

Tibs looked over his shoulder as steps sounded.

“Abyss.” He’d forgotten about that part of the trap.

A dozen guards advanced, the opening in the wall closing behind them.

Like things weren’t already bad enough.

He focussed his attention to the Them in time to throw himself out of the way with a surprised yelp. They landed where he’d been, spiked limbs planted in the stone ground.

They were supposed to be weak without their essence!

He rolled to a crouch, willing his ice sword to form and added metal to it, only for the essences to unravel as they left his bracers.

He sighed and willed his knife out from its hiding place and into his—it didn’t appear. Of course it didn’t. He wasn’t wearing his armor, which meant he couldn’t access the hidden place in it. Which meant that not only couldn’t he use his elements, he didn’t have a weapon.

Not how he’d wanted to do this.

The Them towered as they turned to face him. “You are nothing,” it screeched, its voice hollow, as if it needed essence to carry. The question of why he could understand them without essence was replaced with running as it leaped high and landed where he’d been. Again, pointed limbs piercing the ground.

The angry scream made him stumble, bringing back visions of his nightmare. There had been no sounds when he’d used darkness on his node of sight, but his nightmares had provided them, each one more horrible than the previous. Somehow, none matched what the Them let out.

As it threw itself at him again, and he moved faster than it traveled, Tibs wonder why it was using such an inept tactic. It had to realize that as deadly as those limbs were, that only mattered if it could adapt to what Tibs did.

Which it would have, if it had essence.

Was that it? It didn’t know how to fight without essence?

Tibs continued moving, circling the Them, waiting for them to act. When it didn’t, he stopped, and was moving as soon as it was in the air. It landed closer this time, enough that as it lashed out at him, the tip of a limb slashed through his clothes and his flesh. The contact was fleeting, but he still lost life essence to it, absorbed by the limb while it touched him.

Not how he’d wanted it, but the reminder that touch let essence flow was useful; if he could manage it without getting skewered.

He rushed it as it turned to face him and it hesitated, letting Tibs slip close enough to grab a limb that supported it and pull at its life essence.

The surprise at his reserve being instantly full was replaced by pain from the impact. It was so intense he reflexively suffused himself with purity, and only once he could think did he realize he was headed for a wall far too fast. He barely suffused himself with earth in time to hit it, then crashed to the ground.

“Are you okay?” Serba was crouched next to him, the dogs forming a perimeter around them. “What happened to that thing?”

“It lost its essence.” He sat, then motioned around them. “Essence doesn’t work in here.”

“So it’s defenseless?”

Tibs snorted, getting to his feet. “No. It’s still strong and tough.”

“Then what’s the plan?”

The guards were close enough that they’d attack him if he rushed the Them where it stood, ignoring the advance. But would they attack only him? They were spreading out, weapons drawn, some still facing the Them.

“I need to get myself a weapon.” One of the swords would—

“You started without being armed?” she exclaimed.

“I was interrupted in the middle of something,” he snapped. “And I normally make them with essence so—” He pulled the sword out of Serba’s sheath.

“Hey, that’s mine.”

“Stay out of the fight.”

“Don’t fucking tell me to stay here and watch you get killed.”

“I’m not going to die.”

“That thing has those people to help it now!”

“They aren’t people,” Tibs replied, watching them. Now more confident that half of them were readying themselves to attack the Them.

“They look like people, okay? I’m not one of you Runners, who knows all the stuff about this place.”

“And that’s why you have to stay out of the fight. They’re creatures. Even without essence, they’re stronger than you are.” He grinned. “And don’t worry. I’m the one who set the no dying rule. I won’t be the one breaking it.”

He ran for the guards, ignoring her exasperated cries.

Time to confirm theories.

He slipped under the guard’s swing and slashed. The sword barely scratched it. He threw himself between another guard’s legs and came to a stop too fast when the ice didn’t materialize under him. The sword cut him before he rolled out of the way and heat spread from the wound. Something other than fire. He suffused himself with purity as he got to his feet, but it didn’t remove it, only slowed its progress. He applied a weave. He’d deal with that later since it wasn’t actively hurting him.

He suffused himself with earth and kicked the guard between the legs. There was nothing there to cause more pain, but the strength behind the blow sent it into the others.

The Them watched him, still ignoring those at its back. Like it waited for the guards to weaken him. Did it not realize Sto had set the guard to attack anything he hadn’t put within these walls?

It would be best if Tibs didn’t give them time to realize that before it was too late. He ducked under a guard’s swing, then rushed to the left, and the Them skittered to match. He changed direction, as if reacting to what it did, and fought the guards again.

Tibs had the feeling they were smirking in satisfaction.

