

With the Them busy fighting the dogs, Tibs managed to focus on the etching within the knife corruption to pull it apart. The Arcanus was...odd. Instead of being within a filigree around the threads of essence, they were...forced in? Not the right term again, but it—the etching came undone, and he slumped to the ground, purity finally able to take the pain away.

He absorbed the essence as he stood, and it was the way it always was. It had to be how the Arcanus had been forced into the thread and into each other that had caused the corruption to hurt him. Yet another thing to figure out when he had time.

With a scream that hurt Tibs's ears, the dogs flew away from the Them. Some stood once they landed, with varying degree of steadiness, some crumbled away, and others remained, unmoving.

Tibs recognized Thumper among those.

"I will—" The Them's threat was buried under Tibs's scream and torrent of fire. They staggered back and Tibs noted, through his anger, that they could be overwhelmed.

They found their footing—not the right word again—and took hold of the essence Tibs was throwing.

Time to change things.

Tibs kept sending fire as he switched to channeling water, the flow of essence pouring out of him changing as its source did, and—

Tibs fought to remain conscious, the pain nearly too much. Around him, buildings were destroyed, and the ground was cracked in its center. He was on the ground in a partially destroyed building. He vaguely remembered being thrown back, hitting something hard as heat nearly more intense than any he'd experienced before slammed into him.

How he'd survived that...explosion, that word felt right for once, was explained by the earth that suffused him.

He had no memory of switching element.

He switched to purity while trying to work out what the Them had done to cause this.

Only, he realized, as his head cleared, they weren't who had caused the explosion. He had.

Something had happened as the fire essence had changed to water.

It had been too fast to make out details, but even now, he sensed essence that he couldn't identify dissipating. Essences that hadn't been there before the explosion.

He was up and running out. What had he done to Serba? If he'd been thrown like that, she wouldn't have—

She groaned, pushing herself to her feet, her dogs helping. She was at the edge of the destruction and he thought she'd been away from the fighting when the explosion had happened. Her essence wasn't leaking out, and where it wasn't as usual, she only had bruises.

He made a weave of purity to—

The roar shook his bones more than his ears, and he suffused himself with earth as he turned in time to face the Them barreling into him.

The impact was nothing like Jackal shoulder checking him, or even grabbing Tibs as he ran. The Them...flowed—why couldn't there be a right word for any of this?—around him, feeling like cushions that caught and lifted him, then hardened and they were both rushing at a wall.

He cursed as he sensed the thickness and suffused himself with air.

The Them did..something—he was giving up on words—to try to hold on to Tibs. The sheets and whatever was inside them moved, as well as how the Arcanus within it were arranged. Then it was moving up while Tibs continued on and through a wall, a luxurious lounge, a dining area, then was out the back.

He looked up at it. Why hadn't it gone through with him? It was essence that it could change. That should have made it easy.

He righted himself and flew to the roof. The Them floated high above him, watching.

It could rip his attacks out of his control with ease and change them so they hurt him. He doubt corruption was the only one it could do that with, since it had been in the process of taking control of his fire. He could stagger it, at a high cost to his reserve, which meant he couldn't depend on that.

But they hadn't been willing to hit the wall.

Was the dungeon made stone the reason? No, it couldn't be. That building wasn't one Sto had made.

He rubbed his temple. He was supposed to get answers when he asked questions. Not more questions he couldn't do anything with.

What he needed was a way to even out the fight. Even with all his essence, Tibs was barely more than an Omega Runner compared to the Them, so that only left him with his fighting skill. But it could easily deal with that just by using its...

What if it didn't have essence?

What if essence couldn't exist anymore? Wouldn't that mean it couldn't be?

Where was it? He jumped high, looking beyond what he could sense. He didn't know where it was from the city hall, but—there was the library, and they had. That plaza, there.

He let go of air and fell as the Them flew at him. A cushion of air took care of his landing, then he ran.

