

### Planning-94

The archer moved the coins about, and Tibs noticed something he'd missed. Many of the coins had the same weave of threads within them. Those shared the same kingdom's stamp. As he placed the coins, those that weren't exactly lined up to their matching threads snapped into place, with the stamps centered and straight.

"How do you know where they go?"

"I've been studying the world's geography," Mez answered. Placing a coin where Tibs knew was the wrong place by how the threads didn't align with those touching it. Mez rotated it, but it didn't snap like the others. "A proper noble must know all his neighbors," he recited in a high pitch voice with clear annoyance, then mumbled, as he moved to another coin. "Like she has any idea what it means to be a noble."

He shook his head. "This is the first time any of that comes in handy." He stepped back and Tibs joined him.

Their coin was lower on the map, surrounded by those with two crossed swords and a flower between them. Olvilon was the name of the kingdom. It was the one that controlled the land Kragle Rock was built on, technically. Because of Sto and the guild, the town was its own entity, governed by the guild. To the right, coins stamped with the anchor and setting sun filled the lower portion. A long band with the badger head separated Olvilon from coins with a forest and an anvil on them.

Above were a mix of stamps in small groups, then a swath of a hammer before a shield stamped coins with a variety of stamps above it.

"I don't think that's it," Jackal said, pushing on the door, then pulling. "It's still locked."

"The edges of the kingdoms need to be adjusted. Because all the coins are lined up, I had to guess where the kingdoms touched, but it's just a question of switching those around until they're in the right place."

"I can speed that up," Tibs said, moving the coins to their matching spot. With the last one in snapping in place, the door silently swung open.

The inside was larger than it should be. Just like the loot chests were. Glancing left and right, the wall went beyond the three doors on each side without indications of doors. He also knew there were offices on one side, since Jackal had gone in them to retrieve their missing coins.

The room was white and empty. That was the first thing that caught Tibs's attention. The white was almost painful in how stark it was. It and the emptiness were marred by the... creatures standing, or maybe sitting, Tibs couldn't tell at this distance, at the back. He wasn't sure how he hadn't noticed it first. It was big, and there was nothing white about it. Its large body was covered with colors, circles, triangles, squares, each with a design he couldn't make out on them in shiny ink. They were linked by black lines, ribbon like, crisscrossing its body.

"There's a boss if I've ever seen one," Jackal said, cracking his fingers.

"Maybe we should see if there's a way to make this easier on us before you rush in to start fighting?" Don said.

"I'm not sure what kind of puzzle there's going to be," Mez said. "The room's basically empty."

"Tibs, Khumdar?" Jackal asked.

"I need to go in to find out," Tibs replied.

"There are no secrets in this room that appear to be any different from every other in the building."

"So, this is straight up a fight," Jackal said, too happy for Tibs's liking.

"I find that doubtful," the cleric replied, "but I do not know how the complications will present themselves."

"Hopefully there's going to be a pattern we can take advantage of here too," Don said.

"You guys think this is the floor boss?"

"You wish," Sto replied.

"I doubt it," Don said. "We've barely explored half the city, if even that. My guess is that the floor boss will be somewhere we wouldn't think of. Unlike the other floors, this isn't one with a start and an end. So the final room isn't going to be at the 'end' of anything."

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

"No," The Them replied. "I am wondering if you aren't making things hard enough. They made their way to this room much faster than you expected. They even got through that door you thought would take them all day."

"How was I supposed to know one of them would know the layout of the realms?" Sto replied. "I didn't know about them until you showed up. I figured they'd work out how to group the coins, but after that, they'd have to go through trial and error. Even the rogue didn't work where the coins went until the end, in spite of how much he can sense."

"It would have been harder on them if you hadn't set the coins to adjust themselves."

"Fine, I'll grant you that," Sto admitted. "I'll change it overnight. But I'll have to add something so they can work it out."

"Maybe a faint etching on the coins that matches equivalent lines on the door?" Ganny offered.

The silence stretched, and Tibs stepped into the room, sensing for triggers.

"Well?" Sto asked.

"I'd rather you put nothing," the Them replied.

