

The room ahead lacked a door and contained a mass of smaller creatures. Instead of being made mainly of wood and life essence, he couldn't identify the other main element. Of those he could identify, the mix seemed random but still followed the pattern of mimicking living creatures.

He remained aware of traps, or surprise attacks, but eventually stood before the opening looking at...

Tibs chuckled.

Assembled before him were small woodland animals going about foraging along grass covered ground of the room. The walls were similar to those in the rest of the maze, but had small boulders placed randomly at the base of trees, or partially hidden within thickets, or with a tree growing around them. There was an air of an innocent glade about the scene; which he forced himself to dismiss. He was in a dungeon. These would be deadly if he dropped his guard.

Still, one thing puzzled him.

"You didn't make them out of wood? Sorry. My question is more how you are able to do that. Sto didn't start doing it until the third floor. Everything before that was stone."

"It must have taken him that long to get enough of the Fever element."

Tibs nodded. Fever was the element of the flesh, not that he knew why it wasn't call that. He'd read some, as he had with every element. But he'd quickly realized that scholars understood less than the others. The few books he'd read all agreed that Fever was the element of life, since it was the element people and animal all had in large quantity.

Except Tibs knew that was wrong. Life was its own element. They just didn't know about it. It had made it difficult to continue reading about that element. Eventually, he'd ask the element itself, if he could ever work out how to have that audience.

His one attempt hadn't gone...at all. Because of being linked to flesh, he'd paid to be part of a flesh party, a noble in the city he was in at the time was throwing. It hadn't been easy to get in, both in building an identity a noble would be willing to interact with and in convincing them he was older than he looked. Why he kept being asked that only became obvious once he made it to the party.

His plan had been to get in the middle of it and use the obsidian blade he shaved with to open his wrist and fight the urge to heal himself until he was too weak to make a purity etching. He'd figured that once he returned from the audience, he'd be able to close the wound and then use purity.

He didn't get to test if that would have worked.

That he'd been told to disrobe before stepping within the party room should have been a trigger. But it was called a flesh party, so he told himself of course they'd expect flesh to be exposed.

And it basically needed to be, since everyone there was engaged in sex.

He'd forced himself to step through them, and he almost made it to the center. Then someone touched him where no one had business touching him and it was too much.

Tibs had needed a private bath and a whole day of scrubbing himself before he felt clean again. Fever had then been put as the last element he intended to work on getting an audience with.

"There must be a lot of the animals that come in for you to copy."

“And die in my traps. They aren’t as clever as you are.”

He sensed the floor and walls. Nothing there that led him to think there were triggers. This would be about fighting against overwhelming numbers. As best he could sense, they were as close to normal animal as dungeon creatures could be; the way Sto’s dogs had been, so he still had the advantage. So long as he kept them from all massing on him at the same time.

That was easier to do when he had essence.

He stepped into the room and the transition into dungeon creatures happened instantly. As one mass they ran at him, and Tibs cut, kicked, and bashed with his shield with abandon, to little apparent effect. He was killing them, but there were so many of them he didn’t feel any pause in them, biting and clawing at his legs.

At first, it was only pressure as the leather took the damage, and he continued kicking and cutting and killing them to keep them from climbing on top of one another and reach higher. Then a bite made it through. The pain was barely noticeable, but it was followed by claws, and more biting. And in spite of his attempts, they were reaching higher, the weight on his legs moving above his knees. Kicking out caused pauses, but the leather was sufficiently damaged, not all the critters were sent flying.

And while each cut and bite was small, they were taking a toll by the time he could sense there were fewer creatures attacking him. By the time he could again tell the numbers were reduced, one of the rats, of all things, had managed to bite the inside of his thigh.

Tibs had angrily crushed it in a hand and thrown it away and redoubled his efforts to kill the rest of them.

When he dropped to his knees, Tibs was surrounded by dead animals. His armor was in tatters below his knees—even his forearms had a few bites taken out of them—and he was panting.

