

Stealth-Master looked at her cards in contemplation. Three mining crews, one cleric, and one overseer. Her hand would keep her well supplied during the next few rounds. However, Armor-Master's tribe was faring far better than her own. Weapon-Master also had a noticeable foothold in the gold economy. She would be a powerful opponent late game. Trap-Master was once again playing close to his chest, never giving any hints as to his strength or plan. Mine-Overseer was not playing well so far. It was not common for a class-B kobold to be let in on this game, but he seemed eager. He would make a good meal once he lost. However, her own tribe was not faring well. It was true that the three mining groups would sustain her for a time, but soon her tribe would starve, and without a dragon to keep order, the tribe would soon fall apart. She did not wish to end up on tonight's dining table.

"Are you going to make a move Stealth-Master? Or are you going to continue to stall?" Armor-Master hissed impatiently. A quick glance around the table showed that he was not the only one irritated by her delay.

"Actually, I think it is time to take a break and freshen up." There were a few hisses, but everyone reluctantly agreed. The five kobolds stood from their places and left the room. The rules were clear in the fact that either all were present in the room or none were. As they left two class-C kobolds shut the door and stood guard. Stealth-Master did not need to eat, drink, or void. Yet she made it a point to take care of all these tasks. Her matte black scales never needed polishing, yet she took the time to clean them anyway. Several of the other players joined her in one or more of these tasks, if for nothing else than a reason to move and stretch some. After sufficient time had passed, they all returned.

Stealth-Master-Kobold looked at her cards in contemplation. Three mining crews, one cleric, and one overseer... She hissed in irritation. Had the kobold she instructed failed in his task? She clearly told him to sneak into the card room, find the dragon from the deck, and place it in her hand... Unless... There is only one dragon in the deck, so someone else must have it. Her servant was not foolish enough to remove it from the hand of its opponent... She suddenly went wide eyed with realization. The second mining crew in her hand was upside down. Perhaps this meant that the servant had proven his resourcefulness. Being unable to give her the card she needed, he had left her a message telling her who had it. Weapon-Master, the second to her left, must possess the card.

This was cause for a second, equally delightful, realization. Weapon-Master also was lacking in food for his tribe. When the dragon came into play, surely it would be hungry. Without the proper resources to feed it, the dragon would quickly eat his tribe into extinction, and along with it remove Weapon-Master from the game...

"What is it now?" Armor-Master asked wearily. Stealth-Master wagged her tail back and forth in content.

"I just had a truly wonderful Idea." She responded. "I offer to buy food at one half cost." She said. Weapon-Master would be a fool to turn down this deal. And to Stealth-Master's glee, he eagerly sold her all his surplus food. The trade nearly drained her gold reserves, but it was worth it. She just had to sit back and wait...

\* \* \*

Weapon-Master lay on the table. A large skewer had been forced from his mouth to his hind. The bound Kobold was still sizzling softly. Being a Class-A Kobold, He had been resurrected the moment that Stealth-Master slit his throat. However, he refused to partake in his own meal. He just slinked away in humiliation and defeat. Mine-Overseer was clearly relieved. Being Class-B, he did not have the luxury of resurrection. Stealth-Master smiled at him, making him look away. It was doubtful he would ever become Class-A. Her fellow Class-As and herself got their titles largely to the fact that they were what was known as dragonwrought. They each sported a pair of wings, each tinted a different color. Hers were appropriately black. Armor-Master had blue wings and Trap-Master had red. This abnormality, caused by a large concentration of dragon blood in their pedigree, made each of them as close to deities in the eyes of kobold-kind that any kobold could hope to achieve.

She grinned down at the shy Mine-Overseer. Since she won the game, no one would bat an eye if she demanded he accompany her to bed that night. He was rather well built from all the work he did down in the mines. She smiled to herself, took her plate, and enjoyed her victory. Today had been a good day.

But of course no day could be perfect...

A messenger kobold ran into the room and announced that an intruder had been caught trying to walk through the main entrance. Trap-Master growled in annoyance and abandoned his own plate of food to run down the hall towards the main entrance...

