

“You’re back?” Merka said, sounding surprised.

“I said I’d return.”

They snorted.

Tibs removed his clothing. The leather jerkins and shirt the leathersmith had made him would offer no protection in the dungeon, so he figured doing the run undress was best. He didn’t want to have to explain what had happened to his clothing every time he returned to the village.

He stepped into the dungeon and removed his bracers.

“You aren’t wearing armor,” Firmen said, as the caches in the trees opened.

He placed his bracers in the empty one. “I’ll put on whatever I find in the caches.” He took the sword and shield from the other.

“You, I can’t control what will be in them.”

“Won’t control,” Tibs corrected. “And it’s fine. Now that I’ve done the run a few times, I know what to expect.”

“Something’s rather confident,” Merka said.

“I’ve won all out fights,” Tibs replied, stepping to the start of the maze.

“Because you cheated.”

Tibs smirked and set about reaching the boss room.

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Tibs deflected the snake’s headbutt, which still caused him to stagger back. He leaped over the other head as it snapped at his legs and cut it off.

With only one head left, Tibs readied himself for the essence attack.

“Come on, Merka. Think,” he said as the corruption essence rose in the snake’s throat.

It paused, with a surprised expression. “What do you mean, think? You think you’re smarter than I am?”

“No, but I know you aren’t thinking this attach through.”

The snake narrowed its eyes. “Really?”

Tibs readied himself for “Think, Merka.”

Merka screamed as the snake spit the corruption at him and followed it, maw wide open. Tibs side-stepped the head, ignoring the essence, and cut it off.

“You’re cheating again!” they screamed as the last head turned mossy and melted away, as if it was eaten from the inside until all that was left was a new patch of moss on the ground.

“I told you to think.”

“You were trying to distract me.”

Tibs shrugged. If they weren’t interested in listening, he couldn’t do anything about it. He turned to the chest at the back of the room, but walked past. He placed a hand on the wall. Its composition was subtly different.

“Is this the door to the second floor?” The essence beyond it had to feel of Firmen’s walls, but not as...defined, and spreading about twice as deep into the forest as the maze.

“It’s the access to my extension.”

“Extension?” The essence didn’t go any deeper under the ground than it did for the

maze. Except for the mud room, it only went low enough to make the floor and have essence move about. Even in the boss room, it was no deeper, with the snake's essence flowing there until Merka attacked and it took form.

"The part of me those of defeat this room will venture through in search of more rewards and strength."

"Why aren't you putting that under this floor?"

"There's nothing under me. Just earth, some air, water, barely any fever, a little more crystal than that and, oh, never noticed metal there. My reach must have extended. When was the last time that happened?" They sounded surprised.

"So you have to stay above because you are a wood dungeon?"

"I'm not a wood dungeon. Is that a thing?"

Tibs motioned. "It's all made of wood."

"The snake wasn't," Firmen pointed out, "neither are the animals."

"But it's mostly made of wood then. Even the Woodlings are made almost entirely of wood essence."

"It's what I have the most of. Until the first person died within me, I barely had enough fever to make a few animals. They seem to be more clever than the people. Few of them died to my traps."

Tibs chuckled. "They're probably too light to trigger any of the tiles or cause the plates in the mud room to shift."

"Yes. But my point is that I am not a 'anything dungeon' I am me. And I use what I have access to."

"Don't you have a lot more earth under you than wood around you?"

"Yes, but pillars of earth would be ugly among all the trees."

"But they'd make sense for a floor under you."

"And how will the trees survive? I can't spend my light essence just for them. I have better use for it. Why are you so adamant about me making something under the ground?"

Tibs closed his mouth on the 'because that's how it should be' answer. That was guild thinking, and just by standing within Firmen that thinking was proved wrong.

"I guess," he finally said. "That it's because it's all I've known. The two dungeon I ran were within mountains, made of stone. It's what feels...normal."

