not in a way that told him what it did. Some of the threads were aligning, but other already had been before he started. With the last tumbler in place, he turned the tension bar, and the attached strand pulled onto the rest of the weave and—

His breath caught in his throat as he was yanked away hard. The door was no longer like the others. It was silver, looking more like metal than stone or wood; with rows of circles in it.

“Eighty-one slots,” Don said as Tibs caught his breath. “That’s the puzzle.”

Nine rows of nine circles made...eight and one.

Don fit one of the coins he collected in a hole. “That’s what the coins are for.” He considered something. “But it can’t be just about filling each of them. That seems too simple.”

“Do we even have enough?” Jackal asked.

Tibs took those he had and made stacks of nine. He had three, and four coins left. The

others added theirs, bringing the total to seven stacks and six.

"I'll get them," Jackal said, rubbing his hands as he turned to the door on the other wall.

"I'll be faster if I get them," Tibs said.

"You've had your fun," the fighter replied. "Now it's my turn." He kicked in the door.

"What's your sense of the puzzle?" Don asked, and Tibs put the fighting out of his mind.

"There's essence in each hole, and lines connecting all of them." He put a coin in and sensed for a change. "There's essence in the coins, but I can't tell if it's supposed to interact with what's already there. You're right. I don't think just putting them in will be enough."

"Told you," Sto said with pride.

Jackal added two coins to the stacks and moved on to the next door.

"We could speed this up by each taking a door," Mez said. "We know what the golems in them do, so none of us would be in danger."

"That's not going to help us get through this puzzle any faster," Don replied, "so Jackal might as well break golems. He's entitled to it, after standing by while you shoot all of them."

"None here," Jackal said as he exited the office and kicked in the door facing it.

Mez sat and took an ale skin from his pack. "If you'll make tankards, Tibs, we might as well relax until he's done, then."

Tibs made them one each, while continuing to study the puzzle. When Jackal added the next two coins, he left the food from his pack behind, and Don forced Tibs to sit and eat something.

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Tibs had a coin left over when he placed the last one in the door. He pocketed it. Maybe it was worth something, even without the usual marking.

Eight and one coins in the same number of holes, and nothing.

Well, not nothing. The weave in the door had reacted, and the door had glowed before fading back to normal and nothing that changed. Taking out a coin and putting it back produced the same result.

"I think." Don hesitated. "This is to let us know the weave checks what we do, and it isn't right."

"Then what do we do?" Jackal asked.

"We work out the specificity of the puzzle," the sorcerer replied. "What did the weave do when you took the coin out and put it back?"

"It shifted, then went back to its previous state, I think."

"You think?"

"The weave is complex. It isn't so dense the way some of the others are when..." when Ganny didn't want him to be able to use what he sensed. Did it mean the weave wasn't important to the puzzle, or sensing it was part of the puzzle? "What do you sense?" he asked Don.

The sorcerer closed his eyes. "I can tell there's a weave, but I don't have your precision. There are a lot of threads, but that's about it."

Tibs looked at Khumdar, who frowned. "There are secrets within the door, many

secrets.” He paused and his channels filled with essence, moving to the node of sight.

“Not this time, Cleric,” Ganny said with glee.

“There are too many of them, and of so many types I cannot say what is of use. This is purposeful. I am afraid you will need to accomplish this without my assistance.”

Tibs nodded. Ganny had been too pleased with herself.

“I told you I made it too hard for them,” Sto said.

Don took a coin from the door and turned it in his fingers. “You said there is essence in the coins. Does it lock with the door’s weave?”

Tibs rotated a coin in its hole. “The essence turns with the coin.”

Don tapped a finger on the coins. “We’re missing something. The dungeon can’t expect us to try all the permutations. We’d be at it all week.”

“That isn’t what I did,” Sto said.

“I know very well it isn’t,” the Them replied, annoyed. “I can sense what you did as well as you. Although it would have been a way to ensure they stay past your door closing.”

“How many are there?” Tibs asked, wishing the Them had slipped and given him a clue.

Don chuckled. “I don’t know, but the number would be so big I doubt it can be contained in all the books in a library.”

“It’d take us more than a week to try that many of them,” Jackal said. “This is a lock, so it’s just about making the essence line up, right? You can sense that Tibs.”

“Only if I can tell them apart,” Tibs replied.

“Jackal might still be onto something,” Don said, and Tibs stared at the lack of surprise in the tone. “See if you can turn it so that as many of them line up.”

The coin turned, and some of the threads in it lined up. He moved it to another position and different threads could be made to line up. He tried three more spots before shaking his head.

“So, we can’t win this?” Jackal asked. “Should I try punching through it?”

“The dungeon wouldn’t let that be a possibility,” Don said.

“And he makes all the puzzles so we can work them out,” Tibs added. “If this looks like it can’t be done, it means we missed something.”

“I told you,” Sto said. “I know how Runners think. They only had one thing on their mind and miss the rest.”

