

Planning-107

Steps behind Tibs caused him to look over his shoulder.

“Abyss.” A dozen guards were advancing, the opening in the walls they had entered through closing. He’d forgotten about that part of the trap. He looked back to the Them in time to throw himself to the side with a yelp as they landed from their leap where he’d been. He’d expected them to be too weak to do anything without essence.

He rolled to a crouch and formed his ice and metal sword, only for the essence to unravel as he left his hand.

Right. No essence within the plaza meant he also couldn’t use it. He called his knife from its hiding place and felt inadequate holding something so small against the Them, which still towered over him.

“You are nothing,” it screeched. Its voice had a hollowness to it, without the essence to carry it, and Tibs wondered how he could still understand it, without that, but it leaped high and Tibs hurried out of the way.

It landed and turned to face him, letting out an angry scream that made him shudder. He’d really hope it would be less scary without essence, not more so. It threw itself at him again, this time staying close to the ground, but Tibs moves faster.

It had been easy enough to avoid those attacks. Tibs wondered if it knew anything of fighting without essence. Both would have been deadly, if it had been able to adjust where it landed as Tibs moved. Something essence let it do.

Tibs circled it slowly, waiting for it to attack again. When it didn’t, he quickly reversed direction, stopping just as fast as it launched itself where he’d been heading. He dodged the sharp appendage it was using to walk on and slashed with his knife. The tip only scraped the surface of something that was much harder than he’d expected.

One of its leg lashed out and scraped him in turn, easily going through the leather and cutting him and pulling at his life essence in the process. The contact was too fleeting for him to feel the loss among everything he had. But it served as a reminder that direct contact allowed for essence use.

He just had to find a way to make that contact without having it skewer him at the same time. He rushed it, slipping under the strike, then over the other one. It hesitated, and Tibs used to moment to grab hold of it and pull at its life essence.

Immediately, his reserve was full, then he was in the air. The pain from the impact

was so much he remembered to suffuse himself with stone a second before hitting the wall. Then it took him a few more to switch to purity.

“Are you okay?” Serba asked, dropping to a crouch next to him. “What happened to that thing?”

“It lost its essence.” He shook his head at her incomprehension. He didn’t have the time to explain. The guards were now close enough that they’d be a problem when he attacked it again.

He stood.

But would they be a problem for him only? Some of them were separating from the group and heading for the Them.

“Stay out of the fight.”

“Don’t you fucking tell me to stay here and watch you get killed.”

“I’m not going to die.”

“That thing has those people to help it now!”

“They aren’t people.”

“They look like people, okay? I’m not one of you Runners, who knows all the stuff about this place.”

“And that’s why you have to stay out of the fight. They’re creatures, and even without essence, they’re stronger than you are.” He grinned. “And don’t worry. I’m the one who set the no dying rule. I’m not going to be the one who breaks it.”

He ran to the guards, ignoring her exasperated cry.

Time to test theories.

He slipped under the first guard’s swing and slashed at it, his knife barely doing damage. He threw himself between the other’s legs and came to a stop much too fast with ice there to keep him sliding. The sword came down as he rolled and he winces as it cut him and heat spread from the wound. Not fire. And something with essence that purity only slowed. It wasn’t hurting him yet, so he’d deal with it later.

He kicked the guard between the legs. There was nothing there to increase the pain, but the earth he filled his leg with gave the blow enough strength the guard was sent back into the others. Tibs got to his feet and headed for the Them, these guards following.

It was ignoring the guards approaching it, focusing on him. Skittering left and right as if it expected Tibs to suddenly change direction. Which he’d done the previous time.

Not only wasn’t it used to fighting without essence. It wasn’t used to fighting at all.

Okay. He could use that.

He jerked left, and as it moved he stopped, and it immediately threw itself to the right. He continued left, and it screeched as it came to a stop and had to turn to face him, putting the guards who had been following Tibs at its back and those coming at it at its flank. If it kept its attention on him, then the guards would be able to—

The closest guard slashed at it, while the next two kept coming for Tibs. They knew how to fight, and Sto had made them to deal with teams, so they wouldn’t focus only on the closest opponent. The one thing Tibs had going for him was that this group didn’t have archers. Those had been rare among guards, he realized. Did Sto only think of archers as runners?

