

Tibs ate slowly.

He'd been surprised Firmen hadn't addressed him the moment he'd moved about, gathering wood to for his fire. Because of that, he'd built his camp where he'd slept. Then had gone hunting. He'd come back with two large rabbits and while they turned on the spits, he looked over the remnants of his leather pants.

The leather below the knee was in such tatters that going in with his calves exposed would provide as much protection.

He missed the armor Sto had made for him.

But, as much as he didn't like the reminder. His Omega runs had been done in little more than a thick cloth shirt for protection. If he'd had his leather kit, he might have been able to do something to enhance the armor's efficiency, but the caravan hadn't left his stuff behind.

He'd come across villagers, years ago, who made their armor out of woven reeds. Only the chief had had a set made in such a way nothing was exposed. Every one else had to make do with less material to make their armors. Down to the lowly guards whose armors were little more than criss-crossed lines of reed material with nearly as much exposed flesh as armor. The region had used mainly blunt weapons, and taking a hit in such a way to spread the impact had seemed to be the skill they worked on.

Against claws and teeth, it might not be particularly effective.

He cut the tatters off, then straighten the line above his knee. He'd have to go back to making sure he wasn't hit, instead of taking and healing as he went.

"I don't know if you're paying attention," he said, cutting another section of meat, "but if you want to talk, I'm okay to listen."

"I'm not sure what there is to talk about." Firmen sounded calm.

"You wanted to apologize last night."

"That was fear speaking. You threatened to burn me down. I was afraid you still might."

"And because I didn't, you aren't afraid of me anymore."

"You still terrify me and Merka. I don't understand what you are. Why you're here. You say you want to work within rules, but the moment things won't go the way you want, there is nothing I can do to protect myself."

"I did the run within the rules we agreed to. I only channeled fire once Merka got you to block my exit."

"And if one of my creature is about to kill you? From those I've seen wander in, people don't want to die. You're people. When I did kill you, you came back."

"That one wasn't planned, and I can't reproduce it." Or maybe he could. With not having the immunity to wood essence, he could definitely use his fear of dying to have another audience.

But would he get Wood's boon a second time?

If he could have another audience outside of the dungeon, while respecting the rules, would he gain that immunity?

"Tibs?"

Tibs chuckled. "Sorry, got lost thinking. But if one of your creature can kill me, then I die. If your first floor can kill me, I definitely don't deserve to walk out of it."

“But you left before—”

“Because I knew I didn’t have the focus to play by the rules; In part. I was tired, and when people get tired, we no longer think properly. Yes, it can get me killed, but with the essence I can use, it’s more likely I’ll forget the rules and use something to get me out of the trouble I’m in.”

“And you don’t want to do that?” Firmen sounded dubious.

“Not if it’s breaking the rules we agreed to. I don’t know what Merka said about Runners. I don’t even know how much is ‘how things are done’ instead of ‘what the guild wants us to do’, so this might be a case where we are working with different sets of rules. If we are, now’s probably a good time to decide how we’ll continue. But while your job is to test me, my job is to survive, which includes known when I’ve had enough. A lot of Runners died when the guild first threw us in a dungeon because they never told us those rules. We had to discover them by doing something we didn’t know we were allowed, like walking out of a dungeon without reaching the boss room, and not being punished for it.”

“So you left to protect me?”

“No. I left because I was tired and I knew I’d break rules if I force myself to continue. It does protect you, but that isn’t why I did it. I didn’t trust myself anymore.”

“And you will return.”

“Yes, Merka will get their chance at killing me.”

“Merka isn’t so...”

“It’s okay, Firmen. I learned a long time ago I can’t control how other people feel about me. All I can do is make sure it doesn’t make me act in a way that isn’t me.”

“Then I’ll let Merka know you’ll be back.”

“No today. I always rested between runs. The guild wouldn’t let us go in more than once a week, so I’ll take today to rest and do the run tomorrow as soon as you open your door.”

“My entrance is always open.”

“Then once I’ve eaten.”

“Then we will plan until then.”

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Tibs killed and skinned multiple small animals, cooking and drying the meat. He didn’t expect the next run to take as long, since he’d start it well rested instead of after part of a day of traveling, but he wanted to be prepared for however long it took. The skins would explain to the village why he’d stayed in the forest for days.

When he came back, he might set up what he needed to tan the hides so he could use them to repair or remake the armor he lost. His leather working skills weren’t great, but he had had to learn some once he’d outgrown his self-repairing armor. Tanning had been part of that since outside the cities, the same people tended to do the tanning and leather working.

He made himself a bed of soft earth, and covers of leaves and slept soundly.

He woke to the sound of rain and the wonder that he was still dry. Being wet didn’t bother him, but unless he put effort into it, rain got him wet.

Instead of the gray sky, above him he saw tree branches so interwoven to be a roof keeping his camp dry.

