

Tibs studied the assembled animals and classed them for how dangerous their attacks were. The raccoons had the longest claws. The rats the sharpest teeth. The rabbits fell between the two, but had the ability to leap over the attackers who distracted him.

He ran in; he wasn't letting them take control of the fight this time. He jumped over the raccoons who had taken the lead, slashing at their back and bring up his shield for the rabbit to collide against. On landing he turned, slashing low to the ground and cut a bunch of the rats that had been slower, as well as a raccoon and a couple of rabbits.

Then he moved. Attacking one flank as they turned to adjust to his new position. Claws sunk in his exposed leg. Then the raccoon had a sword through its back. Tibs kicked a rat and smashed a rabbit aside. He barreled through the animals, getting more cuts but not giving them the time to grab onto him as he cut, kicked, and bashed more of them. When he turned on to face them again, he estimated he'd reduced their numbers by half.

This time, he let them approach. They displayed no more cunning than he'd expect from normal animals; the raccoons skittering around, trying to surround him, while the rats charged blindly. The rabbits held back, waiting for an opening.

Okay, more cunning than animals, but nothing like he knew Firmen was capable of.

He slashed the rats, leaped left or right over the raccoons when they attempted to reach him, only bothering to cut one if the opening didn't jeopardize his ability to block a jumping rabbit.

It was slower than he'd have preferred, and resulted in more cuts and one large bruise from a miscalculation and hurt if he breathed too deeply, but no serious damage, and all the animals dead.

The cache had a simple lock he picked; more from curiosity at what it contained than a sense he could use the bow.

It was unstrung; the string rolled against one end. The wood at the grip was worn from use. There were scratches and scoffs on each side that made Tibs think the previous owner had learned to shoot with it.

"Is this from someone who ventured into you?"

"Yes."

"How long ago?"

"Some time. I don't—"

"Bother keeping track?" Firmen could tell day from night by how the sun affected the trees, but he was a dungeon.

"Yes."

Time wasn't something that mattered a lot to dungeons.

"The same person who had the cloak?"

"No."

So he could bring the comfort of knowing what had happened to two families. If he could bring the bow out. He wasn't planning on leaving now, so he needed a way to carry it. He knew the way how to not carry a bow, but without a pouch of holding, he couldn't think of another one.

Bending the bow so he could string it took more work than he remembered. But then again, he'd have used earth to make himself stronger and only acted like it was difficult when he'd attempted to learn the bow. By using his leg as a fulcrum, he managed to get the

other end of the string looped, but he didn't think he would hold if he tried to shoot with it.

He put an arm through it, and rested the wood at his back, with the string across his chest and close to his face. If Firmen or Merka understood anything of strategic fighting, Tibs was going to regret this, and certainly have to cut the string to keep from being pulled into a dangerous situation.

At least his movements were impeded, which meant the mud room ahead wouldn't be a problem, and neither would the tile room.

He couldn't work out what he sensed of the boss room yet, but the essence was under the floor, so it would be more about agility and straight up fighting.

The fight on the way to the mud-room was two Woodlings, each identical to the one he'd fought before, both in how they look and fought. It gave him hope he was right, since neither tried to grab the bow while they fought.

He ignored the cache in the mud-room. He didn't need a pair of boots.

The way to the tile room tested his nerves, as the expected fight didn't happen. Getting into it was the sliding puzzle again, and he navigated the tiles to the cache, because he couldn't tell what was in it. Uneven sheets meant little to him, so could be anything.

They turned out to be furs. Seven of them, well tanned. He wished he could take them, since it would give him something to show for his time away that wouldn't require him to do the work.

If they were still there as he left. If Merka wasn't so angry at their defeat, they made leaving the dungeon its own run. As soon as he left the room, he was assaulted by animals. The speed with which they formed and leaped out of the trees let them score a few cuts and bites, but then Tibs made quick work of them.

He remained on guard all the way to the last door.

It was the same as the others. Logs attached together with vines within the opening. Only this one had a handle made of twigs wrapped together. He sensed no essence trap or lock, and no physical one either.

He cautiously pulled the door open and looked at an empty room.

This looked more like a room in a building than the others. The floor was made of uneven slabs of wood that fitted too well together for any artisans to have made. The walls were all tree trunks, but so close together Tibs expected they'd be the same tree if he encountered something like this outside, shaped by the weather.

He crouched and sensed what was underneath.

It writhed the way a nest of newly born serpents did and the way life essence stretched over and under multiple times made it feel like larger versions, but he couldn't make anything useful out of the essences he could identify. They were pockets within the whole thing, moving about without a pattern Tibs discerned.

On the other side of the room was a wooden box. It would be the boss chest, even if it looked like nothing more than logs stacked together in a box.

He stepped in, sensing for a pattern in any of the motions under him. He couldn't shake the feeling it wasn't random, but he couldn't discern it. He took another step toward the box and sensed.

He wanted to urge Merka to get on with it. To start the fight.

He took another step.

He thought he sensed it coil and readied himself.

He had to force himself to breathe when nothing happened. To relax his body and—the floor exploded up under him faster than the shift in essence registered. What he saw through the piece of wood as he tumbled to the floor made him think of the snakes he'd envisioned, long and narrow head, sharp teeth.

Essence gathered under him when hit the floor and he threw himself to the side as soon as his foot had purchased. He careened out of control as the floor exploded again, and he planted his sword in to stop himself from sliding to toward the other place essence gathered.

The floor exploded there and a third snake head rose as Tibs got to his feet.

Merka cackled.

