

Chapter 11

Tibs found Cross in the Drunk Worm.

She sat, laughing with guards, at a table in the center of the tavern. More guards sat throughout the tables. The Worm was a favored drinking place for them. On noticing Tibs approaching the table, the guards left it for others. Those who walked by him mouthed a “Sorry”.

“You’ve become quite the fun killer,” she said, grinning. She motioned to the tankards on the table. “Feel free to sample what one of them left behind in their hurry to escape you.”

“They didn’t have to leave.” He sipped from the one where he sat. As with the reputable taverns in Kragle Rock, the ale was fine.

She smirked. “When your boss doesn’t like someone, it’s not a good idea to be seen sitting at the same table.”

He nodded and placed the paper before her. “Have you seen a puzzle like this?” He’d drawn the tiles of the dragon crest with the pegs and indicated how they moved.

She glanced at it, sipping her drink, then put it down, frowning. “The pieces are square?” he nodded. “And they pivot around the dot in the corner?” she asked in disbelief.

“There’s essence involved.”

“There’d have to be.” She studied the drawings. “Squares can’t spin like that among other squares. The corners get in the way. If it’s magic, it’s not the kind of puzzle I play with.”

“As far as I can tell, essence isn’t how the puzzle is solved. It’s just there to let the pieces move.”

“And how sure of that are you?” she sipped her drink, eyes still on the drawings.

“Another puzzle does something like this. It’s tiles too, but I need to slide an entire row or column. Edges have void essence woven so a tile that crosses it moves to the other side of the puzzle, on that same row or column.”

She studied him. “How do you know it’s void? I thought adventurers can only sense their essence.”

“We can sense other essences with enough training; but I can’t tell it’s void. Void essence is just the only one I know that can do that. That’s the element the Attendants at the transportation platform have. What essence the dungeon is using here doesn’t matter. It’s just about letting the pieces move in the way the puzzle needs.”

“And that’s why you think it’s the same thing here?”

Tibs nodded.

She tapped the four squares he drew. “Each two-by-two grid moves around this pivot?” she tapped a cruder drawing of the nine-by-nine puzzle. “Here you have pivot pegs at the corner of each tile. Can you turn more than one grid at the same time?”

“When one isn’t aligned. The others can’t move.”

“Can you move a larger grid?”

“Only two-by-two.”

“And you’re certain magic isn’t the solution?”

“The dungeon is consistent in how he tests us. Puzzles that need essence to solve are made of essence. Fights are about testing us physically. When there are traps at the same time, it’s about noticing them and avoiding stepping on them while fighting. The traps I need to disarm have their triggers in the same form as what the solution needs. Locks come in different form, but follow those same rules.”

Tibs turned the paper over and used his charcoal stick to draw a rough square with tiles and a missing one. “The rooms we need to win to unlock the final one have puzzles as locks. The lion room is just tile sliding, where I have to use the missing one to move them and make the crest’s image. The boar’s room has those sliding lines with the essence at the edge, and I have to also remake the crest. So the dragon room will be like that, but I need to turn the tiles around the pegs to remake it.”

“What do you do in the rooms?” She asked distractedly, while studying the drawings.

“The lion room is a game of Conquest. King Killer?” he offered at her frown, then continued. “It’s just five pieces against five, but when a piece ‘takes’ the other, there’s a fight to determine the winner. It’s a test of strategy and of tricking the dungeon sometimes.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You make it sound like it’s intelligent or something.”

“He is,” Tibs said, ready to defend Sto, then paused. He couldn’t say too much; Cross didn’t know Sto was a person. “He’s crafty, but how he behaves can be predictable. So Khumdar used expectations of how a game of Conquest play to trick him—” he’d almost said her “—and win. That wouldn’t have worked the second time.”

She nodded. “The other room?”

