

The forest thinned until all that was left was grassland. As Tibs had been told, he could make out the trail by the lower grass, and sense how the wood essence there wasn't as dense. Gently adding wood essence didn't help, until he also added a trace of life essence to the patch of grass. Then it regained its color, and he could make it grow until it matched the surroundings.

It was only once he was done with his test that he realized channeling Life and Wood hadn't caused him to change. Did Life not have a personality? Or had he channeled that element for so long that it was an integral part of him; that it had already changed him? Or was it because it was the essence he channeled automatically when he didn't channel anything so had learned not to let him affect him without noticing?

It was too late to find those answers now. What mattered was that he didn't have to worry about this pair of element.

Two days later, following the path, he sensed something at the edge of his range halfway between zenith and sunrise. Too far to make out details, even with focusing, but he figured that was the dungeon. He continued along the trail, and it bent in its direction for half a day, following the low side of a hill, before bending away.

The creature running at him from the other side of the hill registered as dungeon made must later than Tibs should have allowed, especially knowing the smugglers had been attacked by one, but he'd been focused on the dungeon, trying to get details.

He still had time to ready himself for the attack.

The creature saw him and paused. So, smart enough to understand a shield and sword meant a tougher fight. Tibs didn't think he could scare it into leaving. Even with autonomy, it was still the dungeon's creature. It had something to do, a test to administer.

Unlike how they had described it, instead of being made entirely of stone, the tall wolf-like creature dripped sand as it paces. Mostly at the joints, but there was some around each stony plate it was made of.

To help with its flexibility?

Didn't that mean the dungeon had changed it? Possibly in response to the previous one not returning? If that was the case, didn't it mean the creatures weren't escaping, but being sent out to attack people?

Didn't that go against what a dungeon was for? If they killed outside its influence, it wouldn't absorb their essence and knowledge.

The creature leaped, crossing the too wide distance, and Tibs rolled out of the way, standing and slashing at it. The tip of his sword left a line in the stone plate that sand filled.

A way to heal them?

It swiped, and he blocked the stone paw with his shield, sliding back under the strength. He cut it and they jumped apart.

It had a lot of life essence, and unlike what it looked like, from the sand filling the gash, the creature hadn't leaked essence until that happened. It had lost some; it was how they worked. Each attack he scored cost them some of their life essence, but that one hadn't been enough to register to his sense.

He considered absorbing it. He'd broken his reserve's wall and become able to suffuse himself forcibly over filling it, but it hadn't been as vast as it was now, and he couldn't tell how close to full it was anymore. There always seemed to be space for more

essence now.

And he wanted to see what the creature did. How was it made to fight him? What was the test?

They exchanged blows; it damaging his clothing, and him adding gashes it filled with sand. Then, as he jumped out of the way of its pounce, sand spiraled up from its back into a tendril that slapped him off course and had him land in awkwardly. While the hit hadn't hurt him, he'd felt the strength of the blow.

He smiled.

Adaptability. That was the test. It had lulled him into thinking this was a straight up fight, and changed the rules. Without Earth essence, it would have injured him. Possibly killed him. Did it have more changes in store for him?

He went on the offensive, relying on his immunity to earth attacks to score hits after hits and he sense its life essence lower slightly.

He landed on his back two dozen paces away and glared at it as it closed its maw.

He had wondered if it was going to change things. An air attack was definitely a change. Was it smirking? It scratched at the ground, as if inviting him to attack.

He obliged, running at it, then throwing himself to the side as it opened its maw and he felt the etching formed at the back of its throat. He made an etching of his own and sent a metal spike at it before hitting the ground and rolling to a crouch, shield at the ready to block a jet.

Instead, it looked at the spike in its side, then glared at him.

"What? We can both change the rules of this fight."

As if it understood him, sand spiraled up from its back and pulled the spike, angrily throwing it at the ground where it went in almost completely.

"Come on. You don't see me getting angry because you slapped me aside once, then blasted me on my back. I adapted. Can you do the same?"

It pounced, and he cut it, dodging the sand tendril.

It landed as he turned to ready himself for its next attack, but instead of landing, and turning, it leaped at him again without doing that. Its rear claws cutting his clothing as he fell back.

He rolled again and stood. "I guess you can. Let's see how agile you are." He sent four small spikes at it at a time, the first volley hit him, it dodged two of the second, only one of the third, it dodged two and slapped one out of the way with a tendril after that, then two, then had three tendril slapping them all without it having to move.

That expression was definitely smugness.

"You learn. That's good." He rushed it, and it jumped out of his way, and he had to parry and block tendrils. He sensed the etching form, and since he was too busy dealing with the tendrils, he disrupted the essence as soon as it left its maw.

Its surprise let him score on hit, then he was flying from the tendril's impact. He hurried to his feet, but the creature was looking at the ground, the etching forming.

The blast sent earth and grass flying, and when it looked at him, Tibs was sure he was malicious cunning in those stony eyes.

Six tendrils formed as it ran at him, maw open, etching forming. Tibs formed the air etching under his feet and launched himself over it as the blast left. It turned its head to

following him, and the jet of air caught his side and sent him careening.

He spit grass out as he stood. Had it always been a jet, and he hadn't paid attention, or was this another change? Tibs etched the old 'x' attack with water and it jumped out of the way. It tilted its head when it looked from the soggy hole in the ground to him.

"Aren't I full of surprises, too?"

It blasted him from where it stood, and he easily avoided that. Definitely blasts. Which meant more than one type of air attack. With its ability to make multiple sand tendrils and stone toughness, it was made to take on groups of people. Without his immunity to those elements, Tibs wouldn't have lasted long.