Tibs kept staring at the door to keep from reacting. That had been for him. Sto wanted him to get into the room. Normally he wouldn’t help, which meant the reward would be more rings. They already a lot, but it wasn’t enough to help everyone.

Sto had confirmed he’d missed something, and that it was because he’d only had one thing on his mind. What was on his mind? Helping the town. Which meant getting the rings. Which had caused him to basically ignore everything else in the offices. If not for making sure the Them didn’t realize Tibs was speeding through the offices to get to those with the rings, he wouldn’t have bothered taking anything else.

What had he taken?

He took the two pages that reminded him of the Promises. The cylinder, the sheath without the sword in it, and the extra coin. He wanted to put it away since he knew what it was for, but was that him being too focused on one thing?

He made a table of ice and laid the items on it.

“What are these?” Don tapped the paper.

“I don’t know, it was in one of the safes. I want Darran to look at them because to me, the way the letters and decorations are arranged reminds me of how Promises look.”

“Stole many Promises, have you?” Don asked with a chuckle. Tibs realized that while he’d told him about taking down the Brokerage for Archer, and so they wouldn’t be able to pay the assassins anymore. He’d forgotten to mention what he’d taken for himself in the process.

The sorcerer took the cylinder and studied it. “What do you think this is? I noticed them on the desks.”

“They were in the safes too. Darran might know what it is.”

Don nodded and placed it back. “Why are you taking them out?”

“Because we’re missing something.” Tibs looked at the items, sensed them. The answer was there. “The answer to the puzzle is in this room.” He motioned to everything around them. “So I’m trying to figure out what item we found that has it.”

Jackal placed three crystal bottles on the table. “Those come for the offices.”

“But we know what they’re for,” Don said.

Jackal shrugged. “And the dungeon knows we know that. I’m not that smart. I’m just adding them because Tibs said he’s looking at all the items we found in there.”

“And doesn’t this look like some sort of quill?” Mez asked, picking up the cylinder. “Look at the tip. That’s definitely something I could write with.”

“But there’s nothing to write with, or on,” Don said.

“There’s that.” Jackal tapped the paper.

“And how does that have something to do with the door?” the sorcerer asked. “I think you’re trying too hard. You’re saying anything that comes to you and hoping it’s right.”

“What else are the rest of us going to do?” the fighter replied with a smile. “You two are the smart ones here. I have so little ideas, I just say them when I do.”

Tibs took the cylinder and looked it over. Mez was right. The tip was a lot like that of a quill. He sort of remembered thinking that when he picked up the first one. And he knew better than to dismiss what Jackal said out of hand. He’d known he was smarter than he let on well before he promised Kroseph he’d do better.

And Don was wrong about one thing. Tibs was the one with a habit of trying too hard. Of getting lost in how deep the problem was, even when it had a simple solution.

Not that this looked to have a simple solution. If this was a quill of some sort, where was the ink? And Tibs agreed with Don that the paper was probably not what needed to be written on. Which left them without ink or anything to write on.

He picked up the coin, a thought coming to him. “Can coins be blank?”

“No,” Don replied.

“Sure, before they’re stamped.”

“Those aren’t coins,” the sorcerer said. “They’re blanks, like these.” He motioned to the door. “They have to be stamped to be called coins. Hence, coins can’t be blank.”

“You’d have fun convincing my cousins of that,” Jackal said. “Considering it was their jobs to get them before they reached the treasury. My father liked having his own supply of coins to stamp as he needed.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier for your cousins to steal them after they’ve been stamped?” Mez asked.

“The Treasurer would know they’ve been taken,” Don said. “Each treasury has a code they used to mark the coins as authentic. I don’t know what it is, since it is a secret they guard with more ardor than the coins themselves. But until they get distributed, they know exactly where each coin is.”

“And that secrecy means no one knows what the code is for coins from other kingdoms,” Jackal added.

Tibs turned the coin in his fingers. “So they stamp a coin to make it real?”

“More to show where it’s from,” Jackal said. “Some kingdom refuse to recognize a rival’s coins are valid, but more will say it’s worth less. It’s how kings show they aren’t happy with the others. But since it didn’t cost my father anything but buying a stamp from each country, even a reduced value meant more coins for him to spend.”

“So the stamp tells you where the coin is from,” Tibs mused.

“Where it claims to be from,” Jackal said, “but yeah, basically.”

Which didn’t help him. He had no way to stamp the coins.

But was that right?

He was confident that the fact the coins weren’t ‘real’ yet was part of it, but was he supposed to make them real? Or to reveal the truth of them being real?

He suffused himself with light and shone it on the door.

Sto chuckled as the light was absorbed by darkness in the door, making it grow thicker, instead of piercing it. “You aren’t cutting through this one, buddy.”

With a huff, Tibs let go of the element and turned to his friends, who were rubbing at their tearing eyes.

“How about some warning next time?” Jackal blinked a few times.

“Sorry. I thought I could have light show me the truth about the coins, but the dungeon’s wise to that. The darkness in the weave absorbed it.”

“Mayhap,” Khumdar said, “if light and darkness were to assault the weave, it could be defeated.”

