

When the sky paled, Tibs decided he was far enough from the village no one would find him. He didn't want to rely on his sense while he was distracted. There was no telling how he'd handle others until he got a handle on how Wood would influence him.

He channeled the element as he walked and waited.

He tried to tell how his thinking had changed while he sent essence to a tree that wasn't growing well. The wood groaned as its branches stopped drooping and its trunk straightened. The leaves turned a more vibrant green.

Done, he noticed a bush where the green of its essence was marred with corruption. He traced it back to where it originated from as he pulled it out, letting that essence dissipate in the air.

What he found annoyed him. Minuscule creatures were gorging themselves on its roots, sapping the bush's essence and excreting corruption that soaked in its place. He pulled their life essence out and let it dissipate along with the corruption. He sensed around for more and did the same to them before they could cause more damage.

He slowly replenished the bush's essence, then added enough to help it flourish. Harvest season was coming, so it probably needed more. Or did it? Did trees come to fruit during harvest season? He'd never paid attention before. He'd ask the farmers about it, he'd also look at their crops. Those corrupting worms might be in the soil there too.

Once the bush was radiant with essence, Tibs moved on to another, then another, and after that, another tree that wasn't doing as well as those around it.

The diminishing light registered, but didn't bother him. Too many of the trees needed help thriving for him to slow, and he still saw fine. Thirst was simple to deal with; he made water in his mouth and swallowed. Hunger he had to ignore until it became insistent. And even then, he kept working. What was that compared to so many trees that were stunted due to not being tall enough to get as much light as they needed, or those whose roots were bound in stones and couldn't draw what they needed from the ground.

Then there was the injured animal, its life essence fading from the gash in its side. The blood along the rock side told him it had slipped and fallen, one of the jagged stone had cut it, along with breaking two of its legs.

It struggled to get away, hissing at him as he approached, etching purity. The one he placed over the gash came apart; the swipe had cut him deep, but he reformed it, spreading earth on that side of his body so it wouldn't hurt him again.

With it no longer bleeding, Tibs turned to the broken legs. They would need splints, but he didn't have life essence in his bracer. Not that he needed that. All he needed to do was—

Tibs staggered back in shock and the swipe missed his head. He put more distance between him and the large cat that snarled. He applied a purity etching on his cuts, then looked at the animal.

What had he been thinking?

That it needed help. That everything had needed help.

He turned and looked at the path he'd taken. He couldn't see anything different, but he could sense it. The trees he'd help glowed with wood essence.

Would that help them? He couldn't simply fill a person with life essence to help; that caused more damage. Were trees different? Could they deal with the excess? Tibs didn't

think so, but he had no idea if just absorbing it would also cause damage.

What annoyed him was that he had no idea when the element had started affected him. He remembered walking as he channeled it, intent on heading to the dungeon, then...

He'd killed worms without second thought. They were worms, so even now their death didn't bother him, but it was the casual way with which he'd taken their essence and dismissed it. He hadn't even checked if he had a reserve he could empty instead.

What would he have done to the cat? Filled it with life essence? Taken it from other animals?

He'd wanted to help, but he hadn't cared what else he hurt in the process.

His stomach groaned.

How late was it? He couldn't see either Torus or Claria, so the night was early or late. He should go back to the village, but he had no idea where it was.

He chuckled. Until sunrise, he was lost.

He looked at the cat, who'd calmed down. "If I had jerky, would that make you not want to eat me?" Maybe he should get back into that habit. If he had some, he'd have something to eat. "Lucky for you, I don't have to get close to help." He paused. "But I can't." He sat. He shouldn't feel bad about it. It was an animal, not a person. It couldn't understand what Tibs had done. "That etching isn't going to stay if you run off, which is what you're going to do if I make splints to help your legs. Even if you don't. I'd have to stay here until you're healed and..." How long? The gash was closing. The etching was fixing the internal damage. He kept it away from the broken bones. For some reason, the etching didn't fix them right. It fixed them as they were. He had to splint the broken limbs before he could have an etching heal them.

How long after that?

Not that long.

But he'd be chasing it through the forest the entire time.

Some things needed to be done, no matter how painful they were. That had been Wood's lesson. Was that what he needed to do here? Do the hard things and end the animal's suffering? Unless it healed fully, it wouldn't be able to hunt, to flee from its predators. It would suffer for possible a long time, unless Tibs ended their suffering right now.

"To the abyss with their lesson." He stood. "You're not going to like this, and I'm sorry, but I need you to stay in place."

He pulled the earth over the cat and it trashed, clawed at it, trying to get away. He ignored the pain it had to be causing itself as its broken legs bent instead of pushing it. A bone broke through the fur and he hardened the surrounding ground. It screamed and continued trying to move.

When Tibs soften the earth that held a broken leg, it tried to run, its leg moving until Tibs immobilized it in a life essence splint and aligning it so the essence that followed the bones was as close to proper as he could. Then he applied the purity etching, and he did the final alignment. He moved to the other leg, freeing it, putting it in the splint, adjusting what needed to be adjusted, then healing it.

It had stopped screaming by then, panting heavily instead.

Tibs sat away and let the essence work. The sky turned pale sunrise-ward not long

after that and not long after that; the cat was healed. Tibs let the earth holding it fall away, and he bolted away from him as soon as it placed all four feet on the ground.

He followed its essence until he lost it among the background essence of the forest, and considered what he'd do next.

His stomach made the decision for him. He knew where the sun was, so he knew where the village was. It demanded he fill it.

He'd kill something small on the way back to explain where he'd been, and call this hunt a failure.