

Serba had built an army of dogs as they entered the road leading to the city hall.

Tibs figured they still attacked because the Them couldn't stop them from roaming like they hadn't been able to fully control how they fought. Sto had set up this floor to resemble how he thought a city worked, with guards, and gangs, and occasional citizens. So he'd set dogs to wander around, alone or in pack. Sto had probably gotten the idea from runners talking about the other dogs in Kragle Rock.

The effect of the army was that Tibs hardly had to fight in the last battles. Serba sent the dogs to swarm the attackers nearly as soon as they stepped out of alleys.

And now, as the city hall became visible in the distance, the attacks stopped.

The Them knew this was where he was heading and had control over the guards. So why hadn't it set this road as a gauntlet? As much as he wanted this was Sto helping him, it didn't feel right.

He slowed.

This had to feel of a dungeon room. One bare of anything other than the boss loot at the other end, inviting the greedy to rush to open it.

"Tibs?" Serba asked.

"This is a trap."

What did the Them have to work with? If they could alter the buildings or the ground, they'd have tried to open it up, or crush him with them. They hadn't used doorways to drop golems on him, but was that because they couldn't, or because they were holding back until the right moment?

"Should we go around?"

"There's only one entrance. Even if we take the alleys to reach the road that goes along the building, the Them can still do something."

She whistled and, before Tibs could stop her, half a dozen dogs ran ahead.

They vanished outside his shortened range without anything happening. Was it because, as dungeon made creatures, they didn't trigger the traps the Them set? Or did they have to decide when the traps were sprung?

He carefully made in it one block, sensing for...anything. Then another, and a third.

He made out motion in the distance, well beyond his sense, just before a howl sounded.

"They're coming back," Serba said, smiling.

"All of them?"

"Dogs aren't smart enough to tell if one of them's gone and warn me. I've trained them to howl on the way back so I know it's them."

"The Them could have retaken control. Or replace them with its dogs. I can't sense them yet. Not that I'd be able to know that way. Dungeon creatures all feel the same to me."

"Can you sense me like that? How about anyone else?"

"Everyone has life essence in them," he answered, trying to push his sense and get earlier warning of...anything. "You and townsfolk are hard to tell apart in groups because it's thin and doesn't have an element to tint it so I can identify people."

She let out a series of shrill whistles not long after they'd entered Tibs's sense and they came to a stop. "I think they're still my dogs."

Or the Them was cunning. Either way, he had to go on. He stayed on guards as they

reached them.

The dogs were oddly still, the way dungeon creatures didn't 'fidget' when they waited. They were like statues until they acted. Serba's dogs, the ones that had entered with them, raced ahead and sniffed the dungeon dogs, while the others walked in step with her, waiting for instructions.

"Tibs?" The whisper stopped him.

"Ganny?" he whispered back, and Serba eyed him.

"Tibs, you need to be careful. They're waiting for you."

"How's Sto?"

"Holding on. They cracked Sto's core, but nothing more. I think they want 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've been told about them and those like them is that they are sent to bring dungeons back in line. Or end them if they've gone too far."

"I thought it's what the guild sent adventurers to do."

"That only happens if the guild realizes it first. I think it's dangerous for adventurers to do it too often. They might realize dungeons aren't what they think."

Tibs didn't see that happening, with how set in their way the guild was.

"They aren't like Sto's creatures. They aren't essence made to be in the world. 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. I think they can be both."

"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 just ending Sto. They want Sto to suffer for protecting the town from them."

"How has Sto been protecting the town?" As far as Tibs knew, Sto still couldn't affect that far.

"The rings."

"But that's just to help with the sickness."

"Tibs. They are the sickness. I thought you knew. I thought it was why you asked Sto to make the rings."

"They can't—That isn't..."

The secret Tibs now knew was the Them following him, and its tendrils stretching to the people around. He'd thought it was just it spreading secrets, the way people who know them did. Could he have sensed them...

"Why?" he demanded. The sickness had started well before Tibs had angered the Them. Why would they do something like that?

"I think it's how they survive," she answered. "Sto does it through the essence he accumulates from the Runners who die and what he finds already there. They do it by... taking essence from what's around them. I'm not sure. All I can say is that each time they return from being outside, there is noticeably more of them."

He'd missed it.

His anger fought his attempt to breathe it down.

How could he have missed that?

“They aren’t going to win,” he said through gritted teeth, and Serba took a step back. “I’m fine,” he told her.

“You don’t sound it.” She made hand motions, and dogs positioned themselves before her.

He breathed. “I just find out the Them is what’s been making people sick, and I never realized it.”

“Were you supposed to?” She raised her hands at the glare he gave her; then breathed.

She was right. He hadn’t known that secret was the Them until recently, and he hadn’t noticed if that secret had been where the worse of the sickness had happened when he sensed it in town. He had acted to help Kragle Rock as soon as he understood how to help with the problem. And that was all he could have done.

Tibs headed for the building. Now he knew how to stop the sickness permanently.

“Stay out of reach,” he told Serba as she fell into step with him. “I don’t know how much the ring is going to protect you from a direct attack.”

“How are they making the city sick?”

“They drain life essence from people.”

She nodded. “Just the townsfolk.”

“I don’t think so. Everyone’s been on edge. Don said that being tired does that to people, and it’s one way not having enough life essence feels. Runners have more. That’s probably why I didn’t fall sick, but we have been irritable.”

“I’m not staying out of the fight,” she said. “I have my dogs,” she added before he could protest. “That’s why I have them. Don’t worry, I won’t get anywhere close to the fighting itself.”

He nodded and continued on.

He sensed something as he made out the details on the city hall’s doors. He was surprised it didn’t register as a secret until he realized that they had no reason to hide in here. The Them was at the bottom of the steps leading to the door, and as Ganny said, there was something different about them.