“Oh, yes,” Sto said eagerly, “Do it, I want to see what will happen.”

Tibs studied the weave, sensed it for a while in case the Them could tell when he did that, then shook his head. “If I knew light based etchings it might work, but all I can do is throw it at something. With that, it comes down to who has the largest reserve. I have a lot, but I figure a dungeon will have a lot more than me.”

He went back to what was on the table. He had a paper, which might be a Promise. A cylinder, which might be a quill, a sheath pretending to be for a knife. A coin, that wouldn’t be one until it was stamped and three bottles, one that healed, one that replenished the essence and one that replenished the stamina.

Only, was that all they were? He sensed the health potion, and it seemed like the others he’d sensed before. “Does anyone have a healing potion from a previous run?” he hadn’t taken any since with his reserve and access to purity, he didn’t need them.

Mez placed a stamina potion on the table. “I didn’t bother bringing the healing ones since you’re here.”

He took it and the crystal bottle containing its equivalent. They registered mostly as

the same, but the difference were so small they wouldn't matter. He handed it back to the archer, only to still hold on to it as he tried to take it.

He was getting something wrong again.

Everything outside had differences. Carina had explained about chaos and how a change far away could affect something next to Tibs. That because of that, even master crafters couldn't replicate every detail of something they made.

But Sto wasn't a crafter, master or otherwise. He was a dungeon. He didn't have to remake things each time he needed it. He had what he called models and all he had to do was put the essences into them and he had the real thing.

When it came to their essence, the same items had exactly the same essences.

Unless Sto made it so they didn't.

"He's got something," Don said.

"That's my line," Jackal complained.

"You need to be faster, then."

Tibs removed the stopper and poured a drop out, catching it with water. If Sto had added something, then what he needed to do was take it out of the rest of the essences. With the other potions to compare with, he could identify those differences... but how did he go about taking them out?

The first step was easy. Pull away the essences he had. That left him with...

"Tibs?" Jackal asked quietly. "How long should we let you stare at the water before asking if you're doing anything?"

"I'm trying to figure out how to pull the...whatever it is, out of the rest. I think that's the ink. I can tell it's there, but it's not made of my elements. I know how to force those I don't have away or toward me, but it's not gentle, and the sense I get of this is that it's fragile."

"What is your theory?" Don asked. "Your idea," he added.

"We only have one thing that really needs to be written on. The coins in the door. We have something that might be a quill, and maybe the ink goes into the cylinder, so I'm trying to get that out of the rest of the essences in the potion, put it in there and use that on the coins."

"I couldn't do that," Mez said.

"I know. That's why I'm trying to work out how—"

"That isn't what he means," Don said. "The dungeon doesn't make puzzles for you to best, Tibs. It makes puzzles for any of us to crack if we apply ourselves to it. Whatever the solution is, Mez should be able to use it."

"And because I'm not as smart as either of you," the archer said. "I'd just take the quill." He did. "And dip that into the provided inkpot." He put it in the open stamina potion until the end touched the liquid, and the change was immediate. The yellow liquid turned gray as that extra essence moved into the quill.

"I really didn't think he'd be the one solving it," Ganny said.

"Runners are full of surprises," Sto replied with a hint of pride.

"I think it worked," Jackal said, and Tibs was too annoyed at himself for having overcomplicated things to glare at the fighter.

"You're the one holding the quill," he told Mez when the archer offered it to Tibs.

“I don’t know what comes next.”

Tibs smiled. “What do you do after dipping your quill in the ink?”

“I write?”

Tibs motioned to the door. “Then write.”

“What if it doesn’t do anything?”

“Then we know this isn’t the solution.” But Ganny had told him it was.

Mez stepped to the door, thought, then applied the quill to a coin. He gasped and stepped away. “I didn’t do that.”

The coin now showed an anchor with a setting sun behind it.

Mez put the quill in Tibs’s hand. “I was just going to write a letter, but as soon as I touched it, that flowed out. You do the rest, so I don’t break anything.”

“You can’t break it,” Don said. “Clearly, this is like a combination lock. The right items need to be in the right position for the lock to disengage. The ‘ink’ needs to be in the ‘quill’ and that unlocks the stamps.”

“I’m going to stick to my fire essence,” Mez replied.

Tibs shrugged and touched another coin. Ink flowed out of the quill and shaped into the form of a bird he didn’t recognize, but he’d seen coins with it before, same as with the anchor and sun. The next one had a flower, then a shield with three swords, then the anchor again. Don had to do the top rows, but then they had eight and one stamped coins. They all had multiples, except for one.

Don looked at it. “That’s strange. I thought I know all the kingdom’s stamps.”

“I know it,” Tibs said, caressing the coins with a mountain on it, and a crack near its base. “It’s our coin.” He could even make out the path leading to the dungeon’s entrance.

“The dungeon’s stamp,” Jackal whispered.

“I knew you’d work that out,” Sto said.

“If that’s us,” Mez said, a smile forming as he looked over the door. “I know what the solution is.”