

Tibs reached for the tile, keeping his balance.

Each like of tiles had two, or three, tiles that didn't trigger, but they weren't always in a convenient place for him to stand on and test the next line. He was close enough he could make the jump through the archway that marked the end of this section, but if he had a team, he couldn't be sure they all would. So he'd decided to find a path that took him no more than three tiles from the end.

He put his hand on the tile, shifting to add more weight, and pushed off the instant he felt it shift. After the twenty-eight rows, he was able to tell early enough that only the more sensitive triggers activated from the push off.

He stood and looked at what he was facing. All the tiles he could reach from where he was triggered, and there was no tile he could shift a foot to that would let him test the other half of the line. He jumped back three lines and took the tiles that let him move to the left of the hall.

He'd started on the other side because the usable footing here was precarious at best. He squatted, his feet three tiles apart on the same line, and place a hand on the tile three ahead of that and reach two more to press the tiles on the line he was testing. The difficulty here was in telling if the tile was safe, or he wasn't able to put enough weight to trigger it. At least, all he had to do if it triggered, was pull his hand out of the way.

This, Tibs had decided, was about testing the Runner's patience. There were no shortcuts that he'd seen or sensed. There were no patterns on the safe tiles telling him they were safe. Each one was earth with splotches of moss on them. They'd grown there naturally, as far as he could tell, now that he had wood as an element.

If Firmen kept the locations the same from run to run, memorizing them would let them proceed faster, but that would come with the risk of falling victim to the dungeon suddenly altering the floor.

He had three tiles which hadn't triggered by the weight he'd managed to put on them. Two should be safe, but that wasn't certain. There had been two until now, but this could be where Firmen made a change.

All he needed was one. A place to put a foot, and jump.

On the next run, he'd check the last lines. He was getting tired, and couldn't use purity.

He stood and placed a foot on the tile his hand had been on, then balanced on it before putting his other foot on the first of the three tiles.

He had most of his weight on it when it sunk in and he hurried to pull it off, and nearly tipping back as the 'thunk' sounded. The tile he put his foot on sank in immediately and he pulled it off, forcing himself to remain on one foot as the two walls of spears jerked out of the wall and then retreated.

He looked for the safe tile before putting his foot on it and giving his breathing time to slow.

He chuckled. Yeah, he was tired. He should have jumped it before, when he had the right alignment of tiles to let him build the momentum. In fact, he should go back to that side and do that.

He placed his foot on the next tile, steadied his breathing again, and leaned forward. He readied himself to pull away and kept in mind where the safe tile was, but it didn't

move. Instead of letting the relief make him pause, he crouched, and launched himself across the remaining distance, rolling on landing and sprawling on the floor.

“Are you going to just lie there?” Firmen asked.

“I need to catch my breath.”

“This wasn’t strenuous. Why are you tired?”

“Focusing so much is tiring.”

“That’s interesting. Are all people like that?”

“Didn’t any of the ones to make it in show signs of being tired after thinking their way through one of your traps?”

“They didn’t make it out of them. Those who didn’t die on the first trigger screamed in fear and ran into the next trigger and that killed them. If they faced a Woodling, they ran away into a trap and died, or into another set of Woodling and died. The one you rescued was the first to avoid them and run into a room instead.”

“And he avoided the triggers?”

“All but one, but he was already running, so wasn’t hurt.”

Tibs pushed himself to his feet. The corridor went to his left and right, with the right ending at a door. Behind it, he sensed a room.

He pushed on the door, but it didn’t move. It was made of trunks disconnected from the floor and held together by an intricate array of essence. He grabbed onto a trunk as best as he could and pulled; to the same result.

“Didn’t we agree the door couldn’t be locked?”

“Do you see a lock on it?”

There wasn’t, the trunks were made of wood. There were no gaps that could act as the lock. The only thing he sensed was how the essence that made them was different from the walls and normal trees.

“Then how come it won’t open?”

“Because…” Tibs heard the smile. “The door is barred.”

“That’s the same as being locked,” he said, resting his head on it.

“No. You don’t need tools to unbar it.”

“This was Merka’s idea, wasn’t it?”

“No, why did you think that?”

“Using a technicality sounds just like something a helper would do.”

“Merka wanted me to place a boss Woodling between the trap and the door to kill you with.”

Tibs looked up. The sky was brighter than he expected. “They wanted to fight me again?”

“Yes. Merka doesn’t like you.”

“And you’re the one who came up with the clever way of using the literal words to still keep me out of the room?”

