

It took four days for Tibs to manage to leave the village with Joman trailing him. When Tibs had returned from his failed 'hunt', he'd woken the next two days with the man already watching Mother Natril's house. Tibs had to spend the next night up, practicing etchings, to find out Joman came to the house with Torus high in the sky.

He spent the day helping around the farm, using purity to keep the worse of his tiredness at bay, then slept as soon as most of the work was done, to wake with the sun setting. Once full dark set in, and sensing that no one watched the house, Tibs sneaked out in the darkness, wrapping himself in the element to ensure no one noticed and reported his departure to Joman.

Once in the forest, he used air disks to speed him up, which led to a few collisions with trees. But he used that as training for sprinting through an obstacle course. He kept going toward the dungeon well past the town leaving his range, and slept when he was tired.

He woke with the sun shining down on him, and it was near its zenith when Tibs sensed Firmen's 'walls' in the distance. This time, he paid attention as he approached, trying to sense a difference that marked where the dungeon's influence started.

Unlike Sto, who had the gathering area encroaching within his influence, keeping him from making changes there. There was nothing to keep Firmen from extending himself as far as their influence reached. But, while Tibs hadn't been paying too much attention to that, he was confident he had been away from the walls when Firmen had first spoken.

"I thought we'd gotten rid of you," Merka said, unhappily, when Tibs was over a hundred paces from the dungeon's entrance.

It wasn't a door, the way Sto had made his door, but now that he looked for it, Tibs saw how the top of the trees leaned toward the center of the entrance, forming the top of the archway.

"How about you don't try to kill me this time?"

"We won't," Firmen said, curtly. "Why are you here?"

"I'd like to do a proper run."

"I don't believe you," Merka said.

"Why?" Firmen asked.

"Because I haven't had a dungeon to run in well over twenty years at this point. I've tried, but the guild's processes have kept me from doing it."

"Why should we let you in if they don't?" Merka demanded, then, "What's the guild?"

"You don't know?" Tibs tried to remember if the guild had come up in his last visit. It had to. But it might not have been within a context that made it matter.

"Why would I?" they replied. "Sounds like something you deal with, not us."

"They control who can go into the dungeons," Tibs said. "Well, those they know about. They're the people who came up with the names for the classes as well as the ranks that represent Runners' advancement."

"No, they didn't," Merka said. "I was taught the names, which means we came up with them."

"And the ranks?"

"I don't know anything about those, so you're making that up for all I know."

"And who taught you?" Tibs asked.

"Oh, no, you don't. I am not here to answer your questions. I'm Firmen's helper, not

yours.”

“Then, one of them told the guild?”

“People can’t hear us,” they said with derision.

Then it made more sense the guild had come up with the names, the dungeons heard them and... they decided to use them? What was the point?

“Firmen, does knowing what class a Runner is help you with making a proper challenge?”

“Don’t answer it.”

“It only helps because I know to make sure they are all included, otherwise one of them could get through too easily.”

“But you don’t need the names for that, do you? All Merka had to tell you is to be ready to have people who are strong and fight in the front, some who are smart and fling essence, clever ones, those who use range weapons, and those who can heal them. The actual class names aren’t needed.”

“I suppose Merka could have left it at that.”

“Then why bother with the class names?”

“Because that’s how it’s done,” Merka snapped. “Unlike you, I do what I’m told.”

Tibs kept his opinion to himself. It wasn’t like he knew anymore than they did. He simply had a feeling that having it originate from the dungeons, or whatever taught the helpers, made less sense than them picking it up from hearing Runners talk about them. Not that having that be something the helpers were taught made much sense, either.

“About that run.”

“No,” Merka said.

“Why not? Don’t you want a chance to eat me?”

“Like that’s going to happen, with all the essence you have.”

“This is the first floor,” Tibs said. “Omega Runners wouldn’t have their elements, so like the previous time, all I use it for would be to make tools.”

“No,” Firmen said. “If, as you claim, those Omega Runners come in without an element, they don’t get to make whatever they need when they need it.”

“You can’t be considering letting that run around you again,” Merka said.

“Asking me to do a run without weapons or tools, or armor, isn’t setting a fair test. Even when I started, they gave us armor and weapons.”

“If you’re so scared, come back when you have all those things you need,” Merka said mockingly.

“I’m not in a position to do that. The village where the people live doesn’t have Runner gear.” He’d be able to bring the sword, but armor was out of the question. Even the guards at the gate were in nothing more than regular clothing. He hadn’t even sensed a metal helmet in the whole village. “I’ll make a sword and shield now, along with picks and a couple of knives and I won’t make replacement if they break or I lose them. For the armor, I’ll coat myself in earth and I won’t change that during the run.”

Merka’s snort told him what they thought of the idea, but Firmen’s stretching silence had to mean they were considering it.

“I don’t trust you not to change them. You are too sneaky,” they said. “So I offer this as an alternative.”

“I’m listening.”

“I will provide you with an armor, a sword, a shield, the tools you used last time, and two knives.”

“You can’t do that,” Merka protested. “You can’t just give it stuff.”

“*He* reached the last room. There should have been a chest with a worthy reward in it.”

“*It* was here to get the person back.”

“Rescuing a teammate doesn’t change that *he* won. He defeated you. He reached the end. You had me build a list of good rewards for that chest.”

“Not entire equipment list!”

“Yes, that is a valid point,” Firmen said. “Therefore, I will make his equipment using no more essence than the strongest of the items on the list.”

“No! I forbid you from doing anything it wants.”

