

Tibs wasn't sure how long he'd walked when he sensed the oddity at the edge of his range. He had expected to sense someone, their essence faint from being near death, or a group of animal feasting on the body, but the one such group he'd encountered, wolves, had been eating a deer.

And now this.

It wasn't an animal or a dungeon creature. What he sensed stretched before him as he advanced. The essence was structured in an unnatural way. Organized the way buildings made by magic were.

Was that what caused people not to return? Some old sorcerer's home with its enchantment breaking down and... what? Tibs had never found such structure before. All he had to go by were bards singing stories about them, and he knew better than to trust those.

Still, he could envision a sorcerer setting traps to keep intruders from disturbing them. Them breaking down over the centuries after the sorcerer had passed in a way that let someone in but not out. With being lost in the forest, any building would seem like a safe place.

Still, something about what he sensed made his conclusion feel off. It was stretching well past the end of his range; ahead of him and to the side as he got closer. And what he sensed wasn't stretches of wall broken by door, or archways, or even windows. Narrowing his range to gain detail, they felt like oddly shaped columns stretching quite high, at what felt like random intervals. Some were clustered, close enough it would be impossible to pass between them, others widely spaced.

"Well, well, well."

Tibs froze as the voice came from nowhere precise. He was a few hundred paces from where the odd structures started.

"Merka," it called, "we already have another one." The amusement was clear in the tone. Tibs couldn't decide if the voice sounded like that of a man or a woman and he started walking again. It reminded him of the people like Zacharia who came across as both.

Not that it mattered, this wasn't a person's voice. Not the way Tibs was a person. This was a dungeon.

"Really?" Merka answered, sounding like an older version of the other voice. Was Merka the dungeon and the other their helper? "Wait, that one's different."

"I know." Tibs was sure he heard a smirk in the words. "What do you think it means?"

"I don't know. I've never been told of someone who has more than one element."

"But he has them. So he's going to be more fun, right? None of the others really did anything. Well, they cried and screamed, then they ended. I hope this one lasts longer."

Tibs thought he could make out an archway made of two thick trees with the branches crossing. See what he sensed, he realized the columns were the trees. The dungeon had formed a forest about itself to... blend in? He sensed as far as he could, but there were no mountains, or cliff face it could be stretching out of.

Could it be under the ground? Sto has stretched below the ground under his mountain, so maybe that was mountain-like enough a dungeon to exist there? But sensing down didn't show him anything like what the trees felt like, or what the other dungeon walls he'd sensed felt like.

He smiled. Whatever it meant, he had a dungeon before him and no guild to keep him

out.

“Hi. I’m Tibs. What’s your name?”

Silence.

“I heard you talk already, and I know you can hear me. I’d like to—”

The essence hit him faster than he could react. Raw, thick, and accompanied by gibberish that sounded terrified.

“I’m not—”

Pain exploded as a tree grew to impale him, then another was through his shoulder, pinning him to something that hadn’t been there.

“Stop—”

A branch burst from the tree in his chest, its leaves covering his mouth as it grew into it, into his throat, stretching and piecing it. He wanted to scream, to draw in breath, but there was nowhere for the air to pass. His chest was held in place as things grew into it.

He trashed as realization sunk in. Tried to do something, anything to get away. He didn’t want it to happen. He hadn’t done what he set to do.

He tried to scream what he wasn’t ready to—

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He coughed, falling to all fours, and it felt like he was hacking out his insides.

“There, there,” a woman said. Or maybe a girl. A hand rubbed his back. “It’s okay. You’re here now. You do seem to find interesting way to come to us.”

“Where?” he stopped as the expected rawness of his throat didn’t manifest. He looked at his chest. He was fine. His armor was fine. He wasn’t in pain, or dying. He shuddered at the memory of trying to draw breath and nothing happening.

How could he be alive?

“Became you came to me,” she said, and Tibs forced himself to look up, away from his uninjured body. She smiled at him, lips of delicate bark, in a face of rougher wood, but lined in a way that Tibs thought men who liked their women younger would find attractive. Her eyes were the green of fresh summer grass, her hair fronds of willow with flowers of all colors growing through them.

She stood, and her body was made of different shades of wood, flowers and moss growing in places women didn’t expose in front of other people unless they had plans for them.

“You’re Wood,” he said as the realization hit. He stood and was surprised to be taller than her. Her head only went to his chest.

“Oh, I am so much more,” she said with a light chuckle. “But Wood is what people like you call me.”

“How do you want to be called?” His cheeks burned. He’d just assumed what he’d heard her called was her name.

“Whatever makes it easier for you to understand me.” She motioned to the side, and the leaves that covered the ground rearranged themselves into a table and chairs. “I believe you like sitting when having discussions.”

“I don’t mind standing,” he said, not wanting to impose on her.

She smiled. “But you like sitting.” She motioned to a chair. “You also enjoy doing it with ale, but that isn’t something I can offer, even if some of me goes into it.”