“It tests agility and the ability to see patterns. The room has columns of varying heights. The change of weight on one will make it and others in the room move up or down. We need to cross the room in a way that it opened a passage. Don used corruption to melt the columns in the way the first time his team did the room, but the dungeon adapted and it didn’t work the second.” He smiled. “There was an essence maze on the second floor my team kept finding ways around for a lot of runs until the dungeon was able to force me to navigate it.”

“This room?”

“I won’t know until we can go in.”

“No other team cracked the puzzle?”

He shook his head. “Without knowing where the room is, it’s hard to get to it before the other two. The third floor is a maze of shifting walls, and the triggers we step on control what wall moves, but we can’t see all the movements. No one mentioned the dragon crest before, and we were the first team to go in now.”

“And you are certain magic isn’t how this is solved.”

“Essence is only used so the pieces can move,” he stated.

“What’s the mechanism like?”

“I haven’t seen it.”

“Have you worked out something about it?”

“It’s physical. I mean, it’s not essence that makes the pivot turn, I’d be able to sense that. It’s just where the tiles will overlap when they turn. There’s a latch of some sort that click when a turn aligns the tiles with the others. It doesn’t lock it in place. I can keep turning it, but it’s probably how the others unlock. That’s also physical.”

“Anywhere other than a dungeon, I’d tell you this is impossible. The level of complexity needed to make something like that work is... Well, it’s beyond anything I can think of. Layers upon layers of gears and levers to control those pivots. I can’t even think of how the mechanism will tell it can unlock the door.”

“It unlocks when the crest is formed.”

“But how does the mechanism know?” she asked, and Tibs frown.

“Isn’t this just like the puzzle box with the sliding pieces? I slide them until all the notches are lined up, and I remove the cover.”

“But those puzzles only have one way any piece can move.” She tapped the paper. “This has any of them move around any of the pivots. Are you certain magic isn’t how this works?”

He shrugged. He couldn’t be certain. He hadn’t sensed essence when the others unlocked, but if it was Ganny watching for when the crest was formed so she could open the door, would he?

She handed him the paper. “With what you’re giving me, all I can tell you is that you’re going to have to crack it the hard way.”

Tibs put the paper away. He wasn’t surprised by her answer. After all, Sto tested the Runners, not those outside the dungeon.

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The guards whose path Tibs crossed eyed him suspiciously. It was night, so what reasons could he have to walk along the path leading to the dungeon’s steps? But he remained on the lit path, so they left him be, continuing their patrols among the tents and nearly finished permanent buildings.

Before the steps, Tibs turned left, off the path and among the empty stalls and patches of ground being cleared for other buildings. The guard he sensed following him remained on his trail until Tibs was well beyond the last stall. They’d post guards at the periphery now, in case Tibs planned on returning undetected.

Now alone, He backtracked and headed to the cliff face where he knew he was within Sto’s range, and sat, leaning back against the stone.

“So,” Sto said, “Don?”

“It wasn’t my idea. Tirania forced him on my team. She threatened to break us up if I said no.”

“Do you want me to arrange it so he doesn’t survive the next run?”

“She’d going to think I did it, and she’ll just force someone else on the team. I need her to be happy with me, and 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’s right. On your side, you just need to stay alive, so you don’t need it.”

“Doesn’t that mean you don’t have to use one either?”

“Yes, but while I can’t force Runners to use one, I want to stick to how the game plays.”

“I won’t tell other teams,” Tibs said.

“I doubt you’ll have to,” she said in disgust. “Don probably has already.”

“Did any of the other teams who did the third floor do that?”

“No,” she hesitated, “but not many of them beyond you, and Don, made it to that room before you stopped coming.”

“I...” Tibs thought back to the sorcerer’s behavior. “I don’t think he’ll tell.”

“Really?” Sto asked. “You haven’t heard him during his runs. ‘I know everything about this.’ ‘I know more than you do about that.’ ‘I know more about how dungeons thinks than dungeons do and I’ll make sure everyone knows about it so they know how much better than them I am.’”

Tibs smiled at the perfect imitation of Don’s voice. “Did he say anything like that during our run?”

