

Planning-103

“How...”

Tibs turned to urge Serba, but stopped as the awe on her face registered.

“How is the possible?” she asked, breathless.

“The dungeon can change things inside himself.” He fought the urge to tell her about the city being there ahead of time. The Them could be listening.

“But... none of the stories talk about...,” she motioned ahead of them.

“We can’t talk about the runs.”

“Oh, I’ve heard Runners talk bout the city,” she replied, her roll of the eyes breaking the stupefaction, “but not one of them ever gave the impression this was the size of a king’s city. I figured they meant something like Kragle Rock.”

“It’s way larger than that,” Tibs scoffed.

“I can see that.”

“Are you okay to go on? We have to hurry.”

“Of course. You should have ordered me to move.”

Tibs shrugged, running down the stairs. “Being yelled at never helps.”

“You have met my brother, right?” she kept up with him, her dogs spreading around them.

“He gives the orders. We only yell at him when he screws up.”

“Then how is it any of you have voices left to speak when he isn’t around?”

“He doesn’t screw up that often anymore.”

She snorted.

Ahead, Tibs saw the city guards massing at the bottom of the steps. Half a dozen of them, each with an element.

“Don’t step on the ice,” he told Serba as he stepped on the section forming before him and stretching to the bottom. He gained speed as he slid, added air to push himself along. Since he was going to explain everything to her once this was done, he didn’t bother hiding what he was capable of.

Fire, Metal, Earth, Light, Corruption, and one he couldn’t identify. Unlike with people, the live essence in golem people didn’t gain the tint of their element. The two remained separated.

He suffused himself with Earth and turned his body to stone. He added his ice armor,

then his metal to that. It was the best protection he could get against his mix of elements.

The ball of fire he took by reinforcing his ice, and immediately knew it was a diversion as the unknown element formed an etching in his path. When he could see, the shimmering crystal he was hurtling toward told him what that unknown element was.

Crystal was more versatile than he'd expected. They could be made sharp as metal, hard as Earth and even slick. He'd watched a Crystal fighter redirect attacks from his light archer teammate in training.

The net of sharp points extended wide and high, telling Tibs someone was managing this fight. Since he knew Sto was in trouble, this had to be the Them's doing. They knew what he was capable of, so planned accordingly.

That was okay. All they had to go on was what Tibs had done before. Time to try something entirely new and hope it worked.

He etched air ahead of him in a wedge, added Ike to sharpen the edge, added Corruption on top of that to weaken the etching, linking the two with Ool—and that was the wrong thing to use. The Corruption leeches into the Air and weakens everything and—

He was out of time.

His etched folded under the impact, corruption weakening it, but the crystal shard still cut him up badly enough that he had trouble thinking by the time he was on the other side. Fortunately, suffusing himself with Purity was a reflex at this point.

Unfortunately, it meant he lost his stone body and the guard's stone fist cracked the ice and metal over his armor as it sent Tibs flying into a wall. Still being suffused with Purity was the only reason he remained standing as he pushed himself away from the cracked wall, his injuries healing as they appeared.

If not for having to deal with six of them on his own, keeping purity for the length of the fight would be his better option. He suffused himself with Darkness and etched the sheath, then ran at the guards.

They didn't react as they should. Sto made them to be as like people as he understood, so they would be unable to see him, but they adjusted as he moved left. The Them's doing again. They saw his essences, the way Tibs did, or the dungeon equivalent, and they were passing the information on to the guards. What they couldn't seem to do was control how the guard fought, because their strikes were miss aimed, targeting where he'd been a moment before, instead of where he was.

That let him block the Light guard, the only one whose attack had more accuracy to it, then cut it open, and plant his ice Sword into the Crystal guard, setting it to spread, and forming another one in time to parry the Light sword, which sliced through Tibs's sword even as it was deflected.

Okay, time to switch tactic. He suffused himself with light and released a flash. Then threw darkness in a rough person shape away from the guard, who responded the way a guard should, turning to follow the escaping felon, only to stop as Tibs made a new sword and jerkily turned to face him again. Only it was too late. He cut it through from torso to shoulder with one Earth powered swing.

Two down—

Fire erupted around him, and the pain was intense.

“Finally,” the Them snarled. “Something you’re feeble against.”

Tibs threw himself out of the conflagration, pulling and absorbing some of it to replenish his reserve. Raw Corruption hit as he stood, and staggered him, but this was simple to absorb, as he made a sword to parry the Metal guard’s swing. That sword tarnishing as he passed through the corruption reminded Tibs that another way people golem were like people was that they weren’t immune to their teammate’s attacks. He redirected the corruption so it engulfed the Metal guard.

It kept trying to hit him as it melted.

Tibs jumps, adding air for height, before the jet of fire reached him. A burst of wind sent him to the side, and he suffused himself with Earth as he crashed down. He was going to need a lot for this. As well as the added defense, since he wouldn’t be able to do anything more until he’d handled the fire guard.

