

Domino's Theory

It was day 207 of my trip, and after 20 days of non-stop travel by a team of *kev* across the eastern desert, I found myself in a small settlement. I'd call it an oasis, as it had food, water, and supplies, but really it was more of a junction, where travelers stopped for a few days between crossing the desert and the high plains or the hill country. It would take Tankir a few days to get a new team of animals together (*kev* are desert animals and would not be of use for our next leg; even so, our *kev* were exhausted and would need several days of rest before their return trip).

I spent my time as best as I could. Initially, it was resting, on a proper bed. The straw was far better than what I had been sleeping on for weeks. I did some planning. But that took little time, since the next few days would be spent here and the next 20 or so would be spent in the next crossing. After that would be the next break. Then the next leg. Then the next break. And so on and so on. It would be a long time before this pattern changed.

Once I felt more rested, I surveyed this small confluence of traders and merchants. There was little in the bazaar that held my interest, and even less that I would have been capable of taking with me on the next part of the journey. In 50 days or so, I'd be in the rainy country, which limits what would last, assuming we hadn't been raided by bandits by then. Still, one learns about the local and regional cultures by seeing what is bought and sold, so I spent time in some friendly haggling sessions with a few of the merchants, playfully talking down their wares, while they would boast of their exemplary qualities.

Only three times did I actually make a purchase. The first was a map of the territory on parchment. I pointed out the obvious flaws in the cartography and the water soluble ink in this so-called "guide of legend."

The merchant gave a conspiratorial laugh and said, "Perhaps you misunderstand the importance of this wonderful, expert-crafted artifact. This map is for getting lost, not found."

I stared at him blankly, as he continued with even more bravado.

"Clearly, I can see from your complexion that you have just crossed the desert. I doubt you are heading back that way. Therefore, you will be facing bandits and raiders. What better tribute than to give them a treasure map that will take them away from you? A map whose very markings, as inaccurate as they may be, and I assure you, you have expertly identified several,

but not all of the errors, will blur and disappear in the rain or even humidity of the environments where it will lead the unwary traveler far astray.”

It was just too good. Not the map, but his story, his patter. Haggling is a game with its own rules, and he had just scored. I could only smile and nod as I silently handed him a few coins—the current price was of no significance to either of us.

The other two items were a small blue gemstone which was the smallest way I could exit from a long, but amusing session, and a bit of graphite which I had actually wanted from the start. The item itself was rather common, but not out here, mostly because there is no demand for such a thing. All the merchants talk to each other and boast about their conquests in the evening. My angle was to be seen as a challenge, but one that was still worth pursuing. I would not be a mark that pays an exorbitant price for junk, but I was a person who could be persuaded to buy something, perhaps something small. So after much haggling on some various objects, the merchant decided if he could at least dump something small and useless on me.

He showed me his shelf of small wares. All it took was a small flicking of my eyes, hesitating on the pieces of broken graphite rods a bit longer than the other junk. He knew of I had a small interest in those, because I *wanted* him to know. Eventually, when we got to the part of the game where I was about to leave, he invoked the ploy, “If I *gave* you some small item, how much do you think my *time* is worth? While we have spent the afternoon talking, how many other customers have I been unable to sell things to?”

“Your time is worth nothing to me,” I replied in turn, adding, “And I would not spend a palm of *teks*,” for that was the name of the local currency, “on anything you have shown me.”

Before I walked out, he said, “a palm would not buy you *this*, even back in the Territories” as he reached for the graphite and slowly held it under the light. He smiled and had a deep laugh that indicated he had noticed my “interest” before. Again, by the rules of the game, he had scored. I had already, “unwittingly”, named my price. And by my own admission, I wished to conclude our session. I paid the paltry price.

Had I not been known as one who could, by clever haggling, be argued into a sale (such as the blue gemstone another had sold me), had I been required to show real interest in the graphite, the final price would have been one hundred times what I paid and the asking price would have been ten thousand times that.

We all play our little games and pay the price. This time both of us left satisfied with ourselves.

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I spent the evenings in the *Vekraz*, the equivalent of a pub. While there was some haggling over the food and drinks, it was relatively minor, since no one wanted to spend that much time sober. Because this junction is a gathering of travelers, the locals are used to seeing strangers from far away and think little of it. After a few nights, I was regarded as a regular, which meant they would call me by name and serve me without the need for ordering. The name was one they invented, as was the order. Both were acceptable, as the name translated to “tall searcher” (tall could refer to my height or the size of my quest) and the drink and food were the same as everyone else had.