He'd forgotten how they knew everything about him since they took the words out of his mind so they could talk.

"I didn't think I'd have another audience." He sat and a plate formed on the table. "Will you be offering me a steak to go with the conversation?" he asked with a chuckle.

"That is not something for me to offer," she replied.

Tibs frowned, looking around at the trees and flowers, the grass and mounds of moss. He recognized some, but not most. "But you're all this. You're all of nature, right?"

"I am all this." She smiled. "What do you not see here?"

He looked again, at the trees, between them as grass and leaves and flowers and more trees. He was shaking his head, about to tell her he didn't understand her question when it registered.

"There are no animals."

"Those are for another."

Tibs nodded. "Why did it take so long?"

"The right conditions are not always easy to achieve."

"But I tried before. There was this cavern filled with crystals years ago. I tried to have an audience there."

"But you could not reach the needed state."

"I was frustrated enough by the end of it," he replied, swallowing his anger. He'd tried for the easier strong emotions, but even channeling fire he hadn't been able to work up anger to the blinding rage it had once done. Trying to die was no longer easy, and he hadn't had the courage to impale himself on a crystal spire.

She placed her hand on his. "You are here now. That is what matters, is it not?"

"I guess."

"Are you no longer on the path you set upon?"

"No, I still want... I still want to make them pay." There was no point in not being direct, she saw his mind. "I guess that after the crystal cavern, I figured I wouldn't have an audience without a dungeon. And I was right." He frowned. "What's with this one?" she raised an eyebrow made of petals. "There aren't any mountains, how is it here?"

She shrugged. "Dungeons are not of my making."

"Who made them?"

She smiled. "How made you?"

He rolled his eyes. "About the only thing scholars agree on is that we're made of all of you. How that happened? At this point, I've heard more theories than times I've asked about it. Purity made us, her cleric claim. We came from a dungeon, I hear once, I don't remember where. We just happened, we made ourselves."

"These answers apply to dungeons as well, I expect. All I can say is that I did not make you, and I did not make them."

"So being under the ground is like being in a mountain and dungeons can live there?"

"I do not know."

"Right. I guess I'd have to ask Earth." He picked up the tankard of leaves and looked in it, wishing it was filled with Ale. He wanted to down it before moving on. The gesture felt needed. The act of reinforcing himself before setting onto a hard task. He put it down. "I guess I should get on with it."

He sensed around himself and was surprised to find the shadow of the element within her. Withing her breasts.

He sensed again, searching for the other one, the true one, but it was the only one.

It couldn't be that easy.

It never was. Almost never. Corruption had simply handed it to him.

"Are you just...letting me have it?"

"You must take it," she stated.

"But you're not...testing me? Having me solve a puzzle, force me to do something that hurts?"

Her answer was a small smile that made him think he was missing something.

He stood, and she watched him. When he stepped around the table, she turned in her chair to continue facing him. She didn't move further. She didn't present her chest to him the way some of the women who earned their coins by taking people to their bed did. She only watched him with what might be affection, or encouragement. Her expression was difficult to make out with her face made of plants.

He hesitated before touching the space between her breasts, where he sensed the shadow, and took off his glove. He immediately felt silly. The glove was no more real than he or she was. They were only essence in this place. Still, it felt wrong to touch her exposed skin with covered fingers.

It was softer than he expected, warmer. There was something resembling the roughness of unfinished wood, but also something of how his flesh gave under the pressure of his finger, and wouldn't allow it through.

He frowned, reminded himself he wasn't solid here, and tried again. Willed his fingers to be essence that passed through—

Her wooden flesh wouldn't let them pass.

"Are you stopping me from getting it?"

She considered something. "I am not making it impossible for you to reach it."

"So there is a test." He smiled. Tests he could work with. He just had to figure out the rules. He touched her as he moved around, testing the firmness of her flesh, looking for a place where it was different, but when he encountered it, it was only in the way another person's flesh was different, where the bones under it were closer to the surface. He made it before her without finding something of use.

He placed a finger to her chest again and pressed. He pushed harder, figuring the test might be about pushing his determination.

Her breathing hitched with a wince, and Tibs jerked his hand away. "Did this hurt you?"

"Would it not hurt you?" she asked, but without reproach.

"But you're an element. You aren't like me."

She took his hand and placed it between her breasts. "I am of this. Do you not think the trees feel when one of your brings them down? Do you think them only things for you to use and throw away?"

Tibs pulled his hand away, face burning with shame. There had been no accusation in the tone, but it was exactly how he treated the trees. He'd cut one down for wood to warm others by without thoughts about it and the others around it. He'd also assumed that

because the previous element had been one way, she would be the same. But they were all different. So why wouldn't she be more like a person than the others.

Plants weren't like stone or metal or air or darkness. Plants had softness to them.

If He was going to get the shadow from her, he'd have to be precise.

"I'm going to need a tool, something sharp."

She looked at him impassively.

"Everything here is you. Can you make me something like that?"

"All here is me, but you brought what is yours with you."

