

Tibs dropped to his knees next to the unmoving Jackal. His chest rose and fell, so there was time. He pulled purity for a weave, only for it to cease to be as it left his bracer. With a screamed curse, he put a hand on his friend and pushed purity in, in order to form the weave inside him, but immediately pulled his hand away as the armor faded.

He cursed again, memories of Carina's body fading to nothing under the push of purity from the clerics. At least, he hadn't touched skin.

Touching exposed skin made him sense the fading essence. "We need to get Jackal out of here!" Okay. He could do this. He let go of purity and his reserve returned to the 'white' of his element.

A splint wouldn't help, since all it did was keep the broken essence in place so it could 'replenish' itself and, in the process, heal what was damaged. What he had to do was the replenishing, and not break anything more in the process.

The first push, as gentle as it was, shoved Jackal's essence out of its channel, the red-brown fading faster without its...protection? Stopping kept more essence from escaping, but now he could see he'd also broken the essence there. A splint fixed that. A series of splints fixed the multiple breaks throughout Jackal's body, but they faded the instant he stopped supplying the essence. Which meant that if he removed his hand, they would come undone.

He had the essence in his bracer, so he could channel another one, but in this place, he couldn't will it across the distance to maintain the splints. Which was how he'd grown used to doing it, the few times he had to rely on them. Weaves of purity were much more efficient.

What he needed was for the essence to move into the channels 'by itself'.

He smiled as he remembered explaining to Carina how he went about speeding up his reserve, back in his early days. How he imagined the essence resting on a table and tipping it so it would slide into his reserve along the incline.

Essence flowed into Jackal and over the channels, but some made it in without disturbing Jackal's. It wasn't much, but he thought it was more than what was leaking out. Would Jackal wake up once there was enough essence there? Or would the injuries have to be healed before it could happen? And how long could Tibs keep this up before what was left of his reserve was gone?

"Where's my exit?"

"We're working on it!" Mez snapped, from away. "Khumdar! Can't you sense where the openings are hiding?"

"My ability to sense secrets is dependent on essence being allowed to flow. As this is not happening here, I will be of no more help in locating them than looking at the wall will—"

The ground shook, then the grinding of stone. Tibs looked up, ready to curse whatever else Sto was sending their way, to see the walls lowering as essence flooded back.

"The walls are coming down!" Mez yelled, pointing out the obvious.

Tibs Hesitated. Now that he had essence, was it better to take Jackal out for the cleric to heal him? Or should he keep adding his essence to help him regain his strength, even if Tibs was running low on it himself, whatever that might mean, considering how vast his reserve was.

There were risks with anything he tried, but he figured it was to his advantage to stay in the dungeon, with its higher concentration of essence.

He mentally change where he supplied the splints with essence from his reserve to the one in his bracer. Then he stopped ‘pouring’ it into Jackal and sensed for the effect. As far as he could tell, the leaking hadn’t accelerated and with what he’d added, he had more time. He simply didn’t know how much that was.

He started on a large purity weave, then stopped. Those went everywhere, but he had no control over how well any specific injuries got fixed. As far as he could tell, it worked harder at the surface, then got weaker the deeper in, as it had already spent itself on previous injuries. That was usually fine, since when Jackal got broken to the point Tibs needed to do this, it was about piecing him together, and that was usually closer to the surface.

Which made no sense, the bones were in the middle of his arms and legs and—  
He breathed the panic down.

Essence didn’t work the way the world did; or how Tibs often felt it should. Deeper here didn’t mean deeper in the body... not exactly. Just like when Don talked about Tibs sensing deeper within the wall’s essence.

He made a smaller weave and sent that to the largest ‘break’ in the Jackal’s essence.

“Shouldn’t we get him outside?” Mez whispered. Much closer now.

“It is unwise to move someone as injured as he is,” Khumdar said. “The attempt might aggravate the damage to the point where—”

“I’m healing him,” Tibs said, fighting the panic again as he added more small weaves, which seemed to have no effect on the overall loss of essence.

“What—” Don cursed, and Tibs looked up, eyes going wide at the blood, cuts and breaks he sensed in the sorcerer’s essence. He wasn’t losing any, but it looked bad enough it explained why Mez was supporting most of his weight.

“You should see the other guy,” the archer said, grinning. “This idiot here just threw himself at it and clung on like it was his favorite girl comforting him.”

“You were going—” Don’s voice broke, and Tibs didn’t think it was because of the pain. “And Tibs was right. Once I touched it, I was able to push corruption in and—” now that was because of the pain. Don forced a smile. “I hung on.”