He saw Serba move to join up and realized the danger. He didn't know how well the Them understood people, but unlike Sto, they had been in Kragle Rock; had seen them outside of trying to survive.

"Stay here!" he yelled at her. If they realized they could use her to control the battle, Tibs would be in trouble.

"But—"

"Stay here! I don't need you slowing me down!"

Her expression darkened, and he used air to leave her behind. He breathed easier when the Them remained on his tail. Now all he needed to do was survive until—

Doors exploded out of their frames as stout, gray-skinned golem people burst through them. Essence came at him before he could take them all in.

He pulled on what he could and replenished his bracers with that. After fighting with the Them for control of his essence, taking it from the golems was easy.

Remaining alert for the Them interfering directly in the fight, he went the easy route. He etched threads of corruption before him, wrapped them in a filigree of Ike and Dhu. Ike to make them solid, Dhu to add sharpness. Then Ool, so it would spread. Again, he wished he knew more of what the Arcanus did because he had the sense this was a case of more being better.

He pushed it forward, and as the etching made contact with the golem people, it cut into them, the dark purple spreading. They didn't stop, or slow—golem people didn't feel pain—but they were crumbling before Tibs reached them. Cutting those who resisted that attack with his sword.

Then it was him and the alley again, and the Them above. He looked to confirm they were still there, as they remained well above where his sense reached through the miasma. He was tempted to ask Ganny to unmake it, but the Them would hear, and if they could control that too, he expected they'd make it so thick he'd be blind.

He sensed the accumulation within the walls ahead of him, and suffused himself with earth. The explosion as he ran between them sent shards of stone so sharp it cut even his stone body.

He stumbled at the pain and quickly suffused himself with purity. He wished he'd had time to sense what it—

He hit the ground from the impact on his back, and the Them was pushing its essences against Tibs's, trying to force it between the dense strand of his life essence.

Tibs made an explosion of raw purity that sent them off him, and he was running again. The walls caught in the blast were translucent, the way a letter scratched off a page remained partially visible until the correct one was written over it.

At least, that had sent them off, but at a cost. His immense reserve was nearing being halved. How much had he had before the fighting started? He hadn't been full, but he had had a lot more. So he could do this? Three more times? Hopefully, he wouldn't have to do it again at all.

A glance over his shoulder as he made out the Them at the edge of his sense, then push harder. Only then sensing the essence ahead of him.

He cursed as he suffused himself with air. Why else would they have entered his sense but to distract him? The explosion happened again, and, while they left no cuts behind, they hurt. He paid attention this time, sensing the wrongness of the mashed Arcanus. Not that he made anything out from that.

How much further?

He launched himself up, glimpsed the plaza, then was rushing down, the Them smashing into him. Their essence again pushing against Tibs's life essence. Only this time, air seemed to make what they did easier.

He switched to earth and dropped out of their grasp.

He hit the ground, bounced, crashed against a building, and was running again. The plaza was further than he'd like, but he'd made progress.

So the Them could affect him no matter which element he channeled. But they couldn't adapt quickly. He had the advantage since switching element was simply a question of willing it for him. So long as they couldn't prepare for more than one element.

What kind of range did they have? Sto could sense anywhere within himself, but had to 'be' in a location, to watch what happened there. He was also not blocked by the mess Ganny had made of the air. But that made sense since he was the dungeon. The Them couldn't be the same, could it?

He decided they couldn't. Otherwise, they'd do more than detonating buildings—buildings Sto hadn't made—and send golems. They'd used the ground against him, the air

too possibly.

The etching ahead of him was complex. He could tell that as soon as it was within his range. With the Them behind Tibs, it meant they could make those etching...too far to be comfortable thinking about.

Options?

With as little as he knew?

The only one he could think of was to suffuse himself with purity and hope that was enough, but was it what it counted on?

Not that he had a choice. He suffused himself. Added a layer of ice, earth, metal, then coated that with corruption, darkness, fire and light because they were in his bracers and he figured throwing everything at the problem had to help more than hinder.