I met a number of people in those nights. The one who had left the most distinct impression on me was one the locals called Domino. He was introduced to me by a cheery, fat merchant with whom I had verbally sparred but never bought anything. He seemed to take no offense at it and enjoyed socializing in the evenings—haggling was the main form of socializing during the day.

He had introduced me to numerous people, so this began no differently.

“Mr. Tall...you are needing to meet another,” he said as he took my arm and led me to the far end of the room. “You are very interesting in all things. Science and the maps and the studies. And you are preparing for a long trip on your Tall Search for the next stop and beyond. Yes, everyone knows of the tired *kev* you brought in and the 10 *duraq* and their drivers you seek for your next Search. Here is a man to each other meet. He is wise. Has traveled much and he sees even more, what he hasn’t traveled. You should know that he suffers from vision, no, I say wrong, from Visions. He was cursed by a Time Priest, and knows what he does. What everything he does, does. You talk to him.”

I was getting good at understanding him, especially when he spoke as a merchant, but I was not completely following him now. We arrived at a shadowed table by the wall. The merchant said, “Mr. Tall Searcher, I present to you Mr. Domino” and then he left.

Domino wore a white shirt and wide brimmed hat, common dress here. As he looked up from his drink, I could see he was middle aged, thin, with salt-and-pepper gray hair under the hat. His eyes were a dull gray, but with a hint of almost shifting points of color. At least, as he looked

his gaze on me, for a moment I would have thought his eyes had bits of blue or brown or even brighter colors. With his hand, he motioned to a chair. I sat down.

We stared at each other for a few moments in silence. I wasn't even sure what language he spoke, yet he looked like he could have come from the same region I had just left. With a sharp intake of his breath, he turned his head slightly to the left, looked out across the room at nothing, then blinked his eyes very slowly and exhaled.

"I'll start," he said, in a perfectly intoned voice. "More piss-water or would you, perhaps, like something better?"

I chuckled and said, "I like that second option."

He caught the eye of a server halfway across the room, raised his mostly empty glass, pointed to it and then pointed to me, and held two fingers up. The server nodded and left.

"You are not all that tall," he began. "Even compared to the local residents. So I assume they are talking about your journey, its size and scope and, perhaps, potential impact."

"Most people through here are either on the trade route or trying to simply get from Point A to Point B and are stuck with taking the low-cost option," I said. "So, by comparison, any expedition of any size must be a grand undertaking."

"And you are an experienced traveler. You speak many of the merchant languages with the local inflections. And you are a shrewd haggler."

"I have traveled some. But my haggling is mostly for amusement to pass the time while I'm stuck here."

"Anyone who can get what they want and leave the merchant thinking they got money for something useless knows the game well."

I shrugged dismissively. How much *did* he know?

"Graphite is useful in so many ways. Some for its properties, and some just as a raw material," he said, while fixing his gaze at me. After a moment he continued, "That is my observation. The locals will continue to believe what they want." He paused another moment before adding, "to their own detriment."

"What is it that you want? Who are you, Domino?" I asked.

"From you, I merely look for conversation, as I shall remain here for several ten-days. As for who I am, I'm just someone who sees the consequences of his actions. The locals use the word

kaht'zet which can mean 'kissed' or 'cursed' or perhaps both. Have you ever wondered about the consequences of your actions? Shall I call you 'Mr. Search' or do you have a preferred name that a stranger can use?"

"Thellock," I offered, with no honorific, as that's an alias I commonly used.

"Thellock, haven't you wondered what the impact of your quest will be?" he asked.

"At times to a greater and lesser extent, when I find myself with extra time on my hands, which until recently has been a rare occasion," I said. "What do you mean...knowing the consequences of your actions?"

"It is a singular talent of mine. The *kaht'zet* I must bear. You are, of course, skeptical, and should remain so," he said with a pleasant smile. "Please give me your napkin for a moment."

"This will convince me?" I asked, as I handed him the napkin in front of my place setting.

"No, it will merely save time," he replied simply.

The server arrived with the drinks. As he set the drink down in front of my companion, he reached too far, lost the balance of his tray, and my drink slid off the tray, hit the table, and toppled over, dousing my trousers with its contents. The server muttered curses in his own tongue and then apologized profusely, trying to mop up the spilled liquid that remained on the table. Domino tossed my napkin back to me while using his to mop up the rest, and told the embarrassed server to get another drink for me...carefully.

After the server left, Domino said, "Anything can be staged. And the price to pay a waiter to spill a drink is probably less than the cost of the drink. But no matter."

I thought it through and it seemed too easy. "No...you'll have to do better than that," I said.