I put his hands behind his head and looked at it, admiring the work. This wasn't someone pulling and pushing strands in to place to get what they wanted. The branches had grown that way. Grown well beyond what they should be able to, but still only grown. There was no more essence in them than the other trees had.

"I didn't know you could just make them grow," he said.

"It was Merka's idea. So you couldn't claim you slept badly and walk out again."

With a laugh, Tibs stood and ignited the fire to cook the meat that hadn't dried over night. Fed and hydrated, he put his armor on, readied his sword and shield, and entered the dungeon.

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Tibs studied the tiles in the hallway. Firmen hadn't changed the layout of the maze, and as far as Tibs could tell, hadn't changed this puzzle either. He tested the tile that hadn't been a trigger the previous time, and it supported his weight. He tested the others on the row as well as the two other rows he could reach without over extending himself.

All the same.

It could be the trick, let him think the triggers were as they were, and overconfidence would kill him. That just meant he needed to still take his time, but he had a place to start that would cut down how long getting through the puzzle took.

He tested each of the tiles by slowly shifting more of his weight into them before proceeding. He made it past the center before Merka commented.

"I wish you'd change where they were."

"That isn't what this test is about," Firmen replied. "And it wouldn't have done what you want. He isn't trusting what he knows. He's testing where he steps. I expect he's ready for the tile to move."

"This is about having the patience to test all the rows, isn't it?" Tibs asked as he tested the next tile. "And remembering where they are so you don't have to test them each time."

"Do you think it's a good test?" Firmen asked.

Tibs paused and looked over what he'd already crossed. "I think that it's a little much for a team who's never done a run before. If they're like I was, they would be overwhelmed by all this. You can be sure that a lot of the fighters would just rush it." He placed his foot on a trigger and removed it as soon as it sunk in, judging how quickly the wall of spears covered the row.

"Even at half the size, it would get a lot of them, especially the second time, when they didn't remember the path they'd taken. They'll curse you and themselves, and more fighters aren't going to want to wait."

"You don't have a high opinion of fighters," Firmen said.

Tibs tested the correct tile this time. "I do for those who survive. But Omega is filled with fighter who didn't have the smarts to fit any another class. Those don't survive long."

Three more rows and he was on the other side.

He looked over the passage again. "If you made it simpler still, people who wander in could survive. They could learn, get stronger."

"And leave," Merka said.

And possibly return to get stronger, find more loot. And spread stories. With the

village on a caravan route, how long until one such story made it back to the guild? How many of those stories would they need before they sent adventurers to investigate? And what would the guild do once they realized this was a dungeon the like they'd never considered could exist?

How many other dungeons were there like Firmen? If the guild learned about one, would they scour the kingdoms looking for more? Would it be Tibs fault for the guild owning more dungeons, turning them into more places to send unexpected children to their death?

"You're right. I guess you wouldn't get enough out of that." Better this remain a forest with a wild beast living in it.

He set off, on alert, toward the next room, and this time, the Woodling attacked before the third intersection, forming only once Tibs had passed it. Omega Runners would be caught unprepared if they didn't watch behind them.

Which Tibs couldn't recall ever doing on Sto's first floor. He remembered it as always progressing forward.

He turned and readied himself, and the Woodling attacked as soon as it stepped out of the trunk. Tibs blocked with the shield and his first returned swipe missed because the sword was shorter than he was used to.

When he tried to cut its head off, it hurriedly step back. It also protected its shield arm, but left its sword arm open. Once Tibs cut that hand off, the fight ended quickly, even if he kept from stepping away from the wooden sword.

He studied it as the Woodling was absorbed into the ground. Its edge was sharp even without the added metal. The essence that made it tight and woven through with water, air, and another he couldn't identify. Air might account for its lightness, but Tibs wasn't sure what the water did. The thing it had going for it was its length. He dropped the metal sword.

"You can't just keep things like that," Merka protested.

"You aren't having your creature drop loot, so I figure I can use what I keep you from absorbing."

"Loot is for the caches," Firmen said.

"Sto dropped coppers when we killed a creature on the initial floors. He started dropping silvers at the end of second floor, I think."

"What's copper?"

"Copper coins. It's part of the currency the kingdoms use." He pulled one from his coin pouch and raised it. "Didn't anyone who came in have something like that?"

"No."

Tibs placed it on the floor and walked away.

"You never told me about creatures dropping anything," Firmen said.

"That's to get people to come back," they replied, and Tibs cursed himself. "There was no point until someone came in and didn't just die. Not that," they added. "A real person."

If Firmen had his creatures drop coins and someone walked out, it could be the start of runs. Turn the village into a dungeon town, and bring Firmen to the attention of the Guild.

Unfortunately, there was no was to undo this. Tibs would hope people in the village

would remain too scared of the forest to find the dungeon.