Which vanished as it screamed from the sword planted in its torso. The guard flew from the Them’s strike, but another took its place, ducking and giving another the opportunity to strike. When the Them turned to focus on them, Tibs ran.

He suffused himself with corruption just before grabbing the leg, then pushed essence in as hard as he could. He held on as it screamed and shook the leg, and when it

bashed him against the guards until the pain made him lose his grip.

He suffused himself with purity, surprised to note that other heat essence was gone, then he blocked a guard's strike, disarming it, taking the sword in his other hand and planting them both into it and shoving them aside so he could run out of the group and away from the Them as they stabbed at dodging guards.

He needed to take in what he had left before he found out if what he'd done worked. His reserve was well below half, and hopefully that much corruption was enough to end the Them; if what he'd planned was possible. He let out a breath, suffused himself with earth essence, and ran through the guards while they were mostly focused on the Them. He used one of them as a step to launch himself up, letting go of the swords and channeling life essence.

The them reacted faster than Tibs expected and the pain was intense as the limb skewered him.

"You are mine!" they screeched gleefully, and slammed the limb down into the ground, pushing Tibs higher on it.

He ignored the pain and fought the desire to suffuse himself with purity. Not how he'd planned for it, but it was physical contact. He could sense the corruption tainting the Them's essence. The way his had been when Bardik had doused him with it.

It pulled at his essence, but Tibs didn't allow it. He wrapped his will around their essence, glared at the Them, and pulled back.

"Leave him alone!" Serba yelled, and dogs jumped on the Them as Tibs senses how the corruption was being left behind. He ignored her; focussed on fighting the Them's will as they attempted to stop it, but just like they didn't know how to fight, they didn't seem to know how to defend themselves against being drained.

There should be a point where there would be too much corruption left behind for it to be able to fight. And then it would.

The impact nearly broke his focus, and Serba's pained scream from it didn't help.

"Yours," The Them hissed. "It is yours." It was realizing what Tibs was doing. It shook the limb violently, but he was too far along it to be easily dislodged, and he was grabbing on, too. Then it was bashing him against the guards again, and he ignored the pain. He didn't have to drain it completely, just enough for there to be more corruption than anything else, and he had space left in his reserve. He wasn't letting go until—

Stars filled his sight, then he bounced on the ground without sense of the Them. He forced his eyes open and watched the Them stumble away, their body a dark purple. It was done. It was just a question of time.

And Tibs not dying at the approaching guard's swords.

He suffused himself with purity and stood. He could do that. There were only three guards left from fighting the Them. He'd defeat the guards while it died. It couldn't pull in life essence since it was away from the remaining guards, and they wouldn't be there for long.

He suffused himself with earth and blocked the strike. He punched its head off and grabbed the sword before it crumbled away, parrying the other's attack and kicked it away so he could—

Serba's scream froze him. The sword burned as he went in—fire—and he cut the

head off, turning. The Them stood over her, looking at him smirk—

The punch staggered him, and he glared at the guard. He didn't have time for this. With a scream, he kicked them and they flew, exploding into rubble when they hit the wall.

He suffused himself with Purity as he ran.

“You will not save it,” the Them said with delight. It had two talons into Serba's chest.

How had he been such an idiot as to forget there was one place the Them could get life essence? He looked at the dead dogs. More than one. Those still alive kept away. “I promised to take all that is yours, and I will start with it. Then you will watch as I end this dungeon, and all the things you—”

Tibs threw himself at it, suffused with earth, as it gleefully threatened the things he cared about again. Fire fueled his anger. Anger at them for the pain they caused. At Tibs, for the part he'd played in bringing them here. He'd pushed and cajoled Sto into breaking rules. He'd been the one to explain how Sto could help the town. He had brought Serba into the dungeon.

He sliced with the guard's sword, its dungeon made metal with earth strength behind it, cutting off one of the Them's limbs as it tried to strike him. Tibs cut another, and it staggered away; away from Serba. Tibs attacked relentlessly, ignoring the hit the Them scored, other than to prevent them from pulling at his essence.

“Sto is my friend,” Tibs snarled. He cut it some more, the corruption filled body offering less resistance than it had before. “Serba is my friend!” More limbs fell off, and its retreat became a fearful crawl. “Kragle Rock is my town!” Piece of its torso fell away under the strikes now. “No one threatens them. Do you hear me?” he glared down into the terror fill orbs that looked up at him, unable to escape anymore. “No one!”

He sliced between them, separating them from each other, and, panting from rage and exhaustion, Tibs stepped back, watching for what the Them would do.

What they did was lie there, unmoving, until he was a dozen steps away. Then they melted into the ground, absorbed by the dungeon the way Sto ate everything that died within his walls.