"Well, I am in a forest, and using trees and spreading wide is what feels natural for me." There was a sense of a final 'there' in the tone that made Tibs smile.

He opened the chest and took the sword out. He pulled it out the scabbard and admired the work. It was a simple blade without decoration, but the balance was decent. "Who dropped a sword like this within you?"

"You did."

"I?" right, the sword he'd taken from Mother Natril's attic.

"I adjusted the essences so it would be without flaws and put it on the list."

Tibs placed his wooden sword against the chest and headed out.

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The tavern owner looked at the stag Tibs placed on the counter. "What do you expect me to do with that?"

"Prepare it. Feed the village with it." Tibs had figured something larger would keep

everyone happy for a while.

“Do I look like I’m set to do anything with a carcass? You hunters usually deal with the cutting and whatever else you do before you bring me the meat.”

“I can deal with it,” a scared woman said, stepping to the counter. “If you don’t have the time.”

The tavern owner left them.

“I’d rather go back out,” Tibs said.

She looked the dead animal over, admiring the cut in the next. “That’s clean.” She looked at him. “You did that with a knife?”

“A sword. I left it at my camp.”

“You killed a stag with a sword?” she asked in disbelief. “And all you got was that?” she nodded to the mended rip in his shirt’s shoulder.

“I chased it to exhaustion, but got overconfident. It jerked its head, and the antler cut me.” Short of how he’d brought it down, it was basically what had happened. He hadn’t wanted to kill it outright by draining its life essence, and it still had had some fight left.

“Where are you hunting? It’s been a long time since I’ve seen a specimen this robust.”

“How far from the village have you ventured?”

The look she gave him was answer enough. They were all scared of going too deep within the forest because of those who’d gone missing and the stories that had spread.

“I went Nadir,” Tibs said, “slightly more than half the day.” It was in the opposite direction of Firmen, so should be safe of unexplainable creatures. He also sensed pockets of life essence in that direction that would either be groups of large animals, or more of the smaller ones. “So long as you can avoid the bears roaming the area, and the large cats and wolves, you should be able to find something to bring back.”

“The guard saw you head Zenith when you left the road,” she said so casually Tibs could have laughed.

“I started in that direction, then did a circuit Sunset ward and then Nadir. I was finishing it Sunrise ward when I came across this one.”

“Can I get you to show me where?”

Tibs chuckled. “When I go into the forest, it’s because I’m done dealing with people.” And he wouldn’t be able to pass himself off as a competent tracker to anyone who knew how it was done. Even if he could take her directly to where the herd would be.

“And you’re sure it’s safe?”

“No forest is entirely safe,” Tibs replied. “But I didn’t come across anything I couldn’t explain.”

She nodded. “What do you want in exchange for it?”

“A few sets of clothing would be nice. The caravan didn’t leave my things behind when they left and these aren’t going to be the same if I have to wash them in a river too often.”

“That’s it?”

“Does anyone have obsidian?” he asked, not hopeful. His beard was getting long.

“What is it?”

“It’s a crystal like stone.” He left it at that.

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Tibs looked at his reflection in the sheet of water floating before him and grabbed a fist full of his beard. He hoped this worked, because his only other option was fire and he knew from experience hair was something fire ate far too eagerly.

“What are you doing?” Firmen asked as Tibs made a line of purity essence.

“Shaving. My beard is too long.” He paused. “Do you know what obsidian is?”

“No.”

“Can you check if Merka does?”

“Merka will not be interested in answering any question from you.”

Tibs nodded and brought the line between his fist and chin. The issue wasn't simply to remove the excess, but to make it look like the result was intentional. It was harder to trim his beard and have it look acceptable than shaving it outright. Unfortunately, unless he was willing to endure the pain of burning himself, or of doing whatever raw purity did, trimming would have to do.

He had to move the line slowly. Unlike fire, purity was in no hurry. If figured that if he asked one of the clerics why, the answer would resemble; *‘work well done couldn't be done fast’*.

