

Mez took the coins out, except for theirs, which was in the center of the grid, then put them back in, starting by surrounding it with those stamped with a flower and two swords crossed over them. The eight immediately around it ‘snapped’ in alignment with the essence threads around the hole when he turned them so they were straight in their place.

“How do you know where they go?” Tibs asked, taking the rest and making stacks based on how they were stamped.

“I’ve had to study the world’s geography,” the archer replied. “These are Olvilon’s coins.” He placed the five left in his hand, but only one snapped when he turned it. He moved from one hole to the other around those already in place until each snapped. “It’s the kingdom in which Kragle Rock is located.”

“Why do you have to know that?”

“A proper noble must know all his neighbors,” Mez recited with derision in a high pitch voice Tibs wasn’t sure who it was meant to be. “Not that she knows what it means to be a noble,” he added, and Tibs figured he was talking about his girl. “This is the first time any of it’s been of use. Hand me those for Mirania.”

Tibs looked at the stamps. “I don’t know which one it is.”

“Those with the hammer over a shield. They’re Olvilon’s neighbor sunrise ward.”

“If Kragle Rock is in Olvilon, why does it have a different stamp?”

“The dungeon’s ego?” the archer said, as he placed the coins, moving those that didn’t snap.

“While that is possible,” Don said, “it still plays into the fact that because it’s a dungeon city, Kragle Rock is actually part of the kingdom of the Adventurer’s Guild.”

“A guild can’t be a kingdom,” Jackal said.

“When that guild controls a force able to topple any king it wants,” the sorcerer said, “it can be whatever it wants. It also simplifies how the other kingdoms deal with it, since it means there will be something resembling a unified mindset across all dungeon cities, instead of each local guild running things as they want.”

“Ah yes,” Khumdar said. “The kingdoms’ so well vaunted internal unity. If each guild is as such, then none should be surprised when they encounter their next posting and find that things there are done in a completely different manner as to what you have learned here.”

“Spent time among a lot of guilds?” Jackal asked so innocently the cleric chuckled.

“No. But I have traveled through many kingdoms, and the unity is only as strong as the king’s will to enforce it.”

“Which leads to tyranny,” Mez said, taking the stack with the badger and putting this to the right of Olvilon and Mirania’s coins.

“Indeed,” the cleric said.

“I defer to your experience,” Don said. “Research tends to be narrowminded, so the conclusions when studying people tend to be just as narrowly focused.”

Coins with the anchor and setting sun went above and to the left of Olvilon’s, then a forest with an anvil before it made a line along the left coins. Beyond that were individually stamped coins, with a series of coins with waves and what Mez told him was a ship’s helm.

When the last coin snapped into place, the door silently opened, revealing a large room with a white so bright it took him a moment to realize there was something wrong.

Tibs leaned in to look left and right. The walls were far enough he should see the inside of at least seven offices on each side. He looked into the office next door, and it was still there, with the broken desk and shelves that resulted from Jackal's fight.

"How is the room larger than what space there is?" he asked Don.

"I'm... not sure. Can you sense anything of the space?"

Tibs vehemently shook his head. He wasn't even risking the chance he'd brush against what was under the building.

The sorcerer looked into the room, eyes narrowed against the glare. "The property of void as an element would allow for something like this, but I haven't read anything about it being done."

Jackal cracked his fingers, grinning. "That's a boss if I ever saw one."

Tibs looked into the room again, trying to understand what his friend was... How had he missed the creature that stood at what might be the back? He couldn't tell how deep the room was.

"How about we figure out if the dungeon has given us an easier way," Don said, "before you run in to start the fight?"

It wasn't only how large it was, its blackness marred the empty whiteness surrounding it. Only on focusing could Tibs tell it wasn't actually all black. Its head was covered with eyes. And its body was made of patches of dark colors in various simple shapes, connected with so many strands of black he could barely make out the gray underneath.

"I don't see how there's going to be a puzzle," Mez said. "The room's basically empty."

"Tibs, Khumdar?" The fighter asked.

"I'm not trying it from this far," Tibs replied.

"There are no secrets in this room that are different from any of the others filling this building."

Jackal rubbed his hands. "Straight up fight it is."

Don blocked his way. "This is a dungeon. There's always more to a room than just fighting. Give us time. It's still going to be there if we can't think of anything."

Jackal raised his hands and stepped back. "You think this is the floor boss?"

"You wish," Sto replied.

"I doubt it," Don said. "We haven't even explored half the city. My guess is that it's going to be in a place that is entirely obvious, but only after we've worked out the clues leading to it. It won't be at the 'end' of the floor, since this floor doesn't have an 'end' in the traditional sense of the word."

"He almost got it," Ganny said. "You have to be impressed."

"No." The Them replied flatly. "I am wondering if you aren't underestimating them. They made their way to this room much too fast, and you said they wouldn't work out the puzzle before the door closed."

"How was I supposed to know one of them would know about that geography thing?" Sto replied. "They never talked about it before, and I didn't know it was a thing until you showed up and told me about all the people out there and how they gather together. Even their rogue didn't know what the design on the coins was for."

“It would have been harder still if you hadn’t set the coins to adjust themselves when they were nearly aligned.”

“Yes, I’ll grant you that,” Sto admitted. “I’ll come up with something to replace that before I get to updating this room tonight.”

“Just remove it and be done with it.”

“I do that and there’s no way any of them can solve it,” Sto replied. “Isn’t it in the rules that every puzzle has to have a solution every member of a team can eventually work out?”

“Just let them try every possibility,” the Them said.