“I am the dungeon,” Firmen said, their tone darkening. “You are my helper. I always appreciate your advice, but you do not get to dictate what I do.”

“Oh? Well, see if I speak on your behalf when they come to punish you.”

“I doubt something this minor will attract their attention.”

When Merka didn’t respond, Tibs spoke up. “I need the sword and picks to be properly made.”

“Don’t think you get to tell me how this will go,” they replied.

“I’ll forgo the shield and knives if that’s what it takes,” Tibs continued. “I’m not telling you how this needs to go, but if I was equipping myself for the run, those are the choices I’d make. Sword, picks, and armor. The best I can afford with the money I’d have accumulated until then. Which is represented by how much essence you’ll use making them,” he added in case Firmen didn’t know what money was. He didn’t remember if the Woodlings had dropped anything after he’d killed them.

“Alright, I can accept this compromise.” There was a pause. “Enter, and reach the first room as you are and your equipment will be waiting.”

“I can’t not sense the layout,” Tibs said, unwilling to give up that advantage.

“So you’ll know where the room is. You will still have to reach it.”

“There can’t be a locked door. Without picks, that would be an impossible challenge.”

“There will not be a locked door, I promise.”

Tibs kept from glaring up. That sounded exactly like what he’d say if he was planning something. Still, he wanted the run, so this was what he had to deal with. If Firmen cheated, Tibs could remind him of their promise while he used essence to open the door.

He knew the floor was different before stepping through the archway. He’d sensed Firmen making changes, but he’d been paying attention to their discussion. Now, he could tell that beyond the floor being made of square tiles, they were all triggers.

“Making it impossible for me to reach the room isn’t how this is supposed to go,” Tibs said.

“There’s a way through,” Firmen replied,

Tibs looked at the trees and thickets that made the walls. He could climb those. Unless the bark was as sharp as the thicket’s leaves, he would be able to jump from one to

the other and make it to the room.

“The way it was explained to me is that everyone on a team should be able to cross the challenge,” Tibs said.

“I don’t see anyone else on your team. But if there were, they too would be able to make it.”

That confirmed the wall wasn’t the way to go. Tibs could still use that way, but he wanted to beat this the way a Runner would, not the way Tibs, the thief, would.

The tiles were slightly larger than his foot. They looked to be made of packed earth and moss, and about the thickness of his thumb. The essence that made them was dense enough it wouldn’t break under his weight. Which meant that weight would trigger the mechanism it rested on.

It was mechanical, although once triggered, the essence signal would run along a conduit on each side of the wall. He placed a hand on it, then pressed. He had to put more weight than he expected before it sank down and he pulled away as a series of ‘thunk’ sounded before wooden spears crisscrossed that row of tiles.

Tibs swallowed. Without an immunity to wood, that would have ripped him apart.

One and two tiles.

He shook his head and breathed.

Twelve tiles before the entrance. If he held onto the wall and stretched, he could place a foot five tiles in.

Sixty possibilities.

There was a delay between the trigger activating and the wall of spears coming out, so he could run through, and that was something nearly everyone on a team would be able to do.

In a dungeon as young as Sto had been when Tibs did his first runs, he would have been willing to accept that as the solution. But Firmen was older. Tibs couldn’t know how old. The first disappearance in the forest went back to fourteen years, but that didn’t mean it was when Firmen had been... were dungeons born?

“How did you come to be?” Tibs asked as he placed a hand on another tile, sensing for how the mechanism reacted.

“What do you mean?”

“People are born of their mother.” Again, it resisted. “I don’t think the how it comes to be would interest you. And I sort of remember the purity dungeon saying that sometimes old dungeons could send out a piece of themselves to make other dungeons. Is that what happened to you?” He had most of his weight on it again before the tile sunk in and triggered and he pulled away at the ‘thunks’ sounded and watched the wall of spears.

“Shouldn’t you focus on what you are doing?” Firmen asked.

“Probably.” Tibs tested the third tile. “But the questions isn’t going to go away even if I don’t ask it.” He had nearly all his weight on it and it still wasn’t sinking in. “And it’s just going to keep distracting me. If you don’t want to tell me, at least say that, so I’ll know I’m wasting my time. It often helps silence them.”

He stood and placed his foot on it, gently adding more and more weight, ready to move off, until it supported him.

“I... don’t know how I came to be,” Firmen said as Tibs stepped off and sensed the

trigger, searching for the difference that would tell him how he would be able to find the safe ones. “I remember becoming aware of something around me, but I have a memory of that sensation lasting long before that. I didn’t know what I was aware of. And even once I understood the difference between the moss, the trees, the thickets, and the animals moving around me, I didn’t know what they were until Merka arrived and taught me the names.”

“They weren’t there when you woke up?” He sensed nothing different from a trigger that activated compared to this one. Did it mean he wasn’t heavy enough to trigger it, or it was safe and he had to work out how to tell it apart?

Well made traps and locks were adjustable. A floor trigger couldn’t be so sensitive that a rat running across it would activate it. How it was adjusted varied from trigger to trigger, but he could always tell by looking at the mechanism.

“No. Merka had to travel to reach me. I think it’s always like that.”

The elements he could identify were identical in the triggers. Which meant the tension had to be controlled through the other elements. If he had tools, he would be able to pry the tile off and look at it. Without that, all he has was the slow and tedious method.

When had the last time been? Probably when he was Omega. He had a vague memory of stretching on a tiled floor, testing each trigger. He wouldn’t have to lie down here, but it wouldn’t be any faster as he tested each row for a safe place for him to put his foot on.