What he sensed came across to him as a representation of attempting to explain the elements and essence to someone who didn’t have them. There was never an exact word for any of it, so he settled for approximations that barely carried the meanings he needed them to.

That approximation was what they felt like.

They had essence. He could sense that much, but it was put together in a way that... he couldn’t even think of a word close to it. Not right was the best he could manage. There were threads and the lines and the Arcanus that made up creatures of the elements, but the way they were...woven wasn’t the right word, nor was etched. It was almost like the Arcanus themselves were what the threads were made of, but even that was just an approximation of what he sensed.

“I sense you there,” he called.

Something...happened. The...whatever made the Them shifted in a way Tibs, again, didn’t quite understand.

Serba gasped, stepping back, and her dogs reacted by growling. “What is that?” she asked, voice trembling.

Tibs looked back and realized that he could see them now, along with sensing.

Not that what he saw helped figure out what they were. Sheets hung between buildings caught in the breeze was the best he could come up with. Many of them, floating around something he couldn't quite make out, but had a sense of familiarity to it.

"You are an abomination," the Them stated.

Serba put her hands to her ears and the dogs that had entered with them whined, shaking their heads. "What was that?"

"Them talking."

"That isn't talk," she said in dismay. "That was...that was horrible."

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

"Escape what?" Tibs asked, then curse his curiosity.

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?" Its tone was mocking. "That you are special? Everything that is came from a dungeon, and should be returned there."

"I don't think that's true," he replied. Purity clerics believed Purity had made the world and people. Don had said that there were scholars trying to prove countless stories about how the world came to be, how people came to exist, and none of what he'd read got close to proof.

"What do you know of true?" it said with derision. "You are an aberration of things that escaped and were deemed too insignificant to be bothered with. You think yourself more than what you are, and I will not wait for the decision to be made by others. I will show you the nothing that you are."

It... move wasn't the right word, and in the time Tibs struggled with finding it, the Them was before him. Then he was in the air, suffusing himself with Earth and coating himself with ice and metal for armor. He crashed through walls and bounced off the ground before coming to a stop.

He breathed the pain down enough he could suffuse himself with purity and decided he needed to avoid being hit like that again.

"How are you not dead?" it demanded, and Tibs threw himself aside as a mass of those sheets hit where he'd been. The...arm? Within them, cracked the ground. It couldn't be an arm. It was too thin, and the Them had too many of them. Even seemed to stand on them when they didn't move.

Tibs jumped out of the way of another strike, and the cracks in the ground spread to the building. He couldn't let the Them get close.

He etched his fire whip and flung it. It passed through the sheets without noticeable effects, then wrapped around the... limb? Appendage? Whatever it was, they floated around. He had to stop wasting time looking for—

Tibs was in air again. The Them had yanked effortlessly and now he was heading for them. He suffused himself with air, and that thin and dark thing, with a pointed end that made Tibs shudder in unnamed fear, went through him and planted in the ground.

Then he was out it's...back? He couldn't tell if there was a side to the them. He suffused with earth and bounced on the ground, turning to land on his feet.

No close range, and no using etching he kept hold of. That didn't leave him with a lot.

Short of—it was a good thing Don wasn't here—trying new things.

He started with what he had, making knives out of ice and metal and throwing them, using air to get them to hit properly.

The them didn't get out of the way, or bother deflecting them. It did something like what made it visible, but not, and the knives passed through. It hadn't suffused itself, or moved those parts that seemed hard out of the way. Other than that...shift in the way its essence was arranged, nothing had changed.

He kept flinging knives, but focused on what he sensed. It was all still there, same as before, but the sense of how real it was had changed. That was what was different.

How, by the abyss, did that happen?

And it happened again while a knife was within the Them, then it was flying at Tibs.

Reflexively, he absorbed the essence, putting as much of his will as he could spare to fight the Them's control. Only there was none. Did that mean they couldn't control essence the way Runners did? Or that it hadn't bothered, or...he didn't even know enough to know what else might be in play.

Did it even have a reserve?

He wanted to say yes, of course it did. Anything that had essence needed to have a reserve, but...

Tibs was getting to hate approximations.

Tibs altered the next knife he threw; added an edge of corruption. When it passed through the Them, it hissed and the...shifting happened differently. Wrong, Tibs wanted to say, knowing that wasn't right either.

He threw more, and this time, the Them moved out of the way, until it shifted again and didn't move. The knife went through it without a reaction.

So it could adapt to his attacks. But it hadn't been instant. What were the limits?

He etched a knife made entirely with corruption and enough of the filigree to keep it solid. It moved and...caught the knife. This time the word felt right, even if all that seemed to be holding it were the sheets. He still felt the his essence in the knife, so focus to change the filigree and cause it to—

It was gone.

He saw the knife. Even sensed the essence that made it, but it was no longer his essence. It had been severed without even having a chance to fight for it.

The Them...looked at him. It was the only way he could describe the malevolence he felt aimed in his direction. Then the knife was approaching much too fast.

He focused on it; it was still just essence. So he could—

There was something wrong with the etching. The Them had done something and—the thoughts were hit out of his mind from the impact in his shoulder that carried him to the wall and slammed him there hard enough stars flew before his eyes.

And it hurt. Abyss that hurt. It was like when he'd walked into the room of fire, or when he threw himself into the pool of corruption, but even that wasn't enough to describe just how much pain this...not-etching caused.

He had Corruption. It wasn't supposed to hurt him anymore.

He thought clearly enough to suffuse himself with purity as the Them approached, but it barely pushed the pain away. He grabbed at the pommel and tried to pull it out.

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

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