"No, I don't, actually. I don't *need* to convince you, Thellock. I can just do whatever I want, whether you believe it or not."

"So explain it to me. What do you mean you 'see the consequence of your actions'?"

"On the surface it is straightforward, yet becomes more complicated when pursued further. Every action has consequences. Some are trivial, some are grand. Let us start with the simple: Had I not offered you a drink, your trousers would not be wet."

I thought on that for a moment before replying, "Then I should blame you for this rather than the server?"

He smiled and held out his hands open in a gesture. "Certainly it is the server whose charter

was to bring you the drink and not bathe you in it. How could I possibly be held accountable for his actions?" He paused, and his smile took on a hint of a sneer. "Of course, what if I had jumbled the rug so as to cause the server to trip? Certainly, by that action, I would bear some responsibility. But let us take it further. What if I had simply observed someone else jumble the rug and knew that the server, when he approached, would, in all likelihood, trip?"

I conceded, "If all that was true, and you did it knowingly, then yes, I suppose if it was your plan to have ill fortune befall me, then you would bear responsibility for the final act. Nonetheless, I still do not absolve our fumbling friend."

"Certainly not. But his blame is clear, for the most part. However, when you say I caused ill fortune to befall you, we must explore that point a bit," he said as he formed a triangle with his fingers and placed them so they were just under his nose. "This is where it starts to get more complicated." With two fingers, he pointed behind my left shoulder.

I turned and saw a barmaid approaching, carrying several towels. She was petite, with curly black hair and dark eyes, wearing a simple peasant dress. She looked embarrassed and pointed to the towels, as she set to work cleaning up the table and floor. She spoke a few words, but it was not in a language I knew. Some sort of apology, I assumed.

I watched the barmaid, as she stooped to mop up the spilled drink with the towels. Domino continued. "It's hard to say in absolutes what is good and bad."

"What? Somehow soaking my trousers is considered a local custom of greeting? A privilege? A benefit of the elite?" I must admit, I let a hint of scorn and derision color my tone; the drink had been rather cold.

The barmaid quietly chuckled and spoke a few words.

"She said you have a powerful, commanding voice," he said.

I looked at her and couldn't stop a brief smile from appearing. She had a look of concern on her face as she saw me turn, but then smiled sweetly, upon seeing my reaction. Now this was a language I knew. I held her gaze for a moment and nodded ever so slightly.

"Sometimes bad things lead to good things," he said.

In our now-common-language of subtle gestures and expressions, I indicated to her that I might be interested and would return, but for the moment, I needed to finish some business at hand with the man to whom I was currently talking.

I looked back at Domino and my tone had a tint of anger as I said, “And now are you claiming responsibility for this, for her too?”

“I am using whatever is at hand as an example to answer your question. I believe saying ‘it is complicated’ was not sufficient.”

“So now what?” I asked. “More back and forth? Her brother attacks me tomorrow morning? I disarm him. The dagger I take is useful for stopping an assassination attempt on the local chief. They reward me. Others reward me with their enmity. And so on and so on?”

“You begin to get the idea,” he said darkly.

“When does it end?” I asked, frustrated.

“Why, with your death, of course.” He read the reaction of anger tinged with fear in my eyes. “Not that *this* leads to your death. It’s just that until things *stop* changing, there is no way to make a final tally. And we have been focusing on *you*. Care to consider the server’s life? Or our lovely barmaid? What happens to them as a consequence of this spilled drink?”

“And this was all some sort of grand plan by you? It’s not that hard to bribe a wench and a servant!” I snarled.

“She is innocent of this, I assure you. But you misunderstand my...talent? Affliction? I said I can see the consequences of my actions. Nothing more.”

“How does that differ from what I said?” I snapped back.

“Are you familiar with the game of Shah? Others call it Armies or The King’s Forces.”

“Yes,” I admitted, “I have seen it played and know the basic rules.”

“Then you probably know good players look ahead many moves. They often make short-term sacrifices of pieces or positions that are feints to lure their adversaries into making mistakes that allow them to gain a stronger advantage later.”

I nodded.

Domino continued, “While good players look ahead many moves, better players look ahead more moves. And the best players are playing a game far more moves into the future than their opponent. And each move can lead to other moves of the other pieces. Which in turn leads to more and more moves.”

“I see your analogy. Continue.”

“I have played the game enough to say, without any hesitation, that I am a very poor player.”

At his point he paused for a moment, to let his words register. “At the end of a game, which is to say, after I have been utterly crushed, I can follow the line of thought of my opponent and see how he led me down the trail to the inevitable conclusion. But I cannot construct such a situation myself. I cannot look ahead and plan that number of moves, Thellock.”