He dropped the sword as he ran to Serba's side. He pulled the part of the Them's leg that was still in her stomach and threw it away. Blood flooded freely and he tried to make a weave.

“Ganny! Drop the wall!” He had to get her out of the trap. He needed essence if he was going to save her. He'd never taken the time to work out how to make a weave inside a person. Why hadn't he learned how to do that? “Ganny!”

“You're alive,” Serba said, smiling.

“You too.” He took her hand and touched the ring. It was working, adding life to hers, but not fast enough to balance what she was losing to the injuries. Not only the blood she was losing. He sensed fragments of the Them inside her leeching at her essence. Continuing to do what the Them did even if they were dead.

“Gan—”

The rumble of the wall coming down stopped his call. He picked Serba up, forcing himself to ignore her pain. She barely weighed anything with him suffused with earth. The remaining dogs followed at a distance, as if afraid of what he or Serba would do because they hadn't been able to keep her safe.

As soon as he could sense what was around him, he made a weave of purity and applied it to her injuries. Serba looked in wonder as the wounds closed.

“You’re a cleric too?”

“I’m a rogue.” It wasn’t enough. She no longer lost life essence to the wounds, but those fragments were still...were they growing?

He laid her down, and the dogs whined. He senses the seven of them. They were normal dogs. The dungeon made one hadn’t known to be afraid of the Them.

“Get here, you bunch of wonderful cowards,” she weakly called to them, and laid around her, heads on her body.

Tibs made a knife with metal.

“What is that for?” she asked without trace of fear in her voice.

“There’s pieces of the Them in you. I have to take them out before they kill you.” Or regrow the abyss thing.

She chuckled. “Why don’t you just magic them away?”

“I can’t—” could he?

Fire would burn them, purity would erase them. Lightning would blast them away.

“I don’t know how to do that without killing you at the same time.” He raised the blade. “This is the kind of magic I know how to use. The edge is sharp and—”

“Do it.”

He stared at her in surprise.

“I know you’re not going to do anything more than you have to. You’re not doing this to hurt me.”

“You know it’s not why I’m doing it?” He knew it, but from what Jackal said about her. She didn’t trust anyone.

“I haven’t...” she searched his face. “I haven’t trusted my leaders ever. From my father to those I had to work for under him. Even my uncle, or Irdian. They’ve always had their own agenda, and I was just a tool for them to make it happen. I only ever trusted my dogs. I trust you, Tibs. I get it now; why Jackal was willing to lead the team you’re in. You got him to do the one thing he swore no one would ever get him to do. And you got me to trust you. You’re something special.”

If that meant he she’d let him save her life, he wasn’t arguing the point. “This is going to hurt.”

“Tibs?” Ganny said as he touched the tip of the blade to the just healed injury.

He raised it. She sounded scared. “Ganny?”

“Tibs. Sto needs help.”

“Can it—” he swallowed, sensing the pieces of the Them inside Serba. “Can it wait?” her essence still seemed to be thinning.

“I don’t know.” Quiet despair. “I don’t know what to do, Tibs.”

“What’s wrong?” Serba asked.

“Sto, the dungeon. They hurt him before coming after me, and Ganny doesn’t know how to save him. But if I go, you’ll—”

“Can you save him?”

“Yes.” Abyss, he hoped so.

“Then go. He’s more important. I’m just a—”

“No. You’re not just anything. You’re my friend.”

“He’s your friend too, isn’t he? It’s better if he lives.”

Tibs glared at her. He wasn’t letting her die to go save Sto. He wasn’t letting anyone die.

He breathed.

What was the problem here?

She was losing essence to the fragments, and he didn’t have time to take them out. The ring was made to fight an outside drain, not one from inside her. Which meant it couldn’t provide it fast enough, and it couldn’t refill itself.

That one was simple to fix. He refilled that reserve.

But her essence was still thinner than it should and not getting better.

Didn’t that mean her reserve was low? Wasn’t it how it was with people without essence? Their body was the reserve? So all he needed to do was refill that. Only he knew how difficult it was. How easy it was to cause damage instead.

“I don’t know how this is going to feel,” he told her, breathing his fear for Sto aside. He couldn’t rush this.

He made a splint of his essence around her as a container, then he let gossamer threads fall over Serba and through her, for the splint to gather and bath her in. He didn’t push anything; it let her float in it.

He sensed his essence drift into her, into her essence, becoming hers until it was its usual faintness. He wanted to do more, to leave the splint in place, but he needed to be close by to maintain it.

This had to be enough.

“Don’t move,” he said, absorbing the splint. “I’ll be back as fast as I can.”

Then he ran.