"Doesn't that make this a puzzle they can't solve?"

“Yes,” the Them said with enough reluctance Tibs thought they wanted not just him to fail, but every Runner. For someone there to make sure Sto followed the rules, they didn’t seem to care for them as much as Tibs thought they should.

He made it a third of the way without sensing triggers or out-of-place essence. “It’s clear to here,” he called. And the others joined him. The... Tibs had no idea what to call the creature, had yet to react to their presence.

“It’s going to be a threshold, or a rigged tile?” Jackal asked.

“For a boss,” Don replied, “I expect a threshold. Close enough to give us time to prepare, but not so much that we can take it too easy.”

“Then,” Jackal said, his impatience sounding, “is there a point in simply not going at it?”

“There’s always a point in preparing,” Don’t replied.

“The point is to not die,” Tibs stated as Jackal opened his mouth.

The fighter closed it and sighed.

“You just fought a bunch of golems,” Mez said. “Why are you in such a hurry to want to fight—” he stopped as everyone looked at him. “Right, never mind. Boss creature; Jackal fighting the dungeon. How could I ever think he might get enough of that?”

“But you’re going to fight it smartly,” Tibs stated. “You promised Kroseph.”

“I’m still standing here, aren’t I?” Jackal replied. “While you’re supposed to move ahead and make sure it’s safe.”

Tibs looked ahead and sensed. Sto and Ganny were tricky, but also predictable. If boss rooms had traps, they started early and were part of the whole floor; working around them became part of how the room worked.

“I think it’s best if we move together. I think Don’s right. It’s going to be a threshold; we should cross it together.”

“In case crossing it causes something that prevents anyone from joining the fight,” Don added, and Tibs glared at the sorcerer.

“Oh,” Ganny exclaimed. “Why didn’t we think of that before?”

Tibs had been trying not to give them ideas.

Then walked in step, and the creature stirred a few of them past the middle of the room, as the door closed with a loud snap.

“Would it have done any good to leave a block?” Mez asked.

“I doubt it,” Jackal replied, and Tibs put a hand on his arm to keep him from running ahead.

“Its fingers are dripping something,” Don said.

“Those look more like the thing Tibs used to make the stamps visible,” Mez said.

“It’s some kind of quill,” he said. “So it’s going to ink, drilling from them.”

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

“A miasma of ink,” Don whispered.

“What?”

“Just something my father said one day when he came back from dealing with the city government. He’d had to fill so many forms it was like they were trying to drown him in a miasma of ink.”

Tibs looked at how it dripped. “That looks more like ribbons.”

“The inky ribbons of bureaucracies,” Mez said. “Maybe it’s going to use that to smother us.”

“So avoid them,” Jackal said. “Got it. Anything else you want to theorize about? Yes, I know that word. Carina was using it before I hear you overuse it, Don.”

“I don’t—I’m a scholar. Theories are what we work with.”

“Then tell me what other you have so I can go and punch that thing and not have he reach us.” It was slowly lumbering in their direction.

“Bureaucracy is slow,” the sorcerer said. “It wraps itself in papers and ink. I don’t see papers, but those ribbons around it are much like what’s dripping from its fingers. It could be armor.”

“You think those are badges of office?” Mez asked.

“Or seals. So they could also be used to lock you in place. They are what is applied once everything is done and approved.”

“So if I stick to hitting its head?” Jackal asked impatiently.

“It’s pretty high,” Tibs said. The boss creature was at last twice Jackal’s height.

“That’s not going to be a problem.”

“Other than all those eyes,” Don said, “probably so it can read every detail of the contracts for ways to take advantage of them, I don’t see anything there I can think would act as protection, so—”

Jackal was running at it, his skin turning stone gray.

Tibs sighed.

“At least,” Mez said, “he’ll survived whatever surprise it’s going to come up with, right?”

“He’d better,” Tibs replied as Jackal threw himself in the air, much higher than it was tall, raising a fist. Tibs figures that he’d fall right at its head, adding to his strength, until he realized Jackal was slowing, instead of gaining speed on the way down.

“Guys?” the fighter called, worried.

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