“There was that moment after winning the game he was bossing you around. And he did go on about how *I* think.”

“But other than after the game, did he lord what he knows over us?”

Sto took his time replying. “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 entire 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 you’d move in the game, I didn’t see a lot of teaching happening.”

“How do you teach someone to be better?” Tibs exclaimed, the ice cracking under the annoyance. “You are or you aren’t. Don only wants this because he’d down. Once he’s over that, he’ll be back to doing whatever he wants to make himself look better and he’s going to be impossible to deal with.”

“I can take care of that,” Sto offered.

Tibs undid the cracks, and the temptation waned. “Tirania’s just going to make my life difficult for it. All she wants is to use me, my team, to make herself look good to the town. Make them forget she abandoned us to Sebastian.”

“If you can get her inside me, I can make her go away, too.”

How could he make that happen? Would Tirania know the dungeon is dangerous to her? Was Sto really able to do something to someone as powerful as she was? Only that wouldn’t solve his problem. Tirania was simply an agent of the guild. That Marger had put her in charge, told her how the guild wanted things to be run. Whoever they replaced her with would be the same.

Could he get Marger to step inside Sto? Would it work? They had to be stronger than Tirania, if they gave her orders.

“I don’t know if you could kill her.”

Sto snorted. “I’ll remind you that what I’m putting you through are tests. If I decide to kill you, it... well... I did kill a lot of Runners before.”

“We weren’t that strong then,” Tibs replied, unsure why Sto sounded apologetic.

“And neither was I.”

“She’s stronger than Bardik, and he hurt you badly.”

“He had those bottles of corruption, and I was young. She can’t do that to me.”

Tibs expected she could do much worse. “She’s Beta. That’s a lot stronger than you. They consider you Rho.”

“That’s because they don’t know anything about me,” Sto replied dismissively.

“No, Sto,” Ganny said. “The guild has studied a lot of dungeons. For everything they have wrong, they have a good sense of the kind of power you have with each floor. If they didn’t, they wouldn’t know who to send in, so you didn’t just wipe them out, or have them outright destroy one of us.”

“Come on, Ganny. Beta’s only five stages above Lambda. That’d be like I’m dealing with five or six Jackals. Sure, it’s going to be a fight, but I am 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 does it take to match one Upsilon?”

“I don’t know,” Sto replied dismissively. “But that’s because Upsilons have an element. They get a lot tougher once that’s happens.”

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

“I... don’t know.”

“Yes, you do. Compare the second and third floor. What’s different in those fights?”

“That’s not the same, Ganny. They know a lot more by the time they make it to the third floor. It’s why they have such an easy time through the second floor on their last run, and why they fight better on the third and have an easier time with your puzzles. That’s not the same as being more powerful than I am.”

“Don’t you think that someone who makes it to Beta has learned even more?” Ganny said, as Tibs thought back to Alistair’s lesson of precision over brute force. Becoming precise was all about learning ever more things about how to use the essence he had.

“And don’t forget how easily Bardik killed the creatures on the first floor, even when he didn’t use those bottles.”

“He was Epsilon,” Tibs said, unsure if Sto knew. “And he used to be stronger, but the guild made him weaker as part of his punishment.”

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

He had? Draining the essence had made Bardik age, as if without that essence he went back to the age he really had, but Tibs hadn’t realized he’d also taken away some of his power. Thinking back on it, it made sense. His own increase in power, as well as the essence that broke his reserve open, had to have come from somewhere.

“Maybe you’re right, and a Runner at Beta is too strong for me to kill. But there’s still what I did to the room I can use on her.”

“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 do that again. She’d be gone and Tibs would be fine.”

“Not her,” Tibs said. “Marger is just going to replace her.”

“Who’s Marger?” Sto asked.

“Tirania’s boss. I need to use Tirania to get them here.”

“Why?” Sto asked.

“Because I’m going to bring the guild down by killing them for what they let happen to Carina.”