A chuckle escaped him. Then it was a laugh. Then he let himself fall on his side and looked at the darkening sky.

“You have odd reactions,” Firmen said. “You aren’t dying, but you are acting... oddly. Those before you were screaming and crying with much less than that.”

“This is reminding me of my first runs. Especially the rats. I used to hate those things because of Sto, them and rabbits. They were the only thing he had on his first floor, and they were vicious.” He chuckled, then rolled and pushed to his feet.

The boulder nearly entirely covered in roots was the one holding the cache. Beyond sensing the space inside it, there was a circular crack that was noticeable if one paid attention.

If he hadn’t been this tired, Tibs would have pulled his sense in and unlocked it the way it was meant to. By feel, working out how much to turn the cover to line up the notched with the channels until, by turning, pressing, pulling and turning some more, it would be unscrewed. It made sense to him that it was simply another version of a maze, but he didn’t have the energy to work at it.

He sensed how he needed to move the cover and quickly had it off. He sensed inside before pulling the fabric and unrolling the cloak. Thick wool, deep green with a plain brass brooch.

“Is this someone one of the people who can in you had?”

“Yes.”

Tibs nodded. Bringing the entire cloak would be suspicious, but with the right application of corruption to the brooch, he could claim to have found it while hunting. Not that he was heading to the village right now. Tibs headed out of the room the way he'd come.

“Where are you going?” Firmen asked.

“Out. I'm done for today.”

“You can't do that!” Merka yelled. “You haven't reached the boss room yet.”

“I'll deal with it tomorrow, or the day after.” He was going to have to figure out what to do about his ruined lower armor.

“Firmen, stop him! It can't leave until it's faced me for real this time.”

“Merka, I don't think I shouldn't—”

“Stop it!”

Firmen sighed and Tibs felt the trees move in the passages ahead.

“Don't do this, Firmen,” Tibs said, stopping.

Merka snorted. “Like you can do anything. You're inside us now. We are in charge.”

“This is you, Firmen,” Tibs said. “Don't let Merka put you in danger because their feelings are hurt. I'm going to be back in a few days, and they can work off their anger on me as much as they want then.”

“I'm sorry, Tibs. Merka is my partner and I—”

Tibs channeled fire and let it leak out without restraint. “Don't.” He kept it from reaching the walls. “Test.” The ground around Tibs charred. “Me.”

He looked up. “I played by the rules we agreed to, Firmen. This is the kind of essence I can use if I want to. If what I want is to burn you down, I will do it. All I want, right now, is to go outside, find a spot to sit and rest for a while. Get something to eat, sleep, figure out my weapons and armor situation, and then come back for another run. I don't know if this is a rule for dungeons or something the guild decided we could do. But we aren't forced to kill ourselves trying to reach the boss room. We go as far as we decide. When we feel strong enough, then we face the boss.”

“You wouldn't dare hurt us like that,” Merka said. “Do you have any idea what they'd send against you if you did?”

Tibs snorted. “Something like the Them? I killed one already. Do you really want to have to go back to whoever sent you here and tell them what I did to Firmen because you wouldn't accept I needed a rest? Firmen, you are the dungeon. Not Merka. Do you want me to burn you down?”

The passages opened, and Tibs pulled his essence in. When he reached the section with the trapped floor, he nearly screamed his annoyance, then decided that since he'd announced he was done with the run in no uncertain terms, he didn't have to deal with it and made disks of air for him to walk on over it.

He stopped before the exit. “My bracers, please.”

The thicket parted to reveal them, and he put them on as he left. He walked for a while before sitting at the base of a tree and closed his eyes.

“Tibs?” Firmen said cautiously. “I'm sorry, it's just that—”

“Firmen.” He didn’t have the energy to keep his tone civil. He’d really hoped he had walked outside of the dungeon’s range. “We can talk about it after I’ve slept.”

“Right. People have to do that.”

Tibs waited, and when the dungeon said nothing else, he let himself relax and waited for sleep.