Tibs was impressed.

That was bigger than anything Sto managed on his first floor.

They were twice his height, with more of their 'bodies' under the floor, and slightly thinner than he was thick.

A head lunged at him, jaws wide open, and he leaped to the side, only for another head to come down on him. He threw himself under the neck of the other one and swung at the third as he tried to bite him, cutting the tip of the 'nose' off. Unlike the Woodlings, it didn't bleed essence.

It tried again and Tibs stepped aside, turning to ready himself for whatever the pocket of wood essence that was rushing through one of throat would do. That snake opened its maw and Tibs sense the form the essence took, but it was too late to do more than run, his shield up, as the wooden spikes erupted.

Pain exploded and pushed him against the wall. Wood jutted through him just above his hip. He pushed through the pain and cut the excess off.

"I have you now!" Merka yelled, the head coming at him, maw wide open.

Tibs raised his shield, and the maw closed on the top and bottom, a long teeth piercing his shoulder. The head moved back, pulling him away from the wall and wrenching a pained scream from him in the process. He pushed through again as the snake shook its head.

"Let go already."

With a scream, Tibs swung and cut the head off.

He fought the light trying to pull him down, and got to his feet.

"Oh, no you don't," Merka said, and another part of the floor exploded, the three heads lunging at him.

"Stop," Firmen said, and the head froze in place.

"Don't protect it!"

Tibs sensed the wounds. The wood in his side kept most of the essence from leaking out. The hole in his shoulder was minor. The tooth hadn't gone in deep.

"I'm not. You're cheating."

"How can you say that?"

"He cut off a head."

"And I—"

"Three-headed snake, Merka. That is the creature I set for this room. That is what he

needs to defeat.”

“But I just—”

“Snakes don’t regrow their heads, Merka.”

“But he—”

“I will not have either of you cheating,” Firmen snapped. “If you can’t do this correctly, get out and let the snake fight on its own.”

Three-headed, which meant one body. Somewhere under the floor, in that mass of essence, was what he could use to not have to fight each head. Although, considering how easy it had been to cut one off, that might still be easier than finding a way to pierce that deep without essence.

Maybe another time, once he’d done enough runs to justify using essence.

The heads moved away, and the newest broke down when it was over the hole it had made. The floor then reformed and there was no sign Merka had done anything.

“Good,” Firmen said, and a head rushed Tibs.

He was slow getting out of the way, and the pain as he swung broke his focus so his sword didn’t cut all the way through, but Merka screamed angrily as the other head attacked.

Tibs stumbled, and it bit his leg. Tibs screamed as he planted the sword in its head and when it swung to the side, the sword cut through as Tibs flew across the room. And when he managed to get to his feet, his head swam. He’d dropped his shield and hopes Firmen hadn’t absorbed it.

The two heads faced him, but were crooked. Cutting both partially did little to affect their essence, but they weren’t sitting properly on their necks. One opened its maw and a pocket of water rose through a neck. Spikes of ice flew out and Tibs had trouble staying on his feet as they hit his armor and pierced through it. He was tempted to use it to seal his injuries, but that would go against the rules he’d agreed to.

He smiled when the barrage ended.

“What?” Merka said. “How? You cheated!”

“I didn’t use essence,” Tibs said, catching his breath.

“Firmen, it cheated!”

“He did nothing.” The dungeon sounded puzzled.

“But it can’t survive attacks like that. You saw what the wood spikes did.”

“And he did nothing then, either.”

Tibs settled his breathing and readied himself. This would hurt, but he needed to take advantage of the situation.

“I expect he will have an explanation,” Firmen said, as Tibs started running. “You said the rogues were the sneaky ones on teams.”

“It isn’t a rogue,” Merka said with derision as Tibs sliced through the rest of the partially cut neck.

“But he is sneaky.”

Tibs turned and tried to get himself to cut the other head before Merka returned their attention to it.

“It can’t do that! I was talking with you.”

“If you can’t focus on the fight,” Tibs said, his panting heavy. “That’s not my

problem.”

“I’m focusing on you now. And one snake is enough to finish you.”

“Part of one,” Tibs said, smiling.

Merka snorted, rushing him. The maw opened, but the side hit Tibs, instead of the front, and he cut it again before landing on his back. Before he could stand, the snake slammed into him, but the head dangled out of the way and the section of the neck was mushy enough it only cause him pain from his existing injuries without adding to them.

Merka screamed in frustration as the snake turned for another attack, but the head dangled itself out of the way and again Tibs was simply squished against the floor. When the snake attacked again, Tibs swung. The impact wrenched it out of his hand, but the head fell next to him.

Merka screamed.

“Is it okay if I heal myself now?” he asked.

“You aren’t out yet,” Merka replied hatefully.

“Merka is right. The run isn’t done until you exit. You haven’t taken your prize yet either.”

Tibs forced himself to his feet and made it to his sword and shield. He looked at the chest. He could sense that what was in it was substantial, even if he couldn’t work the focus to figure out what it was.

“I’m not taking what’s in the box,” he said. “In exchange, I’d like a favor when I come back in.”

“What favor?” Firmen asked, while Merka screamed for them to stop talking with Tibs.

Tibs couldn’t remember what he’d planned on asking. “I’ll tell you after I’m healed and rested.” Something about it made him feel like he was setting himself up for the bad side of a deal, but he needed to keep the energy he had left to make it out. “Oh, and you might want to look into making shortcuts to the exit for when a team wins. It’s really not fair to make them go through the entire maze a second time to leave.”