

Tibs sensed the essence in the walls change as he ran.

The dungeon had quickly gotten over the surprise of how easily he'd 'defeated' the powerful creature, and was working on ways to kill him directly.

He jumped over the crystal spear that flew out of the wall, then under the next one. He made a metal shield to block those he couldn't avoid as the dungeon sent multiple at him. To the point he stopped and encased himself in metal until it paused.

"Why don't you just let it happen?" he demanded, as Tibs ran again. If it had been a person, he'd have said it sounded out of breath. "I *am* going to drink you up."

Ahead, in the oddly straight corridor, it was doing something to the floor, and under it. It should know what its helper had known. Dungeons gained knowledge from those they absorbed. So why hadn't it made rooms? Added twists, at least? Had it purposely ignored how dungeons functioned, or... had it decided it wasn't worth it, since it had no plans to let anyone past the entrance?

As the section the dungeon had modified came into view, the floor fell away, opening a gap no normal person had a hope of jumping across. Even launching himself up, he wasn't sure he'd make it. He set the etching at the edge of the pit, and the air exploded under his foot, sending him over it. The bottom was filled with crystal spikes.

The dungeon was already changing things. A stone rose in at the end of the pit, blocking where it thought his jump would land him. As he reached the height of it, he made a disk of air, and kicked off it, sending himself to the left of the wall, where the dungeon hadn't—

The wall rose, turning that half of the corridor into a drop to the spikes.

"I knew you'd do something like that," it taunted.

Before Tibs made an etching to redirect himself to what was left of the opening, the dungeon closed it too.

He made a ledge of ice and landed on it.

"You can't do that!"

"You set the lack of rules."

"Well, I'm saying no ice ledge allowed." The stone where the ledge connected shifted, and Tibs let those parts of the ledge move with it. It forced him to adjust his footing, but it barely required thoughts.

"Rogues don't care about rules."

"Stop that!"

Tibs snorted and focused on leaving this part of the corridor.

The wall blocking his way was dungeon made stone. It could be made so it would resist nearly everything. Sto had made his impervious to corruption after Bardik had hurt him by splashing concentrated essence throughout him in an effort to destroy his core. But they had limits. Those were, in part, dependent on how strong the dungeon was.

While he knew it wasn't what they were, Tibs could only think of dungeon made walls as a form of weaving. But there was something of etching in them as well, and that meant the dungeon needed to remain focused on them.

That Tibs could steal that essence, if he was the stronger of the two.

"What are you doing?"

He channeled stone and pushed strands of that essence into the wall. The dungeon

resisted, pushed its essence tighter, but it remained woven, so, no matter how solid it looked and felt to his touch, there were gaps his strands slipped through.

“Teaching you a lesson.”

He wrapped a strand around one of the dungeon; and made it his.

“What was that?”

He moved his control up that strand while wrapping another one.

He lost count of how many he was working on when the dungeon understood and fought back.

“If you think I’m letting you just steal from me.”

“You shouldn’t have let a rogue in, then.”

The dungeon had strength.

He couldn’t sense its reserve, the way he could with adventurers, but to be about to make as much as they did, he wouldn’t be surprised if it rivaled his nearly bottomless reserve.

What it didn’t have was skill.

It tightened its will onto its essence, but Tibs was able to maintain his strands within that. Moving against it in sections it focused on wasn’t possible, but it didn’t focus on the entire wall, so Tibs extended his control further, and when it moved its attention, it opened another section, and he slowly progressed into gaining control of the—

“Okay. That is enough.” The essence in the wall became solid in a way that surprised Tibs. “I’m done playing with you.” It had taken hold of all the essence. That was impressive.

Or maybe not. Neither Sto nor Firmen had had to do that against him. Maybe every dungeon could.

Still, he was confident this wasn’t over.

“If you had been willing to let me teach you.” He applied his will and essence against that of the dungeon. “Learning that there’s always someone stronger than you out in the world wouldn’t have been this painful.”

He pushed.

“No.”

The cracks filled as they formed, but not fully.

He pushed harder.

“You can’t do this!”

The wall groaned. The essence bowed away from him. Then reformed with more groaning as the dungeon fought back.

Tibs put his hands on the wall, anchored his feet and pushed.

The stone moved.

“No!”

Pushing physically added nothing, other than making him feel good about the stone shift under his hands.

He pushed.

“Stop it!”

Cracks appeared, and he filled them with his essence, preventing the dungeon from strengthening it.

He pushed.

The crack that appeared from ceiling to below him was accompanied by the dungeon's pained scream. The wall was part of it. It was everything it made within its influence. It felt everything there. And when some of it was damaged...

