

“How does it know you made changes?” Merka whispered.

“How did you make changes?” He hadn’t meant to reveal he could sense what the dungeon had done, but at least this let him ask the question. “I thought you weren’t allowed to make changes during the day?”

“Why wouldn’t I be allowed to make changes if I need to make them when it’s daytime?” Firmen asked. “And Merka’s right. How do you know I’ve made them?”

“Wait, you know it’s day?” Tibs really should focus on more important things. “Can you sense the sun?”

“Are you trying to delay the start of your...run? Do I need to incentivise you by narrowing the wall until the person you want to rescue is crushed?”

“Okay, that, I know you can’t do. His presence keeps you from affecting anything close to him. And no, I’m not delaying anything. I’m just surprised. Sto didn’t know what a day was, and when I tried to explain it to him using the sun. He had no idea what that was.”

“I don’t know about the sun,” Firmen said. “Merka explained that it’s something well beyond my reach that sends essence down to feed the plants, and in part me. That happens for a time, then stops, and starts again.”

“So, if I tell you that a day is a cycle from it starting, ending and just before it starts again, you know what that means?”

“It’s trying to trick you,” Merka said defiantly. “The day is when the sun feeds the plants.”

“Yes, that’s the day,” Tibs said, trying not to sound annoyed, “and night is when it isn’t happening. We call the entire thing ‘a day’. It helps us track time. We also divide the day in sections, but I don’t think we’re going to need that.”

“We don’t need that day thing either,” Merka said.

“Maybe not.” Tibs smiled. He’d explain why it would be useful later. “How about I get started?”

“Yes.” The smile was audible. “Do get started.”

Tibs sensed the layout. It was a maze with the walls made of trees and thickets. It was mostly all passages and turns and dead-ends, with seven places that widened to the points he considered them rooms.

The goal of mazes was to confuse and make it difficult to reach the end. Tibs had come across a few while traveling with caravans. The most memorable had been a field of corn that had been turned in to one. Unlike here, he hadn’t been able to sense the walls and workout the path to take. He had spent half the day lost in it with other guards and city folks until he’d made it out. Every harvest season, the field was turned into a maze.

There, the goal had been the exit. Here, the goal was a room. It wasn’t at the center, as Tibs expected, but to one side. He sensed more of the maze beyond it, but no open passage. It would be the boss room.[keep in mind it was the first room initially and the dungeon can’t change that aspect of it since there is someone in it] it would be where his loot was. The man he was here to rescue.

Firmen hadn’t set rules about having to follow the maze’s halls, so Tibs headed for the lighter thicket between two thick trees. He pushed the leaves out of his way and immediately stepped back.

“Abyss, that hurts.” He looked at his cut hand.

“Oh, did you think we’d let you cheat like that?” Merka said, laughing.

How had he been cut? He etched purity and—

“What are you doing?” Firmen asked.

“Healing myself.”

“You said you weren’t going to use essence other than make tools.”

“But that—” he pointed to the thicket. “It shouldn’t—”

“Oh, something thinks because it has all those elements, it’s too good to get hurt.”

Merka was gleeful now.

Tibs absorbed the essence. He had set the terms. He ripped some of his ruined shirt and wrapped his hand in it. He considered a wrap of his element to stop the blood from leaking, but the cuts were small, and Firmen would sense that.

He stepped to the thicket.

“Is it too stupid to understand it’s going to happen again?” Merka whispered.

Cautiously, Tibs took a leave and turned it around, sensing it. There was no element at its edge he didn’t recognize. To his sense, it was mostly like any other plants he’d encountered, except those here, within the dungeon, had a lot more wood essence within them. It made the leaves stiff; their edge sharp. He cut his finger, testing it.

Except it was all wood, or another element he had.

His elements couldn’t hurt him. It was one thing he’d gained when he took the shadow instead of water. No element he had could...

Except that wasn’t true.

He had fire, but it still hurt him if he wasn’t careful.

What had wood said? She gave him a boon, so he’d survive his return. She gave it because he’d broken a rule coming to her as he had. Except he’d come to her the same as every other element.

“I think there’s something wrong with it,” Merka whispered.