Trap-Master stood amongst a group of kobolds. The kobolds around him all wielded spears, ready to defend the tribe from whatever was waiting in his trap. One of the kobolds moved a large wooden door to reveal a thick net, in which the intruder was hopelessly tangled. It was a canine of some sort, probably a male. Its clothes clearly showed that it came from the town. However, Trap-Master didn't recognize the dog. Any of the townsfolk who were meant to come down here knew about the door that bypasses the trap, so he was either incredibly stupid, or he was not meant to be here.

"What is your name?" He asked, speaking in draconic. Surely if the intruder knew about the cave and was meant to be here, then it spoke the native language of the cave. However, the intruder just stood there, confused and terrified.

"What are you doing here?" He asked again. The intruder stammered something in English as a response, confirming Trap-Master's belief. This intruder was from the town, but had no idea what the cave really was. He smiled to himself, and with a wag of his tail, he turned to leave. As he did, he took one last glance at the intruder and handed down his decision. "Kill it." As he turned to leave, the other kobolds drew close, spears at the ready. The intruder would likely make some tasty food once it was properly dispatched and cleaned.

Aaron sat, frozen in fear. He had fallen down into a net, in which he was hopelessly tangled. Before him were nearly two dozen kobolds all armed with spears. One of the kobolds had a pair of bright red wings. This winged kobold was clearly in charge, and also clearly pissed at him. It spoke several times in the kobolds hissing language before it turned to leave. The others were closing in,

spears at the ready. As they approached he just laid there, unable to think or move or even breathe. A familiar voice pulled him from this fearful trance. The words he spoke were mostly nonsense, but the voice was unmistakable.

*"Itheik! lorit pliso! tir ti svent jacion! Don't kill him!"* Roy shouted as he ran into the room, panting.

*"Wux led coi tenpismo? Kii jalla si origato coi waph?"* The winged kobold responded, turning his attention to the Doberman.

*"He is my friend. Jaci ui sia thurirl. Si geou xurwk jaunus jaci ui bensvelk."* Roy said hastily, trying to catch his breath.

*"Nakta jacion lae vi silit. Sjek jaci ui tisvelk, wux trian geou loreat."* Responded the winged kobold.

The winged kobold grumbled to itself and spat out a command to the other kobolds. They lowered their spears and tugged on the net, dropping Aaron onto the floor of the room. Then, without another word, they turned and followed their winged superior out of the room. As soon as they were gone, Roy turned to Aaron.

"I told you not to come here! I didn't want this life for you!" He sighed and slumped against a wall, rubbing his eyes in resignation. "But it's too late now. You had to see what was in the damn cave. Now you are stuck here like the rest of us."

Aaron just sat there, awestruck by the turn of events. He barely managed to force himself to form the words to speak.

"W...Where are we?" He stammered, unable to say anymore.

*"Wer Waere... The Cave."* Roy replied. "This place is home to the most terrifying creature you will ever meet... A Dragon."

That shook Aaron from his stupor. Dragons were mythological, right? They never truly existed, or even if they did, they surely were all dead by now. No. It was impossible. Dragons can't possibly exist. No one can hide themselves from the world that well. Then again... Two days ago he didn't know that kobolds existed.

Roy took his friend's hand and helped the husky to his feet.

"This place is a safe haven for many things that the world has forgotten. In this cave, there are no ties to the outside. No government controls this place. No one votes for what should and shouldn't be. The few rules that do exist down here are made by the dragon. They are enforced by the kobolds. And most importantly, there are very harsh punishments handed down to those who break them. Right now, you are *irlym*, the enemy. Anyone in this cave could kill you without reason and nothing would happen. The dragon won't risk you leaving and telling anyone where his cave is. As of right now you must become *silit*, a servant of the dragon. If you don't, they will kill you."

Aaron felt the world spin as he listened to his friend. This couldn't be happening. This place couldn't exist. Yet as he looked into Roy's eyes, he could see how cold and serious he was being now. There was no questioning that Roy believed each and every word he spoke. Roy slowly walked to the only door leading from the trap room and opened it. Together, the two canines walked into the world of *Wer Waere*.

