

Tibs cautiously made it halfway to the next room without traps, or creature attacks, and opening one cache that gave him a pair of leather gloves. They were darker than the armor Firmen had provided, and not as thick. They felt more like something a worker would wear to protect their hands than someone expecting to be in a fight.

Sensing the layout of the maze let Tibs avoid dead ends and told him where the caches were. Firmen hadn't bothered changing how that essence flowed to make it harder to tell apart from the walls.

Tibs hadn't gone for those that were off his path. The dungeon knew he could sense the wall, so they'd know he was going there on purpose. They might start changing things to make it harder to find any of them, and Tibs really had no need for what they contain beyond hoping for better armor or weapons. Which, on a first floor, wasn't likely.

He focused on the path leading to the room. Three turns, with roughly twenty paces between them. No triggers anywhere. He'd worried Firmen had found a way to hide them, but he could sense the set of them past the room, on the way to the third one.

He remained on alert.

He didn't put it past the dungeon to not have anything along the way, just so he'd exhaust himself with worry, but he also wasn't taking that for granted. Firmen was the clever one of the two, so he could adjust to Tibs faster than Sto tended to.

He made the first turn without incident, then felt the shift in the walls announcing the Woodling about to step out of the trunk.

Tibs watched and sensed as the essence pooled within the trunk. Life and a mix of mostly wood essence. Some earth, water, air, light and very little metal. As the essence pushed against the bark, it bent. It didn't part to let the Woodling through, but adhered to it as a foot, then legs appeared and touched the floor. The bark continued sticking to the Woodling, stretching around the torso without thinning, along the arms. The trunk didn't run out of it; it flowed from the back to keep itself covered as it covered the Woodling.

When it was standing before Tibs, he was looking at an approximation of what a fighter looked like; the bark acting as its armor, and forming a helm.

"Where did you get the shape of the helm?" Tibs asked before he stopped himself. "I mean, did someone walk in wearing one?"

"I made it," Firmen replied, sounding puzzled. "I wasn't leaving the Woodling's head unprotected."

"So it only looks like some I've seen before, out of coincidence?" He supposed there weren't so many ways to protect someone's head. It wasn't unimaginable two people would make them in similar ways.

"It must be. No person had entered me wearing one."

The...construction of the Woodling was interesting. Quite different from how Sto made his creatures. Life and Wood filled them entirely, but where Sto had the other essences pool where they served a function, earth at the surface to add toughness, air around the feet for speed. The essence within the Woodling was distributed in a way that reminded Tibs of how the essence channels flowed within people.

Water definitely followed that path through the Woodling's body. Earth formed lines through the limbs that made Tibs think of bones. Air made a bubble where two of those 'bones' met at the bends. The torso was one column, instead of the series of bones in his

chest and down his back. The metal flecked the edge of the wooden sword and light pooled in its head. The wooden shield was only wood.

Was the light essence so it could see?

Before he could ask, it charged.

Tibs raised his sword, reaching for his metal essence and—

Where was it all?

He cursed as he stepped aside the strike. He slashed, but was too far for his sword to connect. He stepped back, hand on his wrist and touching skin.

He looked at the Woodling, turning to face him, with worry. He didn't have enough essence in his small reserve to control his sword, and channeling it would alert Firmen.

He shook the worry away. He couldn't use essence regardless of how little he had. That was why Firmen had gotten him to leave his bracers behind. He was supposed to do this as an Omega Runner.

He smiled. He'd left Omega behind years ago. Even the guild hadn't been able to lower him back to that. And even without using essence, he had the things he'd learned to fall back on.

This was a first floor.

Tibs could do this.

He sprang forward, and it parried his attack, but he slid his along it, slashing up just before stepping back, but the tip of the sword missed its head. He'd forgotten to account for it being shortened.

He stepped around it, and instead of doing the same, it stood in place. Tibs didn't think it gave him an advantage, but still tested it. It blocked with its shield, then slashed and moved to follow him as he stepped back, as if he had attacked it from the front, with only the back of the helm telling him it hadn't turned.