“Why don't you simply let it fall?” Firmen said. “They do that without help.”

“But not before they are longer than I like.”

“Why do you let it happen, then?”

Tibs looked at the straight line of bear he was left with. This definitely worked, and was safer than fire, but could he make it look less like it belonged on a character within a bard's song?

“I don't have control over that. People don't.”

“But you have all those elements.”

“I don't have Fever. I expect that's the one that will let me do something like controlling what my beard does.”

“Why don't you get it?”

“It's not that easy.” He chuckled at the memory of his one attempt.

“You had one here easily enough.”

“Because you tried to kill me. It wasn't planned. There has to be specific circumstances to cause an audience.”

“And a dungeon killing you is one of them?”

Tibs looked at the side cut. “No, it's actually the last way I'd want to do it.” It was still too straight, but he couldn't think of to smooth the edge. “What nearly killing me causes is extreme emotions. That's the needed component.”

“So, then you lied to me.”

“What?” Tibs turned to look in the dungeon's direction.

“This is supposed to be a run. That is what you told me. But if one of my creatures or Merka does manage it, you'll just have another audience and come back.”

“I don't think so. I might have the audience, but Wood gave me a boon for my return. I don't think she'll do it a second time. I think she did it because I wasn't trying to have an audience. She was giving me one chance to return so I could continue my journey. I'm pretty sure she expects me to see to my own growth from there on.”

“I suppose I have no choice but to take your word for it and see what happens when you die.”

Tibs smirked. “If I die.”

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The thunk sounded as Tibs stepped forward and he only realized he’d stepped back with the pain erupted along his arm, instead of being him ripped about by the wall of spear. He cursed and wrapped the pair of pants he’d taken from the cache around upper arm to slow the blood. He cursed his inattention.

Only, once he could think through the pain and looked at the line of tiles, the one he’d stepped on shouldn’t have triggered.

“You made changes.”

“You’ve grown too comfortable crossing them. I thought I’d get you.”

He looked at his arm. “Almost did.” The pain was subsiding into numbness. He wouldn’t be able to count on his shield for the rest of the run. He crouched. “If you’re going to make changes between runs, I say you should add an element that the Runners can use to workout where the triggers are. They are going to exhaust themselves by having to test them each time.”

“Say wat you want,” Firmen replied, smugly. “The rules are Runners have to be able to cross the test. They still can. If they want an easy test, they will want to go to another dungeon.”

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Tibs moved out of the way well before the bubble of essence reached the snake’s mouth. He had no idea what element it was, which meant getting caught in the blast would be painful, at the very least.

Shards of crystal hit the wall as Merka tried to keep up with Tibs’s running. When the essence was exhausted, Tibs turned to face the snake, smiling.

“I’m glad you’re thinking now.”

He attacked as the snake frowned, then headed for the chest while Merka grumbled about him cheating, about how he should have lost since he fought with only one arm. The chest contained a bundle of furs. He placed them on top of the chest. He’d have more for the village.

“Is it okay if I practice channeling Wood here?”

“I don’t think you can count on Merka helping you this time. And I am not going to keep you from wandering back into traps if you leave the room.”

Tibs smiled. “That shouldn’t be a problem. I think that after the last time, I know how to keep myself from being overwhelmed by the element.”

“Alright, then go ahead.”

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“Stop!”

“Hi, Merka,” Tibs said, following the line of essence through the wall that needed to be adjusted. “That was a good fight.” He’d asked Firmen why he’d let this deteriorate this way, but the dungeon was ignoring him. He wasn’t sufficiently vast yet Tibs thought he could move out of hearing range.

“I said stop.” They sounded like they were before him.

“I need to deal with this. Firmen—”

“Will you stop before you get yourself killed?”

Tibs stopped walking. “Don’t you want me to die anymore?”

“Yes, but not because of a trap, which you were about to walk into.”

Tibs looked around. He hadn’t paid attention to the path he’d taken into the maze. That would have been for after he’d traced the problem with the wall to its source. He sensed ahead, and as Merka warned, the floor was littered with triggers.