The hallways were carved into the stone. It was clear that they had been carved into the side of the mountain. Each intersection had a torch for light, and a few symbols carved into the archway above each passage. The language was completely foreign to Aaron, yet Roy clearly seemed to be able to read them. Aaron lost track as they progressed forward. Right, left, straight, left, right, right... The path was soon so convoluted that he couldn't remember it. As they moved forward, a low rumble started to grow louder. Finally the hallway they turned onto had a much brighter light at the other end. The rumbling gave birth to a sound much like the busy streets of the city that Aaron used to live in. The room that they entered could be best described as a train station, despite the lacking of any and all trains. The room was longer than wide, and each side was dotted with archways at regular intervals.

The floor was alive with creatures moving back and forth between rooms. Many carried things with in in bags or boxes. Some even pushed what seemed to be old mining carts. The vast majority of the population seemed to be kobolds. Yet Aaron did spot a reptile of some sort there and an avian over there. Even as he stopped to look at the sight, Roy tugged him along, keeping a firm grip on his hand.

"Move quickly. Don't let go of me. Don't talk to anyone or look at anything." Were the only bits of advice that Roy said before the two walked into the fray. They crossed the room without incident to come upon a door. Doors seemed to be rather rare in this cave, as Aaron could count the number of doors he had seen on one hand. It, like every other archway, had an inscription in the strange language on top of it. Roy knocked once, then opened the door and walked in. The room was sparkly furnished with a bed, desk, and chair. In the chair sat an otter whose age rivaled that of Mrs. Harris. This made sense however, when Roy addressed him.

"You were right Mr. Harris..." The otter signed and stood.

"I told you he would find it Roy. In less than 48 hours he found the cave."

"I know. You can yell at me for it later, but right now I just want to make sure he stays alive."

"You should have thought of that before you invited him to live in our town. Now... You still have a shipment you are supposed to me making?"

"Yes... But-"

"No buts boy! Don't add failing your job to the list of mistakes you made today. You know he is in safe hands as long as he is with me."

And with that, Roy gave one last apologetic look at Aaron, and ran out of the room, shutting the door behind him. Roy just looked at the old otter before him, unsure what to do.

"You really stepped in it boy. I told Roy not to let you love here... But now that you are down here there is no turning back. We have one shot at making sure that you live to see tomorrow. You need

to convince the owner of this cave that you are more valuable to him alive than dead. This won't be an easy feat, but with my help, you have a shot." Mr. Harris stood and walked over to Aaron, looking him over.

"Your name is Aaron, right?" He asked. Aaron nodded, afraid that if he spoke he would just make matters worse. "And how old are you?" Mr. Harris asked. Aaron mumbled. "23..." He managed to say. This caused the otter to furrow his brow.

"Now listen here. From now on, when someone asks you something you need to respond quickly and loudly. You can't show any hesitation. They will take that as weakness. The last thing you want to be in this place is weak. Now, did you play any sports in high school?"

Aaron nodded, and managed to say "Track and field." A bit more quickly this time. Mr. Harris nodded in approval.

"If you can convince the owner to give you a job as a runner, you have a shot at living to see tomorrow. He is not easy to convince." He said. The old otter got up and took Aaron by the hand, leading him off back into the cave. They walked through yet another maze of twisting, turning, corridors, and once again Aaron with quickly lost. As they walked, the husky grew more and more nervous. This is it. He was going to die if he screwed up even slightly. There was no way he could handle this pressure. Soon the pair stood before a door that was much larger than any other he had seen so far. Mr. Harris turned to him.

"Now listen carefully. When we go inside I will translate everything he says to you. Do not, for any reason, address me. If you talk to me then you are being disrespectful to him, and he will hate that. Just speak loudly and clearly to him, and he will respond through me. This conversation will decide your fate boy, so make it count."

This did nothing for Aaron's nerves, which were already frayed. He said nothing, even though his mind was ablaze with thousands of questions. His heart thudded in his chest as the massive doors opened just enough for the two to slip inside.

