

## Planning-105

Serba had an army of dogs now.

Tibs figured they were still attacking because the Them couldn't entirely control what happened. Either the ways the dogs were created and moved about the city was automated, or Sto was interfering with the Them's influence over what happened.

The immediate effect was that Tibs had to expend less and less essence fighting the guards as Serba swarmed them with dogs.

He slowed when the city hall came into view at the end of the street.

No guards.

Even when they weren't expecting it, the guild always had guards at the entrance. The Them knew this was Tibs's destination, and it had demonstrated enough control over the guards to send more than there should be to attack him.

So why hadn't it set a gauntlet of them for Tibs to fight through? As much as he wanted to think this was Sto helping him. It didn't feel right.

This had the feel of a dungeon room. One bare of anything, but with the boss loot on the other end.

"Tibs?" Serba asked.

"This is a trap." What did the them have access to? They couldn't change the buildings, or the ground. They'd have done that if they could. They hadn't used the doorways to drop guards on him, but was that because it was holding on until the right moment, or because it couldn't?

Serba whistled and dogs ran ahead before Tibs stopped her.

They ran out of his range and vanished in the distance. They were all dungeon made, so was that why they weren't triggering anything? Or was this trap the kind someone, the Them, decided when to spring?

He advanced one block, sensing for any changes. Another one, then a third. Something approached from the city hall. The dogs. He readied himself.

"They're just returning," Serba said. "If any are missing, or injured, we'll know there's an ambush ahead."

"The Them might have taken control of them, or replaced them. I can't sense that far, and dungeon creatures all feel the same."

"You can sense us too?"

“Everyone has life essence in them. Townsfolk are hard to tell apart without an element to distinguish them, but if I know them well enough, I can.”

Serba let out a shrill series of whistles and the dogs stopped moving. “I think they’re still my dogs.”

Or the Them was cunning.

He remained on his guard as they reached them. The dogs waited, watching Serba, as her dogs, the ones that had come into the dungeon with her, ran around, sniffing the dungeon dogs. Those still with them simply followed and waited for instructions.

Sto hadn’t given them the thing that made her dogs more than weapons, that made them... what was the equivalent of people for dogs? Once the chaos around the destroyed guild settled, he’d ask scholars. One of them had to have studied that. Don and Carina had said everything had been studied at one time or another.

“Tibs.”

The whisper stopped him.

“Ganny?”

Serba watched him.

“Tibs, you have to be careful. They’re waiting for you.”

“How’s Sto?”

“Sto is holding on. They cracked his core, but I think they wanted us to watch you die.”

“What can you tell me about them?”

“They aren’t like you, or Sto, or even me. They’re... I don’t know what they are. All I know about those like them is that those in charge make them when a dungeon needs to be brought back in line, or ended if it’s too far gone.”

“I thought adventurers did that.”

“Not if it can be avoided. I think they’re worried that if adventurers have to get involved too often, they’re going to realize dungeons aren’t what they think.”

Tibs didn’t think that would happen, not with the way the guild was set in its ways.

“They aren’t like Sto’s creatures. They aren’t essence made to be in the worlds, they’re... I don’t know.” She said in exasperation. “I’m not like you or Sto. I don’t sense the elements. I just see what they do, how they act. But they can be both, I think.”

“I can affect essence and what’s solid,” Tibs said, “so I can end them.”

“I hope so. I don’t think they’re going to be satisfied with only ending Sto if you can’t. They want Sto to suffer for protecting the town from them.”

“They aren’t going to win.”

Tibs marched on.

“Stay out of reach,” he told Serba. “I don’t know how much the ring is going to protect you if they attack you.”

“That them, it’s what’s been making the city sick?”

“Yes, they pull on the life essence of the people, weakening them. The ring prevents that, and it has a reserve that helps replenish what you’ve lost before. Sto made them, and they’re punishing him for that. I’m going to stop them.”

“And I’m going to help you. I don’t have to be in range to have my dogs attack.

They're smart enough to react to what it's going to do."

Tibs nodded.

He sensed them once he was close enough to make out the details on the doors.

He couldn't see them, but they were at the bottom of the steps. There was something... different about them. It felt to Tibs the way trying to explain what the elements were to someone went. He could never find the exact words, and had to settle for approximations, words that almost meant when he intended, but never quite went there.

