

Planning-106

His will slipped within the etching, now that the Them was busy fighting the dogs, and he noticed the odd way the Arcanus was assembled before he forced it apart. Instead of being spaced between and around the essence threads, some seemed to be forced together, as if—the etching came undone and he could breathe and absorb the corruption.

The etching, how the letters were shoved together, was why corruption had hurt him. Yet another thing to figure out, but later.

With a scream from the Them, the dogs flew in all directions. Some getting up on landing with varying degrees of steadiness, some crumbling apart and others remaining, unmoving. Tibs recognized Thumper among those.

“I will—” The Them’s threat was buried by Tibs’s scream and the torrent of fire. They staggered back, and Tibs noted through his anger they could be overwhelmed. Unfortunately, they found their footing and Tibs sense how they were taking hold of some of his essence.

Time to try something new.

He channeled water, continuing to pour the essence as it shifted and—

He had difficulty thinking through the specks of light as he fought not to fall unconscious. Around him the remnant of the wall the explosion had sent him through. Had the Them done something to his essence? How had he survived crashing through that wall?

He was suffused with Earth.

That explained how he survived.

He switched to Purity and his mind cleared as he healed.

It wasn’t the Them. It was Tibs’s essence. As it shifted from Fire to Water, somehow Jir and Ank had formed even if there were no threads for them to be connected to and...the heated water explosion had sent him flying.

He ran out of the building. Serba! If he’d been hit this hard, she wouldn’t survive—

She was pushing herself to her feet with the help of her dogs. Tibs didn’t think she’d moved from where she’d been standing at the mouth of the alley. So that had been far enough for the shock wave to dissipate. Short range explosions had their use, especially if

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Tibs felt the roar, more than heard it, and turned in time to suffice himself with stone as the Them barreled at him. The impact was nothing like Jackal shoulder checking him, or even grabbing him as he ran. It was like the Them’s body was made of pillows that then

hardened around Tibs to hold him as they both flew.

With a curse he suffused himself with Air as he noticed they were heading for another building. One made of square stones stacked on each other. They looked solid and thick and Tibs didn't want to risk that impact even while stone.

The Them tried to hold on to him. Tibs senses their body shift as it struggled to grab him, shifting in shape as well as distribution of essence and—

The thing was made of Arcanus too?

It flew up just before colliding with the wall, and Tibs passed through it into a luxurious lounge, then dining area and then a kitchen, before exiting the building.

Why had it not gone through the building with him? It was all essence, so shouldn't that have been easier for them than it had been for Tibs?

He righted himself and flew to the roof. The Them watched from where it floated, high above him.

It could rip Tibs's attacks out of his control and change them so they'd hurt him. He doubted that was limited to Corruption. He could stagger it, as a cost of a lot of his reserve, so that wasn't something he could depend on, especially since they'd also been able to take his control away, but thus seemed to not want to collide with a wall. Was it that it was stone? Dungeon made stone? Wait, no, this building wasn't one Sto had made.

That left Tibs with little more than still more questions, and this was not the time to test theories. What he needed was a way to even the field. With how powerful the Them was, Tibs might as well be an Omega level Runner without access to essence. All he had left was his fighting skill, which it could easily deal with because it had so much—

What if it didn't have essence?

What if essence couldn't exist? Would it cease to be?

He located his destination before jumping off the side of the building, forming an air cushion to soften his landing.

Now for the first risk. If the Them placed Serba in danger to control the battle, Tibs was in trouble.

"Stay here," he ordered her. "I don't need you getting underfoot." He ignored her protests and ran. When the Them chased him, he breathed easier. Now to make sure they didn't kill him before—Doors exploded ahead of him and guards stepped out of the buildings.

Before he could decide how to deal with them, essence attacks came at him. At least half of them had range. He absorbed the essences he identified to replenish his bracers. After fighting for control with the Them, the hold these golem people had on their essence was rather weak.

He went the easy route, keeping his sense alert for anything the Them might do to interfere. Tibs etched threads of corruption in a wave ahead of him. Added Ike on the edges of the thread for hardness and sharpness, Kha for them to spread on contact and Xy for growth, not that he was sure about that one. He had had little time to find out if it was why the etching he'd watch a wood sorcerer use had spread.

On contact, the etching cut into the guards, the darkening of their body spreading for the contact point. They didn't feel pain the way people did, so they weren't stopped, but they

were already crumbling as Tibs reached them, ending the more resistant ones with his ice sword.

Then it was him and the alleys and the Them above, which he had to glance up to make sure they were still there, since they were outside his range in this soup of essence. He was tempted to ask Ganny to undo that, but if the Them could also control it and make it so thick, Tibs was blind...?

Better to work with what he had.

He sensed the essence accumulation ahead, within the walls of the buildings, with only enough time to suffuse himself with Earth. Then the walls exploded, sending shards of far too sharp stones across the alley and cutting him too easily, as if they had arranged the etching specifically to work against when he was suffused with Earth.

Was that even possible?

He wished he had time to sense the etching as it cut him nearly apart.

He leaned against the wall long enough to suffuse himself with Purity and then he was slammed on the ground, the Them on his back, their essence attempting to push between the strand of Tibs's life essence.

Tibs sent out a blast of Purity all around, and they were sent off. Panting, and his main reserve close to half full, Tibs ran again. The building caught in the blast partially gone, like when Don scratched a mis-written letter on a page. Before adding the correct one that obscured it, there was the hint of what that wrong letter had been.