“I’m trying to understand something,” Tibs snapped. He’d been among her element and experienced a strong emotion. It had been a long time since he’d thought he might die. Everything had been just like the other times, down to being unplanned in most cases.

Fire hadn’t quite been unplanned. He hadn’t expected Sto to make him a room filled with fire, since he didn’t know the dungeon was a person then. But he had willingly stepped into it.

Fire had also said he’d broken a rule. That their time was short because of that. And he’d returned from the audience dying, burned so deep if he hadn’t heard Sto and Ganny talk, mentioned the essence in the golem could help him. If absorbing that essence hadn’t been easy, Tibs would have died there.

And he would have died here if Wood hadn’t given him a boon.

Was it the dungeons? For some reason, having an audience in one made it so he didn’t gain the immunity?

But why? Why should it make a difference? How was a dungeon different from any other place someone could have an audience?

Dungeons were people.

That couldn’t be enough. There were people around when the guild brought Omega Runners to have their audience.

Because he was inside? It had to be it. Being inside someone changed how the audience went. It had to be, because the other possibility implied something Tibs wasn't comfortable with.

The only other reason Tibs could think why having an audience in a dungeon broke rules was because it would be easy for a dungeon to create any of the situations that would make the audience easier to reach. But if that was the case, it meant someone had made that rule.

It meant there was someone out there powerful enough to decide how an audience needed to go.

Tibs shuddered and pushed the thought aside.

It was the act of having it inside someone that caused it. He couldn't test it. Doing it in another dungeon wouldn't tell him anything other than in the dungeon was part of why. And while he could think how he might go about testing it inside a person. The result, even before the audience, was too gory for him to contemplate.

"Alright. I think I know how this goes." He faced the passage and made his sword and shield.

"Is that supposed to scare us?" Merka asked uncertainly.

Tibs stared at the jaggedness of both. When was the last time they hadn't looked like normal ones? He'd forced them to look normal after leaving Kragle Rock because the jaggedness was too known as how he made his swords. And over time, it had become second nature, and they only looked like this if he was fighting alone and wanted to scare those he fought against.

He hadn't intended for them to look like this.

"I don't think it was intentional," Firmen said.

What he'd realized had unnerved him this much.

He didn't make a show of it, but he willed them to a normal shape.

He made it to the first junction, and a creature jumped out of the tree trunk before him. Tibs reacted and cut it before getting a good look at it, and it broke apart as he landed on the ground. It wasn't the crumbling Sto's creatures did. This looked more like it had rotted away, the way he's seen old fallen trees being. Their wood growing soft and breaking apart to the touch. Moss and other plants growing over it. Insects living within them, eating them.

There had been corruption there, in that old tree, but only traces of it.

"What is it doing?" Merka whispered.

"I'm thinking."

It let out a fearful meep.

"I do that a lot." He chuckled. "Too much some people liked to tell me. Too many questions in my head. I've answered a lot of them by reading books and talking with scholars, but it's like there's always more of them. Like, why do your creatures go away differently than how Sto did it?"

"How would I know that?" Firmen replied, sounding offended.

"Sorry. It wasn't so you'd answer. You're just the third dungeon I've been into, and the purity dungeon didn't have creatures for me to fight."

"It didn't?" Merka asked. "Why wouldn't it? How was it testing you?"

Tibs smiled. “See, always questions. Purity is about hard work, determination. And that’s what it tested.”

“Am I supposed to make my tests based on a specific element?” Firmen asked.
“Merka, you never said anything about that.”

“Because that isn’t a thing,” it said defiantly. “It’s making that up.”

Bringing up Purity made Tibs realize that was another audience he had in a dungeon. She hadn’t talked about him breaking a rule, but he hadn’t been about to die, even if he’d felt like it, hungry and exhausted as he had been.

He made the right turn because it was the fastest way to the room he wanted. He stepped around the triggers on the floor and over the nearly imperceptible strings. He also ignored the cache he sensed in the walls.

The next attack, when it came, was a group of eight Woodlings, and this time he sensed them forming in the trees ahead of him; one per trunk. They were taller, half his height and when they stepped out of the trunks, each was armed with a sword and shield. All made of wood.