Once again, he paused and looked at me. “The game of Shah, with its 32 pieces and relatively small number and types of moves of each piece, is simple compared to real life, with real people. Given a choice, I can follow the steps in the path and see where it leads. But I cannot construct such a path. There were a number of ways in which I influenced you tonight, yet the drink was the only one to yield significant, short-term results. So that is what I discussed and *that*, my friend—the selection of our discourse—is the only trick I have employed.”

I sat back in my chair and pondered what he had said. I did not even notice when the comely barmaid had left.

“So everything you do, every act...” I began.

“I can see the consequences. Good, bad, worse, better, awful, tragic, final,” he stated.

“Could you undo an action or try to make the outcome better?” I asked.

“I could take a counter-action. Disinvite someone to sit with me. I could withdraw my offer of a drink. I could tell you to be careful. To fix the rug. To warn the server.”

“Then why don’t you?”

“Because each of those has consequences as well, equally as weighty.”

“Then how are you able to do ANYTHING?” I asked with disbelief. “No matter what you did, wouldn’t you always feel some sort of—”

“Guilt?” With that he let out a deep laugh. At first it sounded like he was truly amused. But then I realized it had an edge of bitterness to it.

“Exactly. And now you understand why it is a curse.” And he took a long draw of his drink, then stared at his glass and swirled the contents. “When I look, I can see consequence upon consequence, going back and back. But only based on actions I *have* taken, not actions I *might* take. What I said earlier, about death, was true, but only to a fashion. Yes, it ends the back-and-forth, plus-and-minus battle, or in some cases, multiplication of misery, but an individual death does not end the chain of consequences. They continue to percolate down through everyone touched by that individual. It is only when the entire civilization is dead is there peace. And that

only when it touches no other civilizations. And so on. And so on. And so on. It continues as far as I care to follow.”

I felt hollow, as if his words were carving out pieces of my soul. Even if he was lying, it was a terrible thought to contemplate.

He smiled humorlessly as he pressed onward. “And do you know what this accountant, Death, makes of all the sums of boons and ills?”

I opened my mouth as if to speak, but found I had no voice. The weight of all the world was pressing on me. I merely shook my head.

“It is nothing. Nothing. If...if a chain ends—for while all things must end, remember I am a poor player who cannot keep long sequences in mind—then it matters not. The label of good or bad is arbitrary. They lived, had a life, are gone. And one mere incident hardly tips the scale, even though it may cause an avalanche of follow-on effects.”

Now it was my turn to take a drink. As the liquid flowed down my throat, it burned and then numbed me, much like his words. For reasons beyond my understanding, I no longer thought of it as some deceit. Perhaps it was the lines carved in his face that hinted at ageless suffering and burdens beyond reckoning. As I looked at him, I believed him.

“So...what of...me?” I asked tenuously.

“What? You want me to tell you your future? How your wet trousers will impact your overall happiness? How this meeting between us will alter the course of your life? You understand that the very act of me doing that will cause further perturbations, possibly sending the river of your life off in a completely different direction.”

He paused and looked at me again. Again, I felt caught in his gaze as he looked at me, in me, through me, around me.

“Obviously, you think there’s something to my words, that I’m not merely a merchant of so called medicinal herbs and extracts that you would find at the bazaar. Tomorrow, you will shed a tear for Shie’eya, for that is the barmaid’s name. The happiness of the night will turn into the pain of knowing you will never see her again, nor she you. The pain you cause her will weigh on your mind. All this will prompt you to continue on your Tall Search, leaving a few hours after peak sun, pursuing your goal with a renewed vigor that burns cold. And that merely covers the next day. Do you want to know why you resist using the hard-won graphite at the first

opportunity and yet decide to use it at the second? Do you want the rest of your life explained? Do you want to know your impact on others?"

The drink was strong. I finished the glass and set it down. It was only then that I noticed another empty glass beside it. Shie'eya must have already provided me with another. "Stop," I said quietly. Things were happening too quickly. I don't know if it was his words, the drinks, or some combination of the two, but I could tell my wits were dulled. "Enough of me. You have made your point. You, Domino. With all that you see, how can you possibly decide? How can you make the choice of action and inaction, let alone all the variations on every scenario that could play out?"

