

The first creature to reach Tibs was a metal, earth and wood feline looking one that outpaced the others. The claws were metal, as was the fur, over stone, but it had wooden horns. His shield took the horn, but the force pushed him back. He tried to pull earth essence from the ground to stop himself, but that was the dungeon's essence and it wasn't letting him take control.

By the time he shoved it to the side, he was fully into the daylight. A stone and crystal rabbit flew at him, and he cut it. The feline sliced his clothing, and he bashed it with his shield. A stone wolf sent him to the ground, jaw closing on his shoulder. An etching of corruption added to his sword's edge, removed its head, and he hurried to his feet. The impact of a wooden limb sent him into the wall and he applied a purity etching to the broken bones.

A fire blast gave it something else to worry about, but a bear was already on him, claws into him. He detonated the air etching between them. It and the other creature that had gotten close were sent flying back.

"How come they didn't crack you open?"

Tibs eyed the creatures as he got to his feet. "Send them away, and we can talk. There is a lot you don't know. I can help you."

"You'll be all the help I need once I've drank you up."

The wolf, fox, and tree creature and approached were made of wood. Fortunately, the others stayed away.

"We don't have to fight." He blocked the wolf, and the fox nipped his leg and darted away from his slash, letting the tree swing. He dodged that, but the wolf sank its teeth into his sword arm. He gritted his teeth and formed the fire etching through the pain, and more exploded from the slash at his back, breaking his focus.

With a growl, he channeled fire and unleashed a torrent, burning his three attackers to ash, and then absorbed the essence.

"That's not fair."

Tibs snorted, forming purity etching while watching the other creatures. The dungeon was replacing those he'd killed with version made mostly of stone, but with wooden claws and teeth. The wooden deer changed as he watched, turning into earth, except for its antlers.

"You set the rules. I'm playing by them. I can do worse." He looked at the ceiling. "Just stop, so we can talk."

"No."

They all charged, and Tibs waited until they had nearly reached him to leap with the aid of air. He landed behind them and cut limbs off a few of them before they could turn and attack. Most of those before him were /made of elements he was immune to, and he made sure to keep those crystal horns from touching him. The dungeon didn't seem to have the creativity to try something he hadn't seen working.

The impact into his back hurt and sent him into the mass of creatures. They clawed, bit, and stomped on him. The hooves and paws were mostly not wood, but a set of claws was crystal. He extended his shield so he could pull his limbs under it and focus. The bashing, as well as the occasional clawed paw that reached him, made it difficult, but he formed the air detonation etching, then fed it fire.

It hurt, but it got them off him. He channeled Fever and purity, feeding the first to the etching made of the second and gritted his teeth at the unexpected pain that accompanied the healing.

“Okay. This is starting to get annoying. Why can’t you just be cracked already.”

The creatures were nowhere as injured as he’d wished them to be. The stone and metal ones barely showed damage. Crystal and broken off, but only wood and flesh had been affected to a point those creatures wouldn’t fight well.

“Because this isn’t supposed to be easy for you, either. Runs are so the Runner and the dungeon improve. You test us, and as we overcome them, you learn to be better, smarter. Just—”

“Don’t you ever stop?”

“I can help you. If you do things the way they’re supposed to be done, you can get strong enough to have multiple floors. To have a city with Runners coming in daily.” He wasn’t hopeful, but it gave him time to heal.

“Things like you coming in all the time?”

“Yes.” He’d deal with explaining about people later.

“Coming in, breaking my creatures, and what? Leaving instead of me drinking them up?”

“You get to absorb those who fail the tests.”

“I don’t want some of them.”

The creatures rushed him as one.

Blasts of fever fed fire etchings dealt with the flesh creatures. Fire blasts removed the wooden ones and removed any part of the others made of that element, leaving only crystal as the threat, and it didn’t seem like the dungeon had noticed he was vulnerable to that.

Small detonation etchings fed with fire kept them from crowding him, although he suffered too when he had to use them close.

And slowly, he was thinning the attackers.

Maybe the dungeon had used up its reserve. More likely, it was planning something. Remaining alert for a surprise was easier as the attacks became less frequent.

Then he was the only one left. Panting and hoping the dungeon had enough.

“You must think you’re so great.”

That didn’t bode well.

So many etchings he needed to work out. He should be able to use fever to revitalize himself. Maybe in conjunction with Purity, since suffusing himself with that had taken away his fatigue, along with his injuries. Go through each pair of elements he hadn’t had the time yet. Then find which of his attacks worked with an added element.

“Nothing to say? No, if I listen to you, you’re going to help me and all that?”

“You’ve made it clear you don’t want to listen.”

“I don’t have to. I’ll know what you do once you’re cracked open and—”

“If.”

“If what?”

“If you crack me open. You already sent a lot of your creatures, and I’m still uncracked.”

“But you’re injured. You might be healing yourself, but you can be cracked. And I have just the thing for that.”

The form that pushed out of the wall further down the corridor was twice his height. Tree-like and lanky appearances meant little with dungeon creatures. Sto and Firmen had shown that. It was made mostly of crystal, without any smooth surfaces. It was all edges and spikes.

It reminded Tibs of his ice swords, back before he’d fully controlled what they looked like. There was a lot of anger manifested in that creature.

Tibs smiled.

Anger meant sloppiness.

He waited for it, both to study its essence and get an idea of what to expect and to give himself more time to heal. He missed the near instant healing of suffusing himself.

It was still a dozen paces away when it attacked, extending an arm like a thrown spear. He blocked it and the crystal shattered over his shield, then grew over the edges, reaching for him. He threw himself back, leaving it behind, and had another formed to block the next attack, leaving that behind, when those crystal reached for him.

He was up, another shield ready, but the creature wasn’t attacking.

“How did you get here without me noticing?”

Tibs kept himself from reacting to the ploy, but then realized he sensed someone in the dungeon’s entrance.

“Is that yours?”

A glance over his shoulder showed him a young woman with copper hair, in leathers, holding a sword and smiling. There was metal between the layers of leather.

She raised her sword, pointing it at him. “Fleet Fingers, Nimble Runner, and all the other names you’ve gone by, are wanted by so many cities I will finally get the respect I deserve.”

“You know what? I don’t care.”

The etching formed, and Tibs didn’t have time to think. He made one of his own next to it because any closer and the green stone she wore would disrupt the detonation. The two etchings activated nearly at the same time, and the young woman was sent flying out so fast Tibs worried for her landing, but that might not be what caused her the most damage.

The dungeon’s etching expanded in all directions, and the walls cracked from it.

“Ouch, ouch, ouch. Didn’t plan this well at out, ouch.”

Tibs raised his shield, and it shattered from the force that hit it, sending him flying into the stone wall.

He forced himself to his feet, gritting his teeth through the pain of the speed healing of all the broken bones that etching had given him. He had to hope his etching had caught her first, pushed her away enough that it hadn’t hit her as hard.

But it didn’t matter, it was the intent that did.

“You tried to kill her.”

“Yeah, well, I wanted to drink her up, too. But she was sent outside of my reach. There probably won’t be anything left by the time I have a creature drag her back.”

“She had nothing to do with this!”

“It was here.” The dungeon sounded puzzled. “So what else was I going to do.”

“You aren’t going to see reason, are you? I thought that going through this fight would show you this is better. But you just don’t care.”

“Better than drinking you and it up? I don’t think so.” The crystal creature advanced.

“Fine.” Tibs pulled the life essence out of it. “Then I’m done playing.”