They exchanged more blows, mixing in direct attacks with use of essence. Tibs scored his biggest blow when he iced the ground where it landed, and it then reminded him it too could change things when a tendril split into two and knocked him off his feet.

They circled each other.

From his sense, he'd cost it half its life essence, while all it had done, could do, was ruin his clothing until he needed to make more. As fun as this was, he figured he should end the fight and go investigate the dungeon.

As if it had a similar thought, it moved low to the ground, and its ass moved back and forth in away that fit felines more than a wolf, then ran at him. Tibs sent metal spikes, which it dodged and batted out of the way with tendrils. He kept his shield ready to take the blast of air while planning the strike that would pin it to the ground.

He struck when it was close enough, but it darted aside, and before Tibs could adjust, he was on his back, tendrils wrapped around his feet as it kept running. He reformed his sword, and was about to slash the tendrils to see if he could cut them, when he realized the creature ran toward the dungeon.

They's said that the creature which had attacked them had tried to drag one of them away.

Was this why? To take them to the dungeon so it could...

What? Absorb them after the creature killed them?

Wasn't that cheating? Or did it think fighting the creature was enough of a test and it deserved the reward?

Tibs didn't know all the rules of how dungeons were, but he thought the one about testing them within their influence was pretty big.

He dissolved the sword. He could ask the dungeon once the creature took him to it.

The ground changed as the creature ran within the dungeon's influence.

"Ohhh," someone said. "What do you have for me?"

The ground turned unnaturally dry. The lush grass ended at an unseen line, then it looked like how the ground looked after a year long drought.

"This one's juicy. And with a lot of it. Tasty."

The hill that became visible had a gash in it. Tibs had the sense the ground had been forced up, then cracked open. It lacked the naturalness of Sto's crack when Tibs had first gone in. This was too regular.

"I think I need a bigger cracking committee."

And this was his destination. He pulled the life essence out of the creature and it crumbled.

“What was that?”

Tibs dusted himself as he stood. “That was me.”

“Of course that was you. Who else is around. I didn’t as who did it. I asked what— wait a minute. You can talk?”

“We can all talk.”

“No one did before. Screamed a lot, never talked. I guess you are going to be worth a lot more. I can’t wait to taste you. Just come inside. I’m all ready for you.”

Tibs entered the dungeon, and the path angled down.

“So, what was that? Never had one just drink one of my gatherer before. Or be so full.”

Tibs reached the end of the daylight and stopped.

“Why are you stopping?”

Further along the rough corridor, well beyond the light, creatures waited. Wolves-like, deer-like, bear-like, even some rabbit-like. Stone, metal, crystal, wood. Most a combination of elements. Enough of them, Tibs didn’t know if he could win this fight. Only crystal and wood could hurt him, but the others would still be a distraction. Would the creature have dragged him to them?

Even if it didn’t. Once in the darkness, anyone else wouldn’t know the danger waiting for them.

“What kind of test is this?”

“Test?”

“Yes. Test. You’re a dungeon. You test us.”

“I *am* a dungeon. But I drink you up. Now go and get cracked open so I can taste you. I can’t wait.”

“No, you get to absorb those who fail your tests. Didn’t your helper explain things to you? Where are they?”

“My what?” It sounded impatient.

“Your helper. Every new dungeon receives one. They’re the ones who told you how things work. I don’t know exactly how it happens, but I’m pretty sure Sto said Ganny was there not long after he started thinking.”

The silence felt pensive.

“Is that what that was?” the dungeon laughed.

“What happened?”

“I drank them up. Cracked them open, and it was tasty. Had a whole of stuff to think about after that, and now that you’ve said what they would have done, some if it makes sense, but I’m glad they’re gone. Having something telling me what I can and can’t do would have been so tiresome.”

“You...killed them?”

“Is that the same as drinking you up?”

He had no idea what to think.

Even at his angriest at her, Sto had cared for Ganny. They were friends. If they were people the way he was, he’d be tempted to say they were special to each other. The purity dungeon and her helper had been good friends. He remembered that sense from his encounter with them. Firmen and Merka had also been friends, although there had been a

sense of it being more recent, less secure.

“Why?”

“Because it was there?”

“But they were going to help you with being a dungeon.”

“I don’t need help with that. I’m quite good at getting things in and drinking them up. So, let’s get on with it.”

“That isn’t what you’re here for!”

“Look. I don’t know what you think you are. I’m the dungeon, you’re my food. So, get to it. This isn’t as amusing as you seem to think it is.”

“You are supposed to test us! Help us get stronger. Those who fail, you absorb.”

“Fine. Your test is just further down the hall. Good luck with it.” The dungeon snickered.

“I can see all the creatures waiting there. That’s not a test. It’s a massacre.”

“It’s the cracking committee. Go get cracked.”

“This is the first floor. That’s too many. No one on this floor would even have essence. This is supposed to be able toughening us up. Giving us a sense of what’s coming deeper into you.”

“I don’t know what your problem is. What’s there is the same as what would be further in if I decided to stretch this needlessly. I’m drinking you up. That’s all there is to it. Now. Get to it, or I’m going to have them come to you.”

“You aren’t going to see reason, are you?”

“You’re the one who isn’t acting like he should.”

Too many to outright win. But he couldn’t just leave and let it continue. He was sure that eventually the Them would learn about this and deal with it, but how many people would die before then?

“Tell me you are willing to work with me in being a good dungeon. I’m not as good as a helper, but I know a lot. I can—”

“The only thing I want from you is for you to be cracked open. Stop wasting time.”

Tibs nodded. “Bring them on, then. I’m going to teach you what happens to dungeons who break the rules.”