

“How did it do that?” a voice screamed as Tibs caught his breath. He was on his knees, his clothing was thorn, but he wasn’t hurt. It surprised him, since he’d already been impaled before the audience. That would be the boon Wood gave him. He wanted to go over the rest she’d talked about, but he had a dungeon to deal with.

“How should I know?” the other, Merka, replied. There was fear in their voice.

“How about we try this again?” Tibs said, standing. The trees around him were shattered as if he’d unleashed metal blades. The reserve in his bracers was still full, and his deep reserve was still his element.

“Kill it!” Merka said.

With an annoyed sigh, Tibs step aside the branch that burst out of the foliage to avoid further damaging his clothing. It changed direction with his movement, and this time he wasn’t fast enough to avoid it completely and burning pain lanced his arm as it ripped it open.

He shoved questions aside as more branches targeted him. “Stop that!” he ordered, to no effect. He dodged most, but each that connected hurt. He channeled Fire. “That is enough!” The bubble of raw fire essence consumed the branches as well as the trees and left behind a void that upper portion of trees fell into. He incinerated them without effort.

“Now. How about we start again without you trying to kill me?” He etched purity and healed his injuries.

“Wha...what are you?”

Merka whispered, “It has another element now.”

“Yes, I do.”

They let out a strangled cry.

“My name is Tibs. I heard you call the other one Merka. What is your name?”

“Don’t tell it!”

“I don’t think it’s going to give me a choice.”

Tibs sighed. “If you don’t want to tell me, that’s fine. I’d just like something other than calling you Dungeon.”

“Firmen,” it said after a stretched silence.

“Alright, Firmen. To start with. If you don’t want me to hear you and Merka speaking, you just have to move away from me. I don’t know how far, but I figure to the second floor would be enough.”

“Like we can trust anything you say,” Merka said hatefully.

“If you don’t believe me, that’s up to you. Second, I’m here—”

“What second floor?” Firmen asked.

“Don’t talk with it,” Merka chastised.

“Then you tell me. What’s a second floor?”

“Isn’t there anything under this?” Tibs asked.

“Don’t answer it,” Merka said.

“Alright, Merka, I’d like it if you stopped referring to me as ‘it’. I’m a man. You should be using ‘he’.”

“He?” Firmen said the word tentatively, as if they were testing it.

“Yes, and if you or Merka prefer being referred to as he or she, let me know.”

“What do they mean?” Merka asked, sounding genuinely curious.

“He is for men, she is for women.”

“What are they?” Merka asked. This time, their puzzlement sounded profound.

“Weren’t you taught about people before you came to help Firmen?”

“How do you know about that?” Now they sounded fearful.

“Ganny explained some of it, back when I was a Runner for the Adventurer’s Guild. She didn’t go in details, but she talked about being taught the things she needed to know help Sto. And how a lot of what I can do wasn’t covered in that.”

“How did that Ganny know any of that?” Merka asked defiantly, but Tibs had the sense they were using that to cover their fear.

“She is like you. He helps Sto with what it means to be a dungeon. He made her life difficult at the start with how he didn’t want to bother with the rules.” He smiled. “I didn’t help.”

“How can—”

“Merka,” Firmen said in a tone that had trouble masking their discomfort, “I’d rather we stick to more important things. Like why... he is here and how... he is still alive.” Each time, it felt like they needed to make an effort to use the pronoun.

“I’m still alive,” Tibs answered, “because I had an audience with Wood.”

“Please tell me you know what it’s talking about.” Firmen said in annoyance. Tibs decided to let the slip pass.

“Wood’s the element,” they replied.

“The audience thing,” Firmen snapped. “I understand you didn’t tell me everything, that a lot was for when I was ready, but it—” they sighed. “—he brought that up.”

“I don’t know what that is,” Merka answered.

“Why did they tell you dungeons exist?” Tibs asked, and realize it might be something they didn’t want to talk about. “If it isn’t something you can talk about with an outsider, I understand.”

They let out a strangled laugh. “I wasn’t taught people could understand us, so it isn’t like I was told there are things I’m not supposed to share with them.”

“Then if you aren’t comfortable with—”

“You’re terrifying me!”

“I’m sorry. It isn’t what I want.”

They snorted.

“Merka, can you tell him?”

“Why are you going along with what *it* wants?”

“How about because *he* hadn’t killed us? Whatever he is, he’s clearly strong enough to do that, and I tried to kill him. Some of the others were cursing me and promising that for doing a lot less to them.”

“It’s just—”

“He, Merka.”

“It! I’m not going to play whatever game *it*’s playing! It’s probably not even a person! They aren’t like that.”

“How about this?” Tibs asked. “You tell me what happened to the man who came here yesterday... very close to when I came. If you haven’t absorbed their body, I’d like to have that so I can return it to his woman. And I’ll leave.”

He'd give them time to settle down before returning, and hopefully, they'd have a more productive conversation.