He parried and dodge, cursed when he wasn't fast enough and the sword cut a thin line through his armor. But he had his sword through its side as he slammed his elbow into its back and put distance between them.

Water leaked from the hole Tibs put into it. It wasn't much, but he could sense the reduction of the water essence within the Woodling.

Tibs looked at the cut in his armor. The red line in his skin was thin and barely bled.

"You have it bleed?"

"So do you." There was no mocking in the statement.

"But why? It isn't alive the way I am. It doesn't need blood, or that water to move." Although, Tibs had to admit that for a first floor creature, it moved with a fluidity Sto hadn't managed until later floors.

"I don't understand. It is how I decided to make the Woodlings."

The cut burned, but there were no unwanted essences there. It would be fine until he was done with the run and healed it.

Tibs straightened. "How many tries did it take until you got this one?"

"Many."

The first villager had disappeared over a decade ago. That could be when Firmen had the idea.

He attacked, getting in closer this time, dropping under the attack and cutting the

Woodling's stomach. He stumbled as he put a knee down and didn't find water to ice the floor, but rolled to his feet and backed away before the expected kick didn't come.

The Woodling attacked with broad slashes, forcing Tibs to step back until he was too close to a thicket for his liking. He eye the Woodling's shield and planned his next attack.

He threw himself to the side and put distance between them. When he ran at his opponent, it was with his sword high. The Woodling raise its sword to catch it, and Tibs cursed silently. A quick shift of his grip and the weapons didn't make contact. He turned, slashing deep into the Woodling's side and stepped away, facing it again.

More of its 'blood' flowed and Tibs thought it wasn't as fast. Had Firmen gone as far as to make how they fought dependent on how injured they were? That wouldn't help the creatures win fights.

Tibs ran at the Woodling again, sword high, hoping it could adapt, but ready to take advantage if it didn't. It raised its shield, and Tibs smiled. He stepped aside, twisting to avoid the Woodling's sword. When Tibs slashed, he put all his strength behind it and targeted the bubble of air at the joint between the Woodling's arm and hand holding the shield.

He cut through with more ease than expected. He caught the falling shield before jumping back.

His attempt to remove the hand revealed that it wasn't holding the shield, or even was a hand. The shield grew out of the ball of wood that had been connected to the arm. He grabbed its edge and when the Woodling came at him; he used it to bash the sword away and cut its head off.

He stepped back, getting a better grip on the shield's edge for his next attack, but the creature fell to a knee, then the side and moss started growing on it.

"That killed it?"

"Why are you surprised?"

"It still had plenty of life essence. Nearly all of it."

"It doesn't matter how much life essence you have. If you lose your head, you die."

"Sto never bothered making them do that. We had to cut and break them until there wasn't enough life essence to hold them together."

"I'm not Sto," Firmen said with an edge of annoyance.

"Sorry. I was just surprised. You're only the second dungeons I've met where I saw their creations, and last time I was focused on getting to Joman instead of observing how you made them."

"It has a name?"

"All people do." He studied the ball at the back of the shield. It was larger than his arm, but there was only one. He'd have...

"Firmen, can I get your permission to use essence to change the back of the shield? I'd like to be able to use it, and that means I have to make alterations."

"It isn't for you."

"I know, but so long as I don't drop it and step away, it's going to remain." He looked where the Woodling had been. "And you didn't leave loot behind, so this could be in its place."

"Leave loot behind?"

“When we killed Sto’s creatures, they left something behind. And the way Ganny talked about it, I got the sense it’s something all dungeons do, not just Sto.”

“I see. In that case, very well.”

Tibs steadied his breathing. He didn’t have to channel Wood for this. The essence was right there. All he needed was to...

“Oh, this is going to be etching, that means I’m going to—”

“Have to maintain it. I do know how etching works.”

“So, how do we do this?”

Something clattered to the floor behind Tibs. “Use that one.”

The shield was the same as the one in his hand, except that where the ball of wood was, it was a thick loop of leather. It was wide enough the shield remained in place. Tibs would have preferred a different arrangement, and a second loop to go over his forearm, but this was a reasonable compromise.

He dropped the Woodling’s shield and moved on.