Tibs screamed as he pushed.

It fucking hurt.

The dungeon screamed.

The wall exploded away from Tibs.

He straightened and dusted his hands off nonchalantly, not giving away how pulling this off had strained him. He stepped over the rubble and walked further into the dungeon.

"I'm going to make you pay for this."

"And I'm going to show you that working with a Runner is always better than working against them."

"You're nothing," it snarled. A stone pillar erupted from the wall and slammed Tibs into the opposite wall.

He put his hands on each side and will on all of it and heaved, shattering it.

"I'm a Runner. I've gone up against a dungeon that was much stronger than you. He pushed me and my friends. Ate some of them. But he was a good dungeon. You don't even compare to him."

The next pillar dissipated before it hit Tibs, and the dungeon screamed in anger.

It kept screaming as Tibs kept walking, and ripping the essence of the pillars it tried to kill him with. If it wasn't so angry, it would remember stone didn't hurt him. Even dungeon made stone. It was also getting tired. Its hold over the etchings that made the pillars was weak. The etching barely held together.

When the pillars stopped coming, he paused, sensing for what the dungeon would do next. Nothing happened, and he proceeded cautiously. The end of the corridor was in sight, and he expected the dungeon to try something before he reached it.

He was a dozen paces from it when the dungeon acted. Twenty paces behind him, the corridor closed off.

"Ah! Now I've got you." The wall was dense with essence, and crystal spikes grew out of it. "You are never getting out of here. I don't have to do anything. There won't be much for me to drink up, but I'll happily watch you wither away. However long that takes."

"Clever." The wall was made in such a way, Arcanus liking strands from various essences, probably all of them, that undoing it wouldn't be as easy as the wall that had blocked his way at the pit.

"See, I don't need to learn from you."

Tibs expected that most people in this situation would spend all their energy escaping this dead-end. "There's only one problem."

"Oh?" the tone was mocking.

He turned away from the new wall and faces the end of the corridor; sensed beyond it at the chamber there. All the essences funneling, and starting, from the cradle at the furthest point.

"There's one room left for me to get into." He stepped to the wall.

"No, there isn't. You reached the end."

The wall was made the same way the others were. It might be so no one would know what was behind it, but Tibs figured the dungeon hadn't considered anyone would make it this far, or be able to tell the other room existed.

"Time for another lesson."

The snort could have sounded dismissive, if not for the hitch in it.

He channeled Purity. "Purity isn't only about healing." He sent the raw essence at the wall, and immediately, it leeches what was there. The colors were the first thing to react to the diminished essence, fading away.

"No, no, no. You can't do that!"

Then, the its physicality changed. Tibs could make out details about the room as the wall faded away. Veins of essence ran along the room's walls to the cradle. Their colors become more distinct as purity removed more of the wall.

He wasn't worried about damaging the inside. Raw purity was only dangerous when concentrated, and it only remained like that through Tibs will. He didn't hold on to anything that made it into the room. So that dissipated harmlessly.

The dungeon tried to reinforce it, but it was too late, and didn't seem to have a lot of essence left with work with. Anything he pushed into the wall was leeches away by purity.

"How? You can't know about this. We're not supposed to tell anyone."

"No one told me." He pushed through the nearly gone wall.

It felt...odd.

It resisted, the way a wall would, but at the same time, he slipped through what made the wall...real.

"You should have hidden your cradle better. If your helper was still here, they could have told you that below is better."

The cradle was beautiful. All those colors, like roots of a tree, and at its center, the crystal like core.

He'd never seen an intact cradle before. Sto's had been destroyed by the Them, and the colors had been draining away. The destroyed dungeon's cradle had barely been noticeable, colorless and lifeless, just like the rest of it.

He stood before it, talking it in.

He wished he didn't have to do this.

"Don't," the dungeon warned as he reached for the core. "You can't survive touching that. There is so much essence in there that you'll cease to be."

"You don't have that much essence left." He closed his fingers around the core.

"Please, don't. I'll do better."

"I don't believe you."

"I didn't know what I was doing when I drank my helper. I had no one to guide me. You can't hold me responsible for doing things I didn't know I shouldn't be doing."

Tibs shook his head. "You know what your helper knew. You chose to do all these things, knowing that isn't how a dungeon acts."

"There's no one anywhere around. What else was I supposed to do? How can I be a dungeon without people? Please, have pity on me."

"No."

Tibs pulled, and the dungeon screamed in pain as the 'roots' that connected it to the

rest of itself ripped away.