The room was much darker than the rest of the torch lit cave. It was also massive. A single torch stood before them, yet its light failed to reach the back of the massive cave. The ceiling was dotted with stalactites, suggesting that this room was natural, as opposed to the carefully planned and carved pathways that branched out from it. Mr. Harris stepped forward.

"My Master. Owner of all that I am and all that I see. I apologize for insulting you by speaking to you in English, but I must do so. What I have to say concerns the one that stands beside me, and as he does not yet speak our native language, I must speak in one he does understand. This husky is a dear friend of Roy, the head external currier. He stumbled upon our home by accident, and has now found himself in your possession. He wishes to ask that-" But his speech was cut off by a booming thunderous sound. At first Aaron was confused and frightened, worried that perhaps some part of the cave had collapsed or exploded. But no. The sound was far too complex to be a simple noise. It had to be speech. The thunder was none other than the voice of the dragon. It was a voice that the sound system of a modern concert hall would strain to reproduce. It was a voice that shook not only the ground that Aaron stood on, but the sound alone penetrated him and shook his bones. It was at this moment that the true nature of the situation became truly real to Aaron. Any and all doubt of the dragon's existence, or to the

gravity of his fate where gone. He was going to be killed. He had fallen into a dragon's lair and now he was going to be killed. This single thought repeated over and over again until the voice of Mr. Harris replaced the loud and omnipresent voice of the dragon.

"Do you know the first law that all dragons must follow?"

This snapped Aaron out of his terrified repetition. He suddenly remembered why he was here. He fought the urge to turn and speak to Mr. Harris, and instead, shouted his answer out towards the back of the cave.

"No" He said. The voice quickly responded, shaking and echoing so much that it was impossible to tell where it truly came from. Mr. Harris waited for it to stop before translating.

"The first law that governs all dragons states that any object or creature that enters a dragon's cave, which does not already belong to a dragon, becomes the property of the dragon that owns the cave. This means that the moment you walked into my cave, you became my property... Do you think this is fair?"

Aaron was about to agree completely, just to avoid angering the massive voice. He caught himself just in time, remembering how Mr. Harris told him never to lie.

"Y...No... No it isn't fair. What gives you the right to just say you own people?"

"A fair question. I will indulge you with the answer. I have lived for three thousand, seven hundred and twenty three years. In that time I have seen what you now call the 'creator' races: the mammals, hunt all others to near extinction. This cave is home to one of the ten kobold tribes in existence. There used to be hundreds. In this cave are seven different people whom all belong to races that your kind believe to be extinct, not including myself or the kobolds. If I were to show myself to anyone outside this cave, I would be hunted down and eventually killed, all in the name of 'science', 'progress', 'equality' or any of the other reasons that your kind uses to kill anything that is better than you. To survive, I must follow a specific code. All dragons must... And part of that code gives me the right to claim you, or anyone else foolish enough to learn of my existence as my slave... What do you think of my answer?"

Aaron stood in silence for a moment. He knew the dragon was testing him. He chose his words carefully.

"I understand your answer. I do not agree with it. Just because the world wants you dead, does not mean that you should bend your morals in order to survive in it."

This caused the dragon to make a thunderous noise. What was it? There were no syllables, so it wasn't speech... Laughter... The dragon was laughing at his response.

"You are absolutely correct in saying that I should not alter my beliefs to ensure my survival in a world that seeks to reject me. However, you are wrong in suggesting that I would normally be opposed to enslaving you were I allowed to live without fear of the world knowing where I lived. I have heard enough. You are smart enough to realize that you have no say in your life anymore. You are strong enough to speak your mind when you know I will not like your answer. You are humble enough to admit that nothing you have ever done or will ever do in your life will equal my own accomplishments. So I will

give you a choice. Spend six months as my slave, working in this cave for me, to prove that you are loyal enough to keep my life a secret. If you do this, I will let you go. Alternatively, I offer you an instant and painless death.”

Aaron didn’t need any time to think.

“What job do you want me to do?”