"You still fail to understand my 'gift', Thellock. I see the consequences of my actions. I do not see all of the possibilities. And even when I do start to see the trends, like when one stands on a floorboard that creaks, groans, and cracks under the weight it must bear, I do not step out of the way, I do not alter my course. I see the costs but they in no way impact what I do. Again, it is the kiss and the curse. It allows me to function, day to day. I take a drink, I eat, I converse with strangers such as yourself. Yet in each instance, I am painfully aware of the cost, such as the sorrow Shie'eya will feel once you have left and how that will impact her life, and how these words I am speaking will wound you with renewed vigor tomorrow."

I placed my forehead down against the palm of my hand and closed my eyes. There was no escape from his words, yet my suffering was nothing by comparison to his. Once I leave this table, I will leave his visions and words. He has no such escape. Quietly, I asked, "And you...your own fate? What do you see when you gaze into the mirror?"

"Nothing," he said. "Or nothing beyond what anyone else sees, which is to say a poor, sad man, living his life in a self-imposed exile, away from anyone he knows or cares about. With effort, I can avert my gaze or limit it to the events immediately at hand. I am rather careful about doing that when looking introspectively."

"You mean you never...?" I began to ask.

"Of course I did." He paused and thought for a moment. "At least I think so. Probably early on. I have no direct memory of it, only the sense, as if I had read such a story in a book sometime long ago. Gazing inward is like standing in a hall of mirrors, all reflecting an infinite number of versions of oneself, each more twisted and distorted. It is the sensation of falling, plummeting

down a hole to one's doom. I suspect I did that. And I suspect the effect was that it tore out some piece of my mind. Fortunately, that part contained the memories of the event, as well as the desire to ever try that again. Unfortunately, I do not know what else was lost." He tapped his temple twice with his finger, smiled, sighed, and took another drink.

We sat in silence for a bit. I wondered the implications of all the things I could say. I wondered about the implications of my not saying anything. I wondered about what implications Shie'eya might read into my reactions to this conversation. Quickly, I realized there was no good answers.

Finally, changing the subject slightly, I asked, "Your name...?"

"I no longer use it," he replied.

"Domino...?"

"Oh, that one. You know of dominos? The game involving the tiles?"

I indicated that I did.

"That, too, is a game that is beyond me. However, another game, favored by children, use those tiles. They set up rows and rows of the tiles standing on end next to each other in ranks that wind around and around into complex patterns. And then, once these elaborate patterns are set up over the course of hours, someone tips over the end piece. It falls onto the next tile, which then topples onto the following tile in the rank, which is then caused to fall on its neighbor. This continues rapidly. It can take hours to set up the patterns and less than a minute to have them all knocked over. The children delight in watching it happen."

"And it is this repeated collision, one against the other, consequence after unavoidable consequence, from which you take your name?" I asked.

"Yes, though they gave me that name; I did not take it. But I am like the poor, bumbling fool who happens to kick over a domino, causing the rest of them to topple before it is ready. And I can only stare at the effects of my actions, of my unthinking, blind actions. And...hope that someone, a child or otherwise, finds it amusing." And with that he finished his drink.

"Is there nothing that can help you?" I inquired.

"At this point, I think not," he said. "But you have given me some pleasant company in this lost wilderness, and for that I am grateful. And now, you should take your leave, for your new companion awaits you." He motioned his head towards the bar.

I nodded, rose, bowed my head in respect to him, and took my leave.

* * *

The next morning, I was only vaguely aware when Shie'eya left. It was another hour before I got up out of bed. Then I remembered the previous night. I smiled. And then I realized that I would not see her again. Could not see her again. Her life had already been irreparably altered by my presence. I could make her happy for a night, but no more—it wouldn't last long. Remove her from her world? That would kill her, at least her soul. So she must remain. And with that I hurt her as well.

I closed my eyes and fell back into the bed. I shed a few tears thinking of this hopeless situation. I would have to leave here, leave her, quickly. Minimize the damage done.

I then remembered Domino's prediction.

It galled me. It proved nothing. It was correct.

I was angry. Sad. And a mix of other emotions. I sent word to Tankir: we would leave today, after the rest that follows the peak-sun meal. He would have the team of *duraq* ready and assemble the others. It *was* a cold fire that burned within me now. It was the only way I could move and keep on moving. I blamed Domino, with his finger out, having set a sequence of events in motion. I had no idea the drink toppling into my lap, that me toppling into Shie'eya, that our party leaving this place, we were all just dominos, all just the consequences of a chain of events.

But the journey was already long underway before I met him. I cannot blame him. Yet he undoubtedly had an effect on me.

As we headed out towards the plains, I couldn't restrain a humorless chuckle from rising in my throat. At least he had not told me any more than a day into my future. I preferred to believe myself a person rather than a game tile. I was no domino, nor was I Domino. And for both those small comforts, I was grateful.