He stayed on the ground on landing. Sending essence down and ripping control from the dungeon. From the Them. By the time they were attempting to retake it, it was too late. The ground opened under the Fire guard and slammed closed on it once they fell in.

He redirected the essence to take care of the corruption guard, but it hurriedly moved away. The Earth guard ignored the essence pooling under him to continue pounding on his back. When Tibs ripped the ground apart, an etching spread from the guard’s feet over the gap and kept it from falling in.

Was this something Sto, Ganny, or the Them had come up with? Ganny, he decided, as he pushed himself to his feet. This was her kind of clever. The guard kept pounding on Tibs. Earth guards were a lot like Jackal. Direct. Not all those Sto made fought with their fist like this one, but they went for the attack and didn’t adapt or did something sneaky, the way Jackal liked to do once you thought you know what he was capable of.

Tibs had too much earth essence for the punches to do much more than crack the surface of his skin. When Tibs punched the guard, he also did little more than crack the stone skin, but those cracks let the corruption he covered his fist with seep in, and the etching they form kept it growing.

He turned to face the Corruption guard in the process of forming an etching that was too large to be something it could do on its own.

“I’m done letting you win,” the Them snarled. “I just want to see you deal with this.”

Tibs smiled. “Well, since you say it so nicely. I’ve been meaning to try this one for a while now.” He suffused himself with purity and threw as much as he could at the guard.

The purity slammed into the etching, shattering it and then leeching everything that made the guard something, until it couldn’t exist anymore.

Tibs absorbed the purity that was left.

He looked up. “Nothing to say? Sto and Ganny usually have comments after I pull off something like this.”

“What are you?”

Tibs turned, surprised by Serba asked the question. She stood at the bottom of the stairs, looking at the battlefield with a mix of awe and fear; her dogs seated around her. That told Tibs she’d watch a good deal of the fight.

“I’m a Runner.”

“You took on...” he motioned around Tibs.

“What you are,” the Them said, tone dark, “is an abomination.”

“I can do more than most,” Tibs answered. “Doesn’t mean I’m anything other than a Runner.”

She looked at him in disbelief.

He looked up again. “As for you. What have you done to Sto?”

“The dungeon broke the rules.”

“You’re breaking them right now,” Tibs replied.

“And now I think I understand why,” the Them continued as if he hadn’t spoken. “You made him do it.”

“Sto helped because Sto cares,” Tibs snapped. “We were in danger. You were threatening our town.”

“Dungeons don’t care,” it replied. “They exist to perform a function, nothing more.”

“Make us better, yeah, I know. We—”

“Keep you in check! You and your kind are a pest on the world. You will destroy everything unless your numbers are controlled. That is what dungeons are for.”

“I think you got something wrong, then. When we survive, we get stronger, we get loot from the dungeon.”

“You need something to entice you. The living are all the same kind of cowards. You’ll grow until you choke everything around you without doing more than the bare minimum. Only when your greed is fed do you take risks. So a few of you survive, get stronger. It’ll be too little when the day comes.”

“The day comes for what?” Tibs asked cautiously.

“Don’t worry. You won’t live to find out. I will see to that myself.”

“Then how about you tell me, anyway?”

When the Them didn’t reply, Tibs cursed. They’d left to do something. He doubted he was going to enjoy the result.

“Tibs?” Serba asked, more cautiously than he’d posed his question.

“It’s the Them,” he replied, waving to the ceiling. “They’re planning something.”

“Them?” she looked up, then at him, uncertainly. “Is that who you were talking with?”

Tibs nodded. “They’ve done something to Sto and they’ve taken control.”

“Who is Sto?”

Tibs motioned around them. “The dungeon. He’s who we need to save from the Them.”

“The dungeon.” Her voice shook. “You think the dungeon needs to be saved from them?”

He stepped toward her, and she stepped back. The dogs growled at him in response, then, as if realizing who he was, stopped and looked at Serba plaintively.

“I know it sounds like I’ve fallen into the abyss and left something down there,” Tibs said carefully. “But Dungeons are people in a way. But no one knows it.”

“Except you.”

“I’ll explain everything I promise, Serba. But we have to save him first. He made the rings that healed the town.” He motioned to the one she wore. “It’s not the first time he

helped us, and now it's our time to help him."

"Why isn't the entire guild here to help you?"

"Because if the guild knew, they'd look for a way to take even more advantage of him."

"Then the other Runners, your team." She narrowed her eyes. "Does Jackal know?"

"Of course he does. He's my team leader. And I didn't have the time to get anyone else. You're the one person I have to have helping me."

She straightened and smiled. Tibs realized that she thought he'd placed her above Jackal. Which he had, for this one case. He didn't point that out. He didn't understand why those two didn't get along, but for now, he'd make use of it.