They attacked as one, and for each Tibs cut down, another cut him. The injuries inflicted on him were light, where he killed one with each swipe. It was the annoyance at feeling the pain of each cut that caused him to make mistakes. He’d grown used to being immune to common weapons.

He still won.

And realized they left nothing behind.

“Merka, is it a rule that says what a dungeon should do when I kill one of the creatures?”

“Didn’t that other dungeon tell you?” it replied.

“If Ganny did, I forgot. That was a long time ago. Sto always had coins drop, sometimes other items from a loot list.”

“If it did, it’s because it like you. Why are you chuckling?”

“Sto go into a lot of trouble because he liked me. He denied a lot.” He bandaged the cuts and continued. The path had one room he couldn’t avoid, but he couldn’t get a clear sense of it. The floor was disks of wood on top of earth, but it wasn’t the ground the way it was everywhere else. Firmen did something to it. There was a lot of water woven through, along with corruption, fire, and other elements he didn’t have.

“Okay, it’s cheating,” Merka announced as Tibs stepped over a trigger in the floor.

“No,” Firmen said, unhappily. “He’s being sneaky. He can sense more than just how I change things. Isn’t that right?”

“That’s right.” Tibs ducked as a Woodling launched itself at his head from a trunk. He cut it before it landed.

“Do something,” Merka ordered.

“Like what?” Firmen snapped. “I never dealt with someone like him. Almost everyone before was terrified of the Woodlings, and the few who weren’t couldn’t tell when the traps were, so they fell to that.”

“Just... I don’t know, crush him or something.”

“It can’t,” Tibs said, pausing before taking the left, sensing the floor. “For the same reason it can’t threaten to crush the man in that room.” The trigger went too deep for him

to avoid it without using essence. “There’s an area around me that keeps it from doing anything. Anything living has it, as far as I’ve read.”

He took off running, shield up, protecting his left side, and counting on his speed to keep the worse of the damage from the wooden slivers that flew at him from the right wall.

He collapsed once he reached the other side of passage, his right side bloody in spite of the earth essence he’d spread over it. He hadn’t intended to do that, but he wouldn’t have survived otherwise.

“I think that’s use of essence,” Firmen stated. “Which breaks the agreement we had.”

“As much as you putting a trigger in there that can’t be avoided or disarmed.” Tibs pulled the slivers out of his body and leaned against the wall.

“How do you know you couldn’t disarm it? You didn’t even try.”

Tibs snorted. “The only way to reach the trigger mechanism was to step on the trigger itself, and you had those slivers set along the length of the wall with enough in reserve that I don’t think it had to ever stop. Every obstacle is supposed to have a way to be beaten. Merka, how about you remind it of that rule? I didn’t call you out on it. I tried to beat it, anyway.”

“And used essence.”

“On an unbeatable trap. How about we agree none of this happened and I continue with the run?”

“I suppose there’s nothing else to do.”

Tibs stood. “Look, I’m not angry. You tried something, and it didn’t work. I’m a thief. I break the rules all the time. I get you bending the ones you need to work under.”

“Don’t even think about it,” Merka said, and Tibs froze. They weren’t talking to him.

“You told me to do something about him. That would work.”

“You can’t know that, and that would break the rules so badly it would be noticed.”

“Oh yes, and someone would have to do something about it, I’m sure,” Firmen said with derision.

“They’re real,” Tibs whispered. Even after all these years, thinking about the Them sent shivers down his spine. “However Merka described them to you, they’re real.”

“And how do you know?” Merka demanded.

“One came for Sto, because of me.”

“What happened?” Firmen asked softly.

“We won. Sto nearly died, and a friend sacrificed herself to keep that from happening. I don’t know if whatever you’re thinking of doing would draw one of them, but if it did, you wouldn’t like the result.”

“You’re just saying that so I won’t kill you.” Firmen’s voice trembled.

“I’ve survived a lot of stuff that should have killed me. If you do this, I’ll use all the essence I have to defend myself. I don’t know if you can tell, but my reserve runs deep. I’m telling you about Them, because I don’t want you to suffer the way Sto did. All I want is to finish this run and take the man home to his woman.”

“Without cheating,” Firmen said.

Tibs smiled. “I’ll just be sneaky.”