

Planning-11

Tibs found Cross in the Drunk Worm, laughing with a bunch of guards. As soon as one of them noticed him, the laughter died down, and they left her table as he approached. A few of them mouthed a 'sorry' as they walked by him.

"You've become quite the fun killer," she said, grinning. She motioned to the tankard on the table. "Fell free to sample what one of them left behind in their hurry to run away from you."

Tibs sat and sipped the one before him. As with most of the tavern in the town, the Worm's ale was passable. "They didn't have to leave."

She smirked. "When your boss doesn't like someone, it's not a good idea to be seen sitting at the same table as him."

He nodded and placed the paper before her. "Have you ever seen a puzzle like this?" he'd hurriedly drawn how the dragon crests puzzle pieces moved with arrows showing directions.

She glanced at it as she sipped her drink, then frowned, putting it down. "The pieces are square?" he nodded. "And they pivot around that corner?"

"There's essence involved."

"There's have to be. You can't have squares spin like that. The corners get in the way. That makes it magic. That's not the kind of puzzles I play with."

"I don't think the essence is how the puzzle's solved. It's just there to let the pieces move like that."

"You sure?" she studied the paper.

"The other two puzzles are sliding square puzzles. The first one's just your normal type with one space used to allow them to slide. The second one uses void essence to let the pieces slide out from the edges and appear on the opposite one."

"How do you know it's void? My understanding is that adventurer can only sense their essence."

"With training we can sense others too, but I don't know, it's void. Void essence is the only one I know of that lets something do this. It's behind the transportation platform. But it doesn't matter which essence for it, because that's not what solves the puzzle. It's still just about moving the pieces until I reform the crest."

"Which is why you figure it's the same with this one."

Tibs nodded.

"And each grid of four squares can move around that center pivot? You've drawn it so that every individual square had a pivot at all corners. That would mean it can go with any larger grid."

"I can only change the center pivot when they're properly aligned with the surrounding squares."

"Does it work in a large grid?"

"No, only in two-by-two packs."

"And you're sure magic isn't how this is solved?"

Tibs hesitated. "The dungeon's consistent. The hallways are fights, sometimes with traps we need to step around. The rooms unlocked by the crests are puzzles, but that mix thinking and doing something physical. In the Lion room, we have to play a game of Conquest. King Killer?" he said at her frown, then continued. "But when we confront a piece, it's a fight we have to win. The Boar's room had columns that move up and down, so we have to cross the room, leaping and climbing, but each column makes others in the room move. So I have to work out the pattern. This one's easy so long as no one falls or misses a jump. The crests are puzzles where I slide the pieces to unlock them. So the dragon crest will be the same."

"And the magic's just there to let the pieces move around."

Tibs nodded.

"Do you know what the mechanism is like?"

He shook his head.

"Have you worked out something about it?"

"It moves physically. I mean, the pivot doesn't have essence in what lets it move. I can feel when the edges align with what lets me change which pivot is used."

"Anywhere other than a dungeon, I'd say that's too complex of a puzzle to work. It's going to need layer upon layers of gears to control all those pivots and determine when they are lined up. I can't even think of how the mechanism will tell everything's in the right order to unlock."

"It unlocks when the crest is formed."

"But how does the mechanism know?"

Tibs frowned. "Isn't this like the puzzle box with sliding pieces? I slide them around until all the notches are lined up and the cover can be removed."

"But those kinds of puzzle only have one way any piece can move." She tapped the paper. "This has them move in any way around the pivot. Are you sure magic isn't how this works?"

He couldn't be sure. He also couldn't be sure that Ganny wasn't the one to unlock the door when she saw the crest was complete. He shrugged.

"With the information you're giving me, all I can tell you is that you're going to have to break it the hard way."

Tibs nodded, not surprised by her conclusion.

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The guards patrolling the tents and permanent buildings before the dungeon eyed Tibs suspiciously, but he stayed in the lit path until he reached the steps, then headed along the length of the cliff. He sensed the guard following him until Tibs was well away from the buildings. They'd have more at the periphery, expecting he was planning to use the darkness to return undetected.

Tibs walked to the cliff face and set, resting his head back against the stone.

"So," Sto said, "Don?"

"It wasn't my idea. Tirania forced him into my team. Threatened to break us up if I said no."

"I can arrange it so he won't survive the next run."

"She's just going to find someone else to force on us. At least, Don's not incompetent. Did you know about not having to put a Lord on the board?"

"That's not how the game plays," Ganny said. "But he was right. So long as you don't die, you win, so on your side, the Lord isn't required."