Tibs frowned and turned his sense inward. His reserve was there, as vast as always, and of his element. With the nearly none existent reserve for his other elements. He wore his bracers, but they had no reserves here. He tried channeling metal, but nothing happened. All he had to work with, was what was already his. His element and his reserves.

It would be enough. He took the metal essence from the reserve, leaving as little in it as needed so it still existed, and formed a delicate blade. He crouched before her and placed the point to her skin. He pressed gently and immediately encountered resistance. As he considered how to proceed, a bead of liquid formed around the point and rolled down her skin. He looked up in horror and saw the strain on her face.

"You bleed?"

Of course she bled. Trees had sap going through them.

He stepped away. "How badly can I hurt you?"

She shrugged.

"As anyone before me done this?"

Another shrug.

He wasn't the first one to take the shadow, Water had told him that. But she hadn't said how far they'd gone. There was no order to the audience, so maybe they hadn't made it to Wood. Maybe she'd never been hurt like this.

He looked at the wetness on tip of his blade, and at her again. She was looking at her wet finger as if she'd never seen what was on it before.

Could he do this to her? Hurt her? Take part of her? Every time before, he'd been up against a challenge and the shadow had been his price.

This was different.

This was wrong.

"What... what if I decide not to take it? Can I just leave?"

"I can return you to where you are."

Which was in the process of dying with trees growing through him.

So he had to take the shadow so he'd be immune to the trees hurting him. But doing that could...

He crouched before her and took her hands in his. "Is there another way? I don't want to hurt you. I'm not important than you."

"It is where it is," she said, her expression sad. "If you want it, you need to take it."

"But it's going to affect you. What do you want?"

She smiled at him. "I want what I am. For everything to grow. To change. To flourish."

"But that isn't worth dying for. I can't kill you to get that."

She shrugged and looked away. “Then I can send you back.”

He didn’t want to die. He had things to do.

For that, he had to live and to get the shadow.

He formed the blade again and placed it to her chest. He looked away as her blood beaded around it again, then forced himself to look at what he was doing, then at her as he noticed the pain.

“Look at me,” he said gently. He wasn’t going to look away from the pain he was inflicting. She smiled at him, then winced as he pushed harder. He wanted to stop, but that meant his death.

And this was a test. She was an element. This couldn’t kill her.

He pushed again, and she moved back under the pressure.

There was a bone there. He remembered feeling it once when he tried to save Sto and couldn’t go through with it. Serba had been the one to save him. She’d had the strength to do what was needed, even if it was going to cost her who she was.

If Tibs faltered here, he was the one who paid.

Was that so bad? Who was he to do this to an element? And what happened if he died? Nothing, really? The world would go on.

The guild would go on.

He gripped the blade tighter.

Mama’s killers would go on.

With a scream he slammed his palm against the hilt and the blade sank in deep. He ignored her pained gasp as he put fingers in the hole and used earth to give himself the strength to break the bone apart and reach in for the shadow.

It melded into him with a touch, a new reserve forming between earth and air. His deep reserve would be bigger now, but he’d long ago lost the sense of how vast it was. And that wasn’t important.

“I have it. I’m done. It’s over. You can undo this.

With a cough, she slumped forward, and he caught her. She felt heavier than she looked.

“No, this isn’t what’s supposed to happen,” he pleaded.

“I didn’t know,” she whispered, her voice cracking with a spasm.

“I’m sorry,” he said, her weight pulling him to the ground with her. “I didn’t want this.”

“I know.” Her smile faltered. “I know that you...” her words trailed off as her head slumped.

He moved away, horrified at what he’d done. He tried to make an etching of purity, but he didn’t have enough essence, and her body was already crumbling away and being absorbed by the ground.

“I’m proud of you.”

Tibs jerked and turned at the touch on his shoulder, blade up, ready to—

She stood before him, smiling.

He looked at the little left of her being absorbed and back to her standing, unharmed.

Then, the obvious registered.

“I really hate,” he grumbled, “how I’m always forgetting none of you are real.” He’d

even told himself she was the element, she couldn't die.

Only he hadn't believed it. She'd fooled him.

"What was the point?" he yelled, motioning to where her body had been.

He resisted the urge to step away when she approached.

"Everything starts. Everything grows. Everything ends. It is the way of everything what exists out there."

"I know that, I lost too much already not to know that."

She shook her head, her smile sad. "You don't. But that's also the way of the people who exist out there. You are a child of them."

Tibs snorted. "I haven't been a child in a long time."

"Yes, that is true. But you are still a child to us. You all are."

"Fine." He no longer felt like indulging her. "What happens now?"

"Now you go back," she said, placing a hand on his chest. "But with a boon."

"What do you mean?"

"It wouldn't do for you to end as you leave here."

"But I have your essence now. Wood can't hurt me anymore?"

"You broke a rule coming here as you did, and even I am bound by them. But I too am not beyond pushing against them if I feel so inclined." She smiled. "And with you, I am."

"But—"

She shoved him back.