The Them turned to strike the guard and Tibs ran at it. He channeled corruption just before grabbing hold of a leg and pushed the essence inside it as hard as he could. He held on as the Them shook the leg, then slammed it down over and over until Tibs lost his grip.

He'd know if that had worked next time he grabbed it. He rolled out of the way of the sword, then had to dodge another attack, and a third. He'd dropped off amidst the guards and they had no problem changing target now that he was there.

He blocked on with his knife, and disarmed it, grabbing the sword and planting it into the closest guard before running out of the group and for the Them, as they angrily stabbed a downed guard.

He was well below half his reserve and hopefully, that was enough to end the Them; if what he planned was possible. He switched to life essence as he threw himself up at it, only for it to turn and stab him and then down.

"You are mine!" it said gleefully.

Tibs ignored the pain. Not how he'd planned it, but this was physical contact, and he sensed how the corruption tainted its life essence, the way his had been when he'd been doused with it. He felt it pull at his essence, but didn't allow it. He glared at it and, in turn, pulled at its life essence, and only that, leaving the corruption behind. There should be a point where it would start eating it from the inside.

"Leave him alone!" Serba's yells were followed by dogs jumping on the Them, and it batting them away easily.

Tibs cursed, but focused on pulling. It was fighting him now, but Tibs was gaining. Like with fighting, it was as if it didn't know how to defend itself against this. It knew a lot, but it seemed to use essence. Maybe it was so strong among those like it that it never had had to defend itself before.

"Yours," it hissed. "It's yours."

Tibs held on as it moved and swung the leg. He couldn't switch element, so the collision with Serba nearly broke his concentration, but he had to end this, and by how stronger the corruption felt inside them, he was getting there.

And it was realizing it.

The shaking grew violent. Then it used him to hit guards, but Tibs held on. He wasn't letting it win. He still had enough room within his reserve for more essence and so long as he had life essence, he would survive and that was all that—

The impact shattered his concentration, then he lost his sense of the Them as they retreated from him. Their body was now darker, purple, as corruption was most of what made it.

He sufficed himself with Purity and used the wall to get to his feet. It was over. Without access to essence, it couldn't pull in more to fight the corruption, and unlike him, it couldn't change element. Only use what was already there, and that had been mostly life. The rest had been spread around it to let it do everything it had been able to.

The guard swung at him, and Tibs moved with a curse. Four of them were left, and they weren't satisfied with the Them's coming defeat. They existed to kill Runners, and Tibs was still standing.

Well, he could deal with four of them even without essence.

He blocked one, used Earth to make himself stronger, and punched the head off another. He kicked the next one away and froze as Serba screamed in pain. The punch as he turned made it hard to be sure, but it looked like the Them stood over Serba, looking at him, smirking.

No.

Tibs blocked the guard's swing and took the sword from it, cutting its head off, then running for Serba and the Them. He'd forgotten there was one source of essence here it could easily get to. There couldn't be enough there to save it, but it would kill Serba in the process.

With a scream, he swung at the leg, and it shattered easily.

"You will not save it." It backed, and Tibs followed. "I will take it from you, and then I will take you and everything here. This dungeon will cease to be, and all those things you look after."

Tibs threw himself at it as it threatened the things he cared about. Fire burned inside him, his own anger that his inattention had put Serba in danger, that Sto was hurt because he had helped him and his town.

Tibs hadn't brought this thing on them, but he'd played a part in it being here, and he was pissed that something he'd done to help what he cared for was in danger because of that. So he swung and dodged and attacked and destroyed this thing, no longer gloating, but retreating in staggers as it lost another leg, then in incomprehension as it fell to the side, nothing left to move with.

Tibs glared at it, panting.

"Sto is my friend. Serba is my friend. Kragle Rock is my town. No one threatens them. Do you hear me? No one!"