“I’ll heal—” Tibs looked at Jackal. Did he have enough to share? “I don’t know—” His throat squeezed shut as his eyes burned.

“Put me down,” Don said.

“Are you sure?” Mez asked.

“I need to help him, and I don’t think it’s going to be fast and—” Don yelled, then glared at the archer. Tibs nearly laughed at the ‘you told me to do this’ look Mez returned to the sorcerer, but it turned into a sob.

“Abyss, I never want to be in this much pain ever again.” Don took a few breaths. “What’s the problem?”

“I don’t know—” Tibs wiped at his eyes. “I don’t know what to heal. I’m putting weaves on the biggest breaks, but I can’t tell if it’s helping. He’s losing essence from everywhere.”

“Each break is causing essence to leak out, correct?” Don’s instructor tone wasn’t as effective, interrupted by wincing and groans as he moved in small ways.

Tibs nodded, adding another weave.

“And the bigger the leak, the more ‘deadly’ the injury?”

“Ye—” Tibs froze as he realized he didn’t know. He always went for the biggest first, but he usually had a weave over all of them well before there were risks. He looked at Jackal, sensing if the essence was vanishing in a way that corresponded to the size of the break, but there were so many of them and they were all blending together and he didn’t know—

“Breathed Tibs.” The harshness of the tone was followed by a pained gasp. “Slow down. You can’t help Jackal if you spiral into panic.” Don caught his breath. “How long do you have to fix him all?”

“I don’t know.” Tibs barely kept from screaming. He forced shuddering breaths. “I don’t know when there isn’t enough left to help. With Radcliff, it was too quick, and I didn’t know how to do it. Sebastian put those green stones on Carina, so I couldn’t help her.”

“Breathe, Tibs. What happens right now if you stop what you’re doing. Can you tell me that?”

He sensed the essence’s concentration. Was it higher than when he’d started? Was the loss slower? Why couldn’t he—he breathed. It was higher than when he’d first arrived at Jackal’s side. What he’d added had done that. The loss? He couldn’t be certain, but... “he’ll be okay for a little bit if I stop now. It’s going to take some time before he loses the essence I was able to give him.”

“Then, if that happens, you can simply give him more and—”

“I’m low on my essence.”

“You’re what?” The disbelief might have been funny if not for Jackal dying, and Don’s pain cutting it off.

“I have limits.” Tibs bit off the words; angry Don thought he could just—he breathed. The sorcerer caught his breath. “How close to reaching it are you?”

Tibs shrugged. “I never paid attention.”

Whatever Don was about to say got bit back, then the sorcerer was panting again. “Okay, that’s for later.”

Tibs sighed.

“You can’t just go on not knowing what—”

“Yes, yes, I have to know it all,” Tibs snapped. “I have to get better at everything. I get it! Is the abyss list ever going to get smaller? Or are you going to add to it all the time?”

Don chuckled, then winced. “But the important thing is you have time. So, you need to use it strategically. It isn’t always the biggest injuries that are the most life threatening. The body is complex. Sometime it’s something small, where it can’t be seen, that ends up causing the most damage.”

“How do you know so abyss much?” Tibs demanded in exasperation.

“I read a lot,” Don replied flatly. “Your advantage is that you can sense the flow of our essence. What you need to do is not just sense what’s flowing away, but if there’s any of it that’s where it shouldn’t be.” Don hesitated. “That needs to be dealt with, too.”

“When the guy who knows more than anyone else hesitates,” Mez said. “I think it’s time to proceed with a lot of caution.”

“Life essence isn’t something that’s known about,” Don replied tersely, then took a

breath. “I mean, scholars have written about something that might be it, they call it the ‘life force’ it’s how they explain why the dungeons can affect us directly, or how being close to someone who died keeps them from absorbing the bodies. But nothing I’ve read has certainty about it. It’s all theories because there are no ways to know for certain. What I’m doing is drawing similarity between how physicians go about deciding what needs to be operated on first and hoping there is a correlation.”

“Something else you read?” Mez asked.

“This is from speaking to some. The university back home also teaches physiology.”

“How do I know if some of the life essence doesn’t belong?” Tibs asked. Finding a few areas that had it.

“Based on what you told me of how it registers to you, the first thing to look for is lack of flow. That was because it’s always flowing, right? Not you just forgetting to mention it?”

Tibs nodded, ignoring the accusatory tone. “What else?”

“I’m not sure. Physicians will bleed out those places where blood is pooling, but this is life essence. I don’t know if removing it won’t do more damage. Can you get it to flow?”