“Thank you. I’ll watch where I step.”

They snorted. “Unless there’s something wrong with a trigger, I don’t think you’re going to pay attention to anything other than the essence that degraded.”

“Why had Firmen let that happen? They seem much more careful with themselves than to let that happen.”

“Firmen has been working on the next section and most of the essence had been going to—what am I doing. You’re the one who owes me answers, not the other way around.”

“What questions do you want me to answer?”

“The one about me thinking. What was that about? It wasn’t just to distract me, was it?”

“During the fight? I was simply pleased that you were finally paying attention the the right elements to use against me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You used crystal.”

“Yes.”

“Didn’t you use it because you realized it was one of the elements that could hurt me?”

“It was just the next element I hadn’t tried against you.”

“Oh.” Tibs was disappointed, but this was also an opportunity to help them grow. “Okay, then you need to pay attention. You can sense the elements I have, right?”

“Yes.”

“Didn’t you notice than anytime you used one of them against me, they didn’t affect me?”

“No, I... you were...”

“I wasn’t cheating. Firmen said it too. I didn’t do anything. It’s just something that comes with me having that element.”

“But you cut yourself on the thicket, and the spears ripped your arm open.”

“Yes, when I gain an audience in a dungeon, it breaks some rule no one seemed to know anything about, and I’m not immune to it.”

“So, if I want to kill you, I have to use wood, or an element you don’t have.”

“Exactly, or one I gained in a dungeon.”

“Which ones are those?”

Tibs smiled. “I think you can find ways to work those out.”

Merka was silent, so Tibs returned his attention to the wall. The trees shouldn’t have to be hampered by that flaw.

“You’re only telling me that because Wood is changing how you think, aren’t you?” they asked as Tibs moved to the next trunk.

He turned to face where their voice now came from. “Yes. During the previous fights, I was counting on you working it out on your own, especially with me urging you to think. I really thought you had worked it out.”

“You don’t think much of me, do you?”

“I think a great deal of you, Merka,” Tibs replied, surprised. “You helped Firmen with a lot of what they had to learn to become the dungeon they are. And I simply think that you have a lot of growing to do when it comes to fighting. And I’m sorry if I’ve made you feel like you should be smarter. Ganny is the only other helper I’ve known, and it left me with expectations. But let me tell you, there is no way she’d be able to fight like you do.”

“Fine,” Merka exclaimed. “You ever bring this up, and I am going to convince Firmen to spear you with all the wood essence he has.”

“I don’t understand. Why do you sound angry?”

“Oh, and I’m the dumb one?”

“Merka, I never said that.”

“I know,” they sighed. “How about you tell me why you’re alone?”

“No.”

“Come on. You want me to be better, don’t you? Well, for that, need to know what happened.”

“I put my obsession before my friends.” He swallows the pain.

“How did you do that? And why would you do that?”

“Don’t,” he whispered, his eyes stinging.

“I need to know if I’m going to grow.”

And he wanted them to grow, so he needed to put his pain aside. It didn’t matter. His friend didn’t matter, only—

Tibs swallowed the anguish and hung onto the sense of what was happening. His friends mattered, because they were a part of him. Some things had become more important than his memory of them, but they would always matter. Only the element could think they wouldn’t. And Tibs wasn’t the element.

“You played a dangerous game, Merka.”

They snorted. “What was the worse that was going to happen?” they replied dismissively. “You’d have gotten all hot, Firmen would have noticed, and he’d have to spear you. You’d be dead and I wouldn’t have to deal with you again. Since that didn’t work, how about you take yourself outside? I believe your run’s over.”

Tibs didn’t contract them. Didn’t point out he had so much fire he’d hurt Sto, whose walls were made of stone. Tibs let them think he didn’t see through the dismissiveness. That he didn’t understand Merka had done something to help him.

He gathered the furs from the boss room, then left the dungeon.