The walls didn't explode as Tibs reached them, but stretched in a way that hurt his mind. It was as if they didn't exist the way everything else did, where the rest did. They weren't walls on each side of the alley, but within it, and Tibs couldn't avoid it.

What made the walls he pushed through as he continued running were those mashed up Arcanus. And it all clung to him, pulled at him, at his essence, pushed against him all at the same time.

And it hurt.

It hurt the way trying to wrap his mind around essence being and not being at the same time had hurt. It hurt the way trying to come up with the right word to describe the elements hurt. But those were hurt that passed, or that he could stop thinking about. This was a hurt that would never end. It would tear him apart until there was nothing left of—

He nearly fell in a stumble once it was gone and he took in a deep, painful breath, as he remembered breathing was something he could do.

He never wanted to experience that again.

Nearly all the essence he'd coated himself in was gone, ripped away or absorbed by that...wrongness. His bracers barely had half their reserves left. Had he lost focus while enduring whatever that had been? Or had the etching been made to rip at them? Were they why he'd survived to make it to the other side? He should refill his bracers, but that meant channeling each of the elements and if the Them could use that to plan his attack...

He'd rather avoid enduring that again than surviving it. So he focussed on pushing his sense ahead of him and changing direction anytime an etching formed. Hopefully, the Them had limits on how long he could do that, the way Runners did. It was hard to get all the essence back from an etching.

He sensed the scream when he shouldered his way through a door instead of continuing into the etching that formed too close for his comfort. Then he suffused himself with air to make it through the back, and he kept going in that direction until the next etching, and again it screamed as he turned back in the direction of the plaza.

The lack of another attempt worried him, and he cursed as, ahead, the alley was made of one large building on each side. No windows, and the one door was far into it. He launched himself into the air instead of risking the perfect place for a trap.

Then it was on him. It's essence grabbing and forcing itself into him.

He switched to earth and fell to its frustrated scream.

He crashed through the roof of a building, bringing it down on himself, and barely

escaped it in time to avoid the etching they dropped on the entire thing.

Like Runners, they also needed time to etch.

He entered the plaza and rushed the central building. Had they been watching when his team deal with this puzzle? Had Quigly found it, and had they watched that? Did they know what this trap was and weren't worried about it?

He'd find out soon enough, one way or another.

The door opened when he collided against it, and he ignored how the inside didn't exist to his sense.

"You cannot hide!"

He slowed, rounding the stack of stone disks in the center of the room. He hadn't considered they through he was trying to avoid fighting it. It did think all people were cowards.

"All you do is ensure I will make ripping you apart painful."

The chest was ornate. Black wood with a finish that made the pale grain shimmer. The metal had been worked, etched and bent, and was incrustated with precious stones and gems. It looked like a treasure chest from a bard's song.

It screamed 'trap' to Tibs, and he understood how Jackal hadn't been able to resist it. He yanked the cover up and turned to run out, then stopped. Where was the wave that had removed all essence?

He had done what Jackal had. The fighter had rushed in, grabbed the cover and—set one of the stone disk moving.

How? What had Jackal done?

He'd rushed in, went around to disk to reach the chest...and bumped them. Tibs slammed his shoulder against the two at that height, and before he needed to move to kicking the lower ones, they ground into motion and he felt the pressure against his essence.

He ran out with the wave, grinning as it hit the Them and the essence was flung off and out in time with the walls rising up to imprison him alone for the duration.

Only they were still there. Or part of them were. What the sheets had obscured.

Tibs stepped back as his nightmare stood before him. Many thin legs and arms all black and malicious. Those orbs peering at him with undisguised hatred.

He hadn't seen a fabrication of his mind when he'd added Darkness to his node of Sight. He'd seen what it truly was. And the sight that haunted his dream since now stood before him.

And to make the situation worse, Serba and her dogs were watching the walls come to a stop at full height, locking her in with Tibs and a pissed off Them.