Tibs shook his head. “It’s not in a channel.”

“Can you put it back into a channel?”

“I don’t think so. When I tried adding my essence to his, I did more damage. I think that unless it goes in by itself, forcing it in doesn’t help.”

“Then it’s not contributing anything. Can you remove some and see how it affects the overall loss?”

Tibs found one by Jackal’s heart. Carefully, he drew it away, avoiding the channels and anywhere that was already leaking out. This was like how they unlocked the doorway to access the floors, only the opposite. He had to make sure to keep the essence out of the channels.

“When we leave,” Tibs said, teeth clenched in concentration, “you’re reading about purity and how to use the Arcanus with it. Then you are teaching me.” With that essence removed, he paid attention for any changes to the rest.

“I doubt those are going to be easy books to get. Purity clerics are highly secretive. Khumdar would have an easier time finding those.”

“Why don’t you ask that cleric you’re training?” Mez asked Khumdar. “She’s a cleric who wants to fight. She might be open to sharing secrets.”

“I do not allow speaking while I train her. To allow her free rein of her mouth means I must listen to her sharing her beliefs. I do not wish for that to stray into her opinion of what I am and what should be done about those like me.”

“She wouldn’t care.” Tibs found another one, slightly larger, and since he sensed no changes, he drew it out. “She isn’t like the others.”

“Purity clerics are not known for the changes in their stances. Their beliefs are taught to all children. It is the earliest stories any of them will remember their parents recounting; that they be of a cleric family or not. I know better than to waste time hoping she will be unlike the others I have encountered.”

“Then Tibs can ask her,” Mez said. “You two have talked before, right?”

He removed another pool of essence. “How do I explain why I want to learn those

things? Just saying I'm curious how it works isn't going to be enough this time." Still no changes from removing this one.

"You can explain what you—"

"I would advise against that," Khumdar interrupted the archer. "I will not claim that she will be as prejudiced about what you are as she is about me—"

"As you think she is," Mez corrected.

"But as an organization, purity clerics are no better than the guild. What you tell, she will tell them. That they tell the guild or not will depend on if they want to take you for their own so they can...improve you, or decide you should be the guild's burden."

"I think I got them all," Tibs told Don. "It's not changing anything."

"You make it sound like they'll..." Mez hesitated. "I don't know. Try to fix him."

"Then go back to healing the leaking," Don replied. "At worst, this was for nothing, but at least, it's no longer a worry."

"That is exactly what I expect the will they do," Khumdar said. "Purity is obsessed with—"

"The people who have purity," Tibs corrected, forming a weave and applying it to the largest leak. "Purity doesn't care who's different."

"I—" Khumdar was silent, and Tibs applied more weaves, wishing their effect were more pronounced, and reminding himself this wasn't a quick fix. "You are correct. I apologize. I, too, can fall within the belief that the element is the same as the people wielding its essence. Purity clerics only care about fixing all that is different from them. If it was within their power, they would go to war against more than those like me. They would seek to wipe all who do not believe as they do from the world. Leaving behind only them."

"If even that," Mez said. "Wars are costly to all sides."

"Don't your people value life over power?" Don asked. "I didn't think they'd have tales of war."

"We have those tales, so we'll know wars should never be something we want."

Tibs formed another weave, then was at a loss as to where to put it. Jackal might be more purity than earth at the moment. And he was no longer losing essence, but he didn't seem to be gaining any either.

"His breathing's even," Don said, and Tibs focused on the sorcerer, not understanding. "Jackal's breathing better. Deeper. It's a good sign."

Tibs sensed Jackal. "I think I put weaves on all the injuries."

"What's your reserve like?"

Tibs snorted. "I have some, but I can't tell you how little there is. I do have enough to heal you."

Don waved the suggestion aside, which surprised Tibs. "Shouldn't being able to absorb life essence make it easier to refill your reserve?" Don asked. "It's everywhere."

"It's in everyone," Tibs corrected.

"Then the other essence? You can channel whatever the best is."

"And the dungeon figured that out a long time ago. He uses a lot of... 'will' when he unleashes essence attacks, and he's done something to the essence in the walls that makes it difficult to pull from them. I also have to focus on pulling the essence in, and the dungeon has been keeping us busy."

“With what?” Jackal croaked.

“You’re alive!” Tibs exclaimed. Of course, he was alive. He’d sensed it the whole time.

“I’d like to argue that,” the fighter said, then sighed. “I can’t believe I went through all that, and there was nothing in the chest.”