He brought down the sword and cut what was left of it until he knew it was dead because the pieces lost their purple tint as the essence was wiped away by the trap. There were no guards left, and Tibs had a vague memory of one of them caught in the violence he'd unleashed.

He dropped the sword and ran to Serba's side. He pulled the end of the leg out of her stomach and she gasped in pain.

"Ganny! Drop the wall!" he had to get her out. He couldn't pour purity into her, he had to form the weave first, and he didn't know if that could be done inside her body, or his, or— "Ganny!"

"You're alive," Serba said, smiling.

"You too." He took her hand and touched the ring. It was working, adding life to her, but it didn't work fast enough for what she was losing. And it wasn't only the injury. There was something inside her leeching at her life.

Fragments left behind when he pulled the leg. And they were still doing what the Them had been.

"Gan—"

The rumble of the walls coming down stopped his call. He suffused himself with earth and picked Serba up, exiting the plaza as soon as the wall was gone. Essence filled him and he made a purity weave. He applied it to the wound and Serba looked in wonder at the

healing wound.

“You’re a cleric too.”

“I’m a Rogue.” Something was wrong. She healed, but she still lost life essence to those fragments. Were they growing? He put her down and dogs whined, pressing against them. A glance told Tibs only her dogs were left. The dungeon created ones had been sacrificed trying to keep the Them from her.

He made a knife of metal and she looked at him, but not scared.

“What’s that for?”

“There are pieces of it in you. I need to take them out before they kill you.”

She chuckled. “Can’t you just magic them away?”

Could he? Purity might erase them, fire would burn them off, lightning destroy them.

“I don’t know how to do that without killing you at the same time.” He raised the blade. “This is the kind of magic I know how to use. Its edge is sharp and you—”

“Do it.”

Tibs stared at her in surprise.

“I know you’re not going to do anything more than you have to. You’re not going to try to hurt me.”

“You know I won’t do that?” He knew it, but from what Jackal said about his sister, she didn’t trust anyone.

“I haven’t...” She searched his face. “I haven’t trusted my leaders ever. From my father, to those I had to work under for him. Even my uncle or Irdian. They’ve always had their own agenda, and I was just a tool for them to make it happen. Only ever trusted my dogs. I trust you Tibs. I get it now, why Jackie was willing to lead the team you’re in. You got him to do the one thing he swore no one would ever get him to do. And you got me to trust you. You’re something Special.”

If that meant he got to save her life, he wasn’t arguing with her. “This is probably going to hurt a little.”

“Tibs?” Ganny said as he applied the blade to the just healed injury. He raised it. She sounded scared.

“Ganny?”

“Tibs, Sto needs help.”

“Can it—” he swallowed “—can it wait?” He sensed Serba’s essence. She didn’t have much left.

“I don’t know. I don’t know what to do to, Tibs.”

“What’s wrong?” Serba asked.

“Sto, the dungeon. They hurt him before coming after me, and Ganny doesn’t know how to save him, but if I go, you’ll—”

“Can you save him?”

“Yes.” Abyss, he hoped so.

“Go. He’s more important. I’m just a—”

“No. You’re not just anything. You’re my friend.”

“He’s your friend too, isn’t he? It’s better if he lives.”

Tibs wasn’t sacrificing one friend for another.

What was the problem?

She was losing essence to the fragment. He didn't have the time to take them out. The ring was there to fight the drain, but this was a direct attack, and its reserve was nearly empty.

That one was easy. He refilled the reserve. But it didn't work as fast as what she was losing, and she had already lost a lot.

Okay, that one wasn't as easy, but it was basically the same, wasn't it? Her body was her reserve. All he needed to do was refill that. But he had to be careful. He knew from experience what happened if he only dumped life essence in without care, and she didn't have his training to survive it.

"I don't know how this is going to feel."

Gently, doing all he could not to let Sto's danger rush him, he pushed gossamer strands of essence life into her. Adding to what was already there. Matching how they felt until it seemed to be back to her usual faint level of essence. He wanted to add more, but he couldn't take anymore time. This had to be enough.

"Don't move. I'll be back as quickly as I can," he told her, then he was running.