"There isn't—"

"I haven't absorbed it yet," Firmen said over Merka's denial. "It's still living."

"He is?" Tibs hadn't expected that, especially after realizing the dungeon had to be where her man had ended into. He sensed as far as he could, but the essence of the dungeon was too strong for the man's faint one to be noticeable.

"Should I be using he for it too?" Firmen asked, hesitating. "You said there's a she too. How am I supposed to know which one to use?"

"You can use it for anyone else," Tibs said. "They can't hear you, so they won't care. I mind, because it is usually used to refer to objects, and there's an entire class of people in the cities who delight in making me and others like me feel like we're nothing more than objects for them to do what they want with. How is he still alive? I'd have expected one of your traps to kill him, or one of your creatures."

"It ran into the first room when the first Woodling attacked. The trap there cut it, but it bandaged the wound, then huddled into a corner and hasn't moved since."

"And you didn't send a Woodling to force him to continue?" Tibs narrowed his range to gain precision. The first room would be closed, and he might be able to tell even a person's faint essence from what made the dungeon.

"There's no point. It's going to die eventually and I'll absorb its essence then."

The problem was that he couldn't tell where the room was. Everything was made of trees and now that he could sense that element, it was so strong here it would cover up a person's.

"Then I want to bring him back to his woman."

"Don't—" Merka started.

"No," Firmen stated. "If it means you're going to kill me, I can't stop you. But I am not going to hand over someone. There are rules. You asked why I exist. I was going to let Merka answer, since it is who you asked, but it's why I won't just return it to you. I am here to test whatever crosses my threshold. If they pass my test, they grow so they can return to test themselves again. If they fail, they become part of me and I use their essence to grow."

"Alright. Do the rules say anything about those coming into you working in teams?"

"That is how it should usually happen," Merka answered reluctantly after the silence stretched. "But we aren't breaking rules if they just show up on their own."

"Then I want to be on his team," Tibs said.

"You can't do that," Merka replied.

"Firmen, you're the dungeon. It's your decision."

"Don't you dare break the rules," Merka warned.

"Which rule is this breaking?" the dungeon asked. "You never mentioned a rule about them having to enter at the same time."

"That's because it's never been more than one of them at a time before," they replied, and, to Tibs, there was petulance in the tone.

"You're just unhappy because he knows the rule enough to do this. But it doesn't change the situation," they said. "It still needs to leave on its own."

"But if I'm on his team, I can go in and help him leave. I just have to survive the tests,

too.”

“With what you can do?” Merka demanded. “What can Firmen do that you can’t just burn it down?”

“That’s a good point,” Tibs said.

“You’re planning something,” they said in a suspicious tone.

“I’m a thief. We’re pretty much always planning something. How about this? I don’t use essence other than to make a sword and a shield, and thief’s tools. I won’t etch attacks, or…” He looked at his no longer injured arm and side. But no, a regular person wouldn’t be able to heal himself. He’d have to be careful, but this was the first floor, and he had his sense. Unless Firmen could tell he was using it, that would give him an advantage. “No essence work beyond making the tools I already mentioned.”

“What are thief’s tools?” Firmen asked.

“You don’t know?”

“I don’t know what thieves are either,” they answered.

“Do you know what rogues are?”

“Merka mentioned them. They are the ones who focus on the traps and being sneaky.”

Tibs chuckled. “Thieves are rogues who don’t work for the guild.”

“That’s the adventurer’s guild you mentioned before.”

“You don’t know about them? How does Merka know about rogues, then? They are the ones who named the class.” He made a variety of picks, instead of taking those hidden within his right bracer, then added a knife. He didn’t want to limit himself by too narrow a selection.

The silence broke with Merka’s sigh. “I wasn’t taught anything about where the names come from. Just hem and what they do. The fighters throw themselves at the creatures. The sorcerers wield the essence of one element, the archers stay in the back and use a bow and arrow. The rogues deal with traps and are sneaky, and the clerics heal those who survive.”

“These are the kinds of tools thieves often use.”

“And they will be the only ones you will use?”

“I’d like to be able to make them as I need. I didn’t bring a leather roll to hold them. And to remake my sword or shield if needed. It’s easier for me to return them to essence when I have to work on a lock than set them aside.”

“Are you actually thinking of going along with it? You know it’s going to cheat.”

“I’m not going to cheat,” Tibs said. “I’m going to be sneaky.”

“I am agreeing to it,” Firmen said, the smile audible. “Because I’m tired of them not making it beyond three rooms, if even that. I want to see him go up against the rest of what I came up with. And it’s fine if he’s going to be sneaky. I planned for that.”

Before Tibs could wonder what that meant, there was a shift in the essence within his narrowed range. By the time he stretched it, what Firmen had done was over, but Tibs could tell the layout had changed.

“Wait, did you just change the floor?” he asked before stopping himself.

“Did you think all you’d have to do was reach one room, and you’d leave? I want to see what someone who knows what they are doing is capable of. You want to take your team member out? It is now at the end of my test for you.”