“The sorcerer said there are so many of them it can’t be done!”

“How about we include braided essences, as the way for them to tell how the coins are supposed to be aligned?” Ganny offered in a conciliatory tone. “We can put one for each element, like with the doorways, and it will force them to pay more attention since it’s going to be the structure of the braid and not just where it passes from the coin to the door that will be the indication it’s in the correct slot.”

Tibs took a breath in the stretching silence and stepped into the room.

“Well?” Sto demanded.

“Fine,” the Them said with enough reluctance Tibs wondered if their dislike was aimed at more than just him. For someone who was supposed to be there to make sure Sto followed the rules, they didn’t seem to like having to follow them too.

He sensed the floor and space a pace before him, stopping when he was a third of the way in. “It’s clear to here,” he told the others, and they joined him. The boss creature didn’t react to their presence.

“Is the trigger a threshold or under the floor and we have to step over it?” Jackal asked.

“For a boss,” Don said, “I expect a threshold. Close enough, we can prepare, but not so much we’ll be able to see every detail.”

“What’s the point in not just going at it?” Jackal asked impatiently.

“There’s always a point in preparing,” the sorcerer replied.

“It’s to not die,” Tibs stated as Jackal opened his mouth.

He closed it and sighed.

“You just fought a bunch of golems,” Mez said. “How can you still be in a hurry to fight—” he stopped as everyone stared at him. “Never mind. Boss creature. Jackal fighting the dungeon. I could I ever think he’d get enough of that.”

“But you’re doing it smartly,” Tibs stated. “You promised Kroseph.”

“I’m still standing here, aren’t I?” Jackal replied, a smile forming. “While you’re supposed to move ahead to make sure it’s safe.” He made a shooing motion.

Tibs considered the floor. The smart thing would be to extend his sense as far as the miasma let him. He could shape it, and that would—

He thought his shudder was visible to the others.

Okay. He couldn’t let that paralyze him. He pushed his sense one and three paces ahead, willing it to not go below this floor, and did not sense anything, before fear stopped him. No threshold and no triggers in the floor yet.

While they were tricky, Sto and Ganny were also predictable. When a boss room had

traps, they were part of the entire floor and became something to deal with as part of fighting it.

“Stay with me,” he instructed. “Don’s right. It’s going to be a threshold and we should be together when we cross it.”

“In case crossing it causes walls to come down and divide us, preventing us from helping whoever takes on the boss directly,” Don said.

“Oh,” Ganny exclaimed while Tibs glared at the sorcerer. “Why didn’t we think of that before?”

Didn’t Don know better than to give them ideas?

They were halfway to the boss when the door banged closed.

“Should we have put a block in the doorway?” Mez asked, looking over his shoulder.

“I doubt that would have helped,” Jackal replied, and Tibs grabbed his arm to keep him from rushing off. “We crossed the threshold, haven’t we?”

“It has yet to move,” Khumdar said.

“Was that always dripping from its fingers?” Don asked.

Tibs hadn’t noticed the black liquid forming a pool on each side of it.

“Are you sure those things are fingers?” Mez asked. “They look more like claws to me.”

“No, the nibs of a quill,” the sorcerer mused. “Which makes that ink.”

“That is doubtful,” Khumdar said. “It will be something it uses against us.”

“Ink,” Don whispered, sounding like he was searching. He looked up. “A Miasma of ink.”

“A what of ink?” Jackal asked while Tibs stared.

“It’s what my father called it one time after returning from an arduous day of dealing with the city government. ‘They had me fill out so many forms, they might as well be drowning me in a miasma if ink.’”

Tibs studied how they dripped. “Those are more ribbons, then actual drips.”

“The inky ribbons of bureaucracy,” Mez said. “I heard one of the nobles saying that, something about never being smothered by them again now that they were in a city free of kings. Maybe that’s the theme?”

“Okay,” Jackal said. “So don’t let them touch me. Anymore theorizing you want to do before Tibs lets me go?” He rolled his eyes. “Of course I know the word. Carina was using it well before I heard you overuse it, Don.”

“I don’t over—Theories are what scholars use,” he protested.

“You aren’t one yet,” Jackal replied. “But get on about it before it reaches us.”

Tibs looked at the creature, and Jackal was right. It took a lumbering step in their direction.

“Bureaucracy is slow,” the sorcerer said. “It wraps itself in paper and ink. I don’t see papers, but the ribbons going from patch to patch look like the same thing dripping from its fingers. That could be its armor.”

“Do you think those patches are badges of office?” Mez asked.

“That, or seals,” Don said after considering it. “They might cause a fighter who touches it to be locked in place. Those are applied once everything is done, approved, and can’t be changed.”

“How about I stick to hitting its head?” Jackal asked impatiently.

“It’s pretty high,” Tibs said. It had to be at least twice his friend’s height.

“That won’t be a problem.”

“Good luck having it not notice your attack,” Don said. “All those eyes are there so it can’t miss any details, but I don’t see how that will protect it, so—”

Jackal was out of Tibs’s grip and running, his skin turning stone gray.

Tibs sighed.

“On the bright side,” Mez said, “we know he’s going to survive whatever it throws at him.”

“He’d better,” Tibs said as Jackal launched himself in the air, going much higher than Tibs had ever seen him. Well above the boss creature, fist high and ready to strike once he fell onto its head.

Only, Tibs realized, Jackal no longer seemed to fall.

“Guys?” The fighter called, worried. No, he still fell, but extremely slowly.

Don sighed. “Right. Bureaucracy isn’t just slow. It slows everything around it.”