"Doesn't that mean you don't have to use it either?"

"I guess, but while I can't force the Runners to have one, I want to stick to how the game works."

"I won't tell the others teams," Tibs said.

"You can be sure Don will," Sto replied disgustedly.

"I... don't think he will."

"Really?" Sto asked. "You haven't heard him during his runs. 'I know everything about this.' 'I know more than you about that.' 'I'm going to make sure everyone knows how much better than them I am.'"

Tibs smiled at the perfect imitation of Don's voice Sto did. "Did you hear him say anything like that during our run?"

"There was that moment after winning the game where he was bossing you around."

"But what about the rest of the time?"

"No. He was surprisingly subdued."

Tibs nodded. "He's been like that out here, too."

"Why?"

Tibs shrugged. "Sebastian's attack hurt everyone. He got his whole team killed in an ambush. He wanted to die there. Now he wants us to teach him how to be better."

"Other than Jackal letting him decide how the game of Conquest went, it didn't seem like there was a lot of teaching happening."

"How do you teach someone to be good? You are or you aren't. Don only thinks of himself. Once he's over whatever this is, he's going to start doing that again and he'd going to be impossible to deal with."

"I can take care of that for you," Sto offered.

"No." Tibs was tempted, and if not for the ice, he'd say yes. But cooling his anger let him see beyond the immediate satisfaction. "I told you, Tirania's just going to find another one, and he's going to be worse. All she cares about is using us to make herself look good to the town. Make them forget how she abandoned us to Sebastian."

"If you can get her inside me, I could make her go away."

Tibs chuckled. How good would that feel? But again, he could see the problems it would cause. Whoever was actually in charge would put someone else to run the guild. That was who he needed to remove, who he needed to have step inside Sto.

But would that even work? Tirania was powerful, Tibs sensed that, and power determined how was in charge, so the person who told her what to do had to be more powerful. How did Sto compare to them?

"I don't know if you could kill her."

Sto snorted. "I'll remind you that what I'm putting the runners through are tests. If I wanted to kill all

of you, it would be easy.”

“But we’re Rho and Lambda at this point. She’s Beta. They consider you to be Rho. That’s a long way to Beta.”

“That’s because they don’t know anything about me.”

“No, Sto,” Ganny said. “The guild’s studied a lot of dungeons. For everything they have wrong, they have a good sense of how powerful we are at each stage. Otherwise, they wouldn’t know who to send in, so we didn’t just wipe them out, or have them outright destroy one of us.”

“Come on Ganny. Beta’s only five places above Lambda, so, that’s like me dealing with five or six of Jackal. Sure, it’s going to be a fight, but I’m going to win.”

Tibs chuckled.

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that,” Sto said.

“You have it wrong, Sto,” Ganny said. “How many Omega Runners would it take to match one Upsilon?”

“I don’t know, a lot of them, but that’s because Upsilon have an element. They’re a lot tougher once that happens.”

“Alright, how many Upsilon to match one Rho?”

“I.. don’t know.”

“Yes, you do. Just look at what the second and third floor. What’s different during those fights?”

“No, that’s not the same,” Sto replied, “by the time they reach the third floor they’ve learned more. That’s why they’re better in the fights and figure out your puzzles. That’s not the same thing as being more powerful.”

“You don’t think that someone who reaches Beta had learned a lot more?” she asked. “Remember Bardik, and how easily he killed the second floor creatures?”

“He was Epsilon,” Tibs said. “He’d been stronger, but the guild made him weaker as a part of his punishment.”

“And you made him weaker still,” Sto said.

He had? He knew that draining his essence had made him grow older, as if without all that essence, he went back to the age he really had, but he hadn’t realized he’d taken away some of his power. But now that he thought about it, it made sense. His own increase in power, as all that essence broke his reserve open, had to have come from somewhere.

“Alright, maybe you’re right and a Runner at Beta would be too strong for me to kill. But there’s always what I did to the room I could use.”

“You don’t even know what happened to it,” Ganny said.

“But I know what I did to make it happen. If I put her in a room and did that again. She’d be gone.”

“Only if she can’t stop it from happening. Her element’s crystal. That’s everywhere.”

“But that isn’t going to help her. I didn’t use Crystal when the room vanished.”

“It’s not going to matter,” Tibs said. “They’re just going to send someone else. Someone I don’t know. I can use Tirania, I might not be able to use whoever replaces her.”

“Use her how?” Sto asked,

“And to do what?” Ganny added.

“I don’t know how, yet,” Tibs replied. “But I’m going to use her to make the guild pay for letting Carina be killed.”