“Why do you sound surprised by that?”

“Sto wasn’t that clever.”

“I’m not Sto.”

Tibs nodded. He’s known not all dungeons were the same. They were people, after

all, but in his tired state, he'd forgotten that aspect. Sto had been the muscle to Ganny's smarts. He'd only talked to a few other dungeons over the years and he hadn't gotten a sense of the dynamic between them and their helper.

He pushed away from the door. "I'll keep that in mind." He studied it. The trunks looked ordinary, but he knew they weren't. They were dungeon made. Which meant that the way the essence was structured withing them was purposeful.

There was a structure to normal trees or any object, but it was never quite the same. Metal had... spikes was the best word he could think of, but even items that looked the same had a different arrangement of them. Trees's structure...flowed. There were no sharp angles as with metal, or with ice, or stone. The flow reminded him of soft earth, except it moved in a direction that matched the trunk and branches, instead of simply flowing over itself.

This was more like the structure of ice. Lines against each other. Like planks stacked together.

He smiled. Unless they were nailed, planks slid.

The section that moved was on the second truck from the left; it slid up two hand-spans.

"I thought I'd arranged the essence so it wouldn't tell you what to do."

"The way it's aligned made me think it could slide." Tibs sensed. "But you did manage to hide how they interact." Testing the rest of the door didn't cause anything to slide up or down.

This reminded him of the puzzle boxes with sliding sides. They needed to be slid in the correct order to align gaps hidden from view. But even with the best made one, there was always slight play that told him which sections could be moved.

Here, he had nothing to use to eliminate sections that only serve to hold the whole together, and there was nothing within the essence telling him where the channels were. The only thing he was confident of was that the puzzle was limited to the door. It had taken Sto a long time to introduce void to his puzzles, and Tibs didn't know how easy it would be for Firmen to work out what to do with the element without a sorcerer to show him. Sto had learned a lot from the Runners he'd eaten.

Again, this would test his patience on top of his smarts. At least a mistake here wouldn't almost kill him, and he had experience with these kinds of puzzles. Ultimately, they were about taking his time and paying attention.

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When the door swung inward, Tibs nearly fell. He'd been so focused on planning his next series of moves it only registered the next one didn't move as he pressed to gain traction and the door opened instead of resisting him.

Getting over the surprised, he smiled at what waited for him.

The armor was simple. Thick, but supple leather with ties to tighten in place. Next to it, a wooden scabbard had a plain sword similar to the one he'd made to fight the Woodlings his previous time. It was close enough Tibs had to ask. "You didn't have enough essence to make it the same length?"

"You insisted you needed the picks. Those required a surprisingly large amount of essence to give them the strength and flexibility they'd need to act like the ones you

made.”

He’d have to be careful. It had been years since he had had to fight with a sword, not exactly as he like them.

He put the armor on, tightening the sections that were loose on him, then attacked the scabbard and pocketed the picks. Firmen hadn’t provided him with a leather roll for them.

“How did you come up with the armor? It’s nice.”

“One of the people who died in me wore something like that. The essence that made it was thin and frayed, so I adjusted that.”

“It was old,” Tibs said. “It’s something that happens to object’s essence over time.”

“I also played around with the thickness, and adding other elements, but those are for if you make it deeper within me. And if they come up on the list. Merka is adamant the list has to govern what ends up in the chests.”

Tibs chuckled. “Ganny was the same. She hated it any time Sto put something specific in one for me.”

“The dungeon made items to help you?”

“We were friends.”

“But a dungeon’s role is to eat you.”

“It’s to test me.”

“But I’ll eat you when you fail. Did your friend accept that? I could never eat Merka.”

“I did. I think Sto did too, but I don’t think we ever outright talked about it. He certainly made his floors hard enough I nearly died a few times. Pushing me as hard as he could was something he saw he had to do, as my friend. So I’d be strong enough to face the rest of the world.”

“And you were fine with your friend eating you?”

“Other than my team and a few people in Kragle Rock, Sto was the first one to treat me as something more than a thing to use. He broke rules for me, to help me with other problems I had. He protected the town as best as he could. I knew he’d eat me one day, but that wasn’t his fault. He wasn’t the reason I had to do the runs. That was the guild’s fault. They were the ones I held responsible for the misery I endured.” He ground his teeth. “The friends I lost.”

He let out a breath. The guild was for later. Once he was strong enough.

Now it was time for him to continue his run, so he could gain that strength.