They were made of essence. That he could sense. It was how that essence was put together that he couldn't quite explain. The word that came to him was a weave, but that wasn't right. It was an approximation of what he sensed. The threads were there, as were the Arcanus, but it was the way they were woven, no that also wasn't the right word. It was like the threads were made of the Arcanus themselves, instead of being used around the threads.

"I sense you there," he called.

Something happened to what Tibs sensed, and Serba gasped as they became visible. Her dogs growled, and she motioned them to silence.

They were... Tibs thought of a sheet hung between buildings to dry as a breeze blew it about. They were made of many of those floating around and through something that was... real was the approximation that came to him.

"You are an abomination," they stated, and Serba winces as her dogs whined.

"What was that?"

"Them talking."

"That wasn't talk, it was... it sounded horrible."

"You aren't made to understand any of this," they said, the hate dripping from the words. "You should never have been allowed to escape and spread."

"Escape what?" Tibs asked, then cursed himself for letting his curiosity get the better of him.

But the question seemed to give them pause. "The dungeon that made you, of course. Did you think you just came to be in the world?" it said mockingly. "That you are special? Everything that is came from a dungeon and should be returned there."

"I don't think that's true."

"What do you know of true? You are an aberration. You escaped and seemed too insignificant to be bothered with. You think yourself more than what you are, and I will reduce you to nothing."

It... moved. It wasn't the right word and in the time Tibs struggled with finding it, it was before him and he then he was in the air, suffusing himself with Earth and adding ice and metal to his armor. He crashed through two walls and bounced off the ground before coming to a stop.

He forced the pain away so he could suffuse himself with Purity.

He wanted to avoid another hit like that.

"How are you not dead?"

Tibs threw himself aside and its... arms? slammed the ground where he'd been, cracking it.

Close range combat was out of the question.

He etched his fire whip and flung it. It went through some of the essence that composed its body, then wrapped around something. It pulled, and Tibs was in the air, heading at it. He suffused himself with Air and its swing passed through him and he passed through it.

He let go and rolled as he hit the floor, then was on his feet. Not attacking with anything that he had to hold on to, either. He really didn't want to have to start trying new things, but most of what wasn't just unleashing raw essence focused on close quarter fighting. He didn't raw essence would do much more against them than drain him.

He made ice knives and threw them, not bothering trying to be accurate.

Instead of deflecting them, it did...something, and the weave that made it changed. The knives passed through the way he had, but it wasn't suffused with air, or even mostly that. The composition of the weave hadn't changed that much. It was its structure that had.

He moved as he flung knife after knife, studying what he sensed. That element of real was still there, but it too was different, not less or more, just not the same.

Something happened.

The weave shifted, then one of the knife was flying back at him.

He absorbed the essence reflexively and was surprised at not feeling the resistance of someone else's control. Did that mean they couldn't use essence the way Tibs could? It was limited to what was within them? He couldn't tell what their reserve was like. There was one, but it registered as... solid.

Tibs was getting tired of almost right words that didn't help him.

Tibs made an alteration to a knife as he threw it, added corruption to its edge. When it passed through the Them, it hissed, so he threw another, and then each one had corruption.

It did...something, and the weave shifted. The next knife passed through without causing a reaction.

It could adjust to his attacks.

But what were those limits?

The next knife was etched exclusively with corruption. He hadn't thrown one before, but so long as he remained focused on it while it was in flight, it would be fine. He couldn't fill it as much as he wanted since that would delay the throw and he didn't want it to realize something was different until it was—

It...caught the knife. This time the word felt right, even if Tibs didn't see a hand holding the still essence item. That means contact, so Tibs focus on the etching to change how it—

It was gone.

He could see the knife, even sensed the essence that made it, but it was no longer his essence. That had been severed without him having a chance to fight.

It...looked at him. That was the sense he got from the malevolence he felt aimed in his direction. Then, the knife was flying at him.

He focused on it. It was still just essence, so he could—

The wrongness of the essence registered a second before the knife planted itself in his should and carried him to the wall, where he slammed into it hard enough to see stars.

Abyss that hurt. He wrested through whatever it had done to the essence, like an

etching for also not—

He was so fucking tired of this. He just wanted to know so he could kill the thing and go save Sto. And while he tried to free himself, it was advancing. Tibs flung raw fire at it and screamed as the distraction let more of that etching push into him.

He was supposed to be immune to the corruption's effect!

“You are nothing,” it said. “The mark you bear means nothing,” it snarled. “I will remove you from—”

The rest was buried, with it, under the dogs.