A glance over his shoulder made Tibs run faster. The Them was catching up to him. Which might have been as a distraction as it caused him to sense the accumulation of essence ahead too late to turn.

He suffused himself with air for the extra speed, but the explosion still happened just as he reached the area. This time, the shards passed through him, hurting, but not leaving physical damage behind. It also let him get a sense of them, and there was that same mashing of Arcanus as with the Corruption knife the Them had thrown.

How far to go?

He launched himself up to see, then was sent back down as the Them collided with him. Their essence tried to push through his life essence again, and this time, it was pulling along some of his air essence as if they made it easier.

Tibs switched to Earth and dropped out of their grasp before they could adjust.

He hit the ground, bounced, then crashed against a building, but was on his feet, running. He'd caught sight of the plaza. Still further than he'd like, but getting closer.

So the Them could affect him no matter what element he channeled, but they needed to know and prepare for it. Rapid switches between them gave him an advantage, so long as they couldn't spread over multiple elements. How far was their range? Sto could sense anywhere within himself, no matter the essence mess Ganny had made of the air, but he was the dungeon. The Them could control some of it, but it couldn't be it the way Sto was, could it?

They couldn't, he decided. Otherwise, they'd be changing the landscape to their advantage instead of detonating buildings... which they hadn't done in a while. Confirmation they could only prepare for one element? Couldn't sense what element he was suffused with

at the distance they were following him at?

Or they were planning something new.

The essence etching ahead was definitely that. And complex. He could tell that the moment he sensed it. The range of where they could make their etchings was somewhere terrifying.

What were his options?

With a lack of knowledge?

His only option to increase his chances of surviving whatever that was Purity. Did it know? Was it part of its plan? Like Tibs had a choice at this point.

He suffused himself with Purity, coated himself with Ice, Earth, Metal, and Corruption, then added Darkness, Fire, and Light because they were in his bracers and he was becoming a believer in throwing more at a problem to increasing his chances of surviving.

This time, the walls did not explode, but stretched. Something happened to the way things worked around them that Tibs couldn't quite understand. It was as if here, how stone, wood, metal and whatever else made walls didn't have to exist the way they usually did. They weren't on each side of the alley, but within it, and as Tibs collided through the etching, it tried to grab him, force him to not be what he was.

There were a lot of those mashed up Letters in there. And some seemed to be more than two of them, the mashing seeming larger and it hurt, and Tibs had no idea what he was supposed to do against it other than keep running and—

He nearly fell in a stumble once it stopped and he could breathe again, knew that breathing was something he could and had to do.

He didn't want to have to go through that again.

When he tried to absorb the essence he'd coated himself with, he realized a lot of it was gone. He'd used half of the reserve in his bracers for each and the most he got back was a quarter of the Darkness.

Had he lost his focus? Or had the etching ripped at them as he ran? Were they why he'd made it through? He should refill his bracers, but that meant channeling those elements in turn and if the Them could sense that?

And he'd rather avoid what he'd gone through than try to survive it again, so he concentrated on sensing as far as he could, and anytime something felt odd, he changed direction. Hopefully, they had limits and any etching they had to absorb came at a loss.

Tibs knew he had the right strategy when he sensed them scream as he ran through a door and a house to get to a different alley. He kept going down the new alley until the next attempt to snare him, when he turned back toward the plaza.

He readies himself when he realized he was in a long alley without windows, and the doors were much thicker than the previous ones. The next intersection was too far. He'd put himself in the perfect place for a trap, and he sensed it coming.

He suffused himself with Air and launched himself over the buildings. As soon as he cleared the roofs, it was on him. Its essence grabbing and forcing itself into him. He switched to Earth, and it screamed in frustration as it tried and failed to hold him.

That confirmed they couldn't adapt quickly.

This crash resulted in the building falling over him, and he barely got out from under that in time to avoid the etching they dropped on the whole thing.

They also needed time to etch.

Tibs entered the plaza and rushed for the building. Had they been watching when his team had dealt with its problem? Had Quigly's team come across it and had they watched? Did they know what the trap was and weren't worried about it?

Tibs was going to find out the answers to the important question the hard way.

He shouldered the door open. Ignoring how he couldn't sense what was inside the building.

"You cannot hide!"

Tibs paused, rounding the central structure. He hadn't considered they might think he was trying to avoid the confrontation.

"All you have done is ensure that I will make ripping you apart painful!"

The chest was ornate. Black wood with a finish that made the pale grain shimmer. The metal work was with something Tibs didn't recognize and incrustated with precious stones and gems. It looked like something out of a bard's story, the treasure chest that contained the quest's items.

It screamed 'trap' to Tibs. And he could understand how Jackal had been unable to resist opening it.

He yanked the lid open and ran out with the wave of essence negation that escaped from the chest.

His grin on leaving the building and seeing the wave hit the Them died as the walls rose around the plaza.

They were still there. The wave had ripped away the sheet like essence that formed their body and left behind something emaciated, but real and solid looking, and angry.

But it wasn't its scream, or the skin crawling insect-like appearance that chased his elation at a partial victory.

Behind it, just inside the plaza, Serba and her dogs watched the walls go up, imprisoning them with Tibs and the Them. Even without the use of essence, this was a fight Tibs knew could be deadly to anyone not Used to running dungeons.