

Planning-104

They made it three blocks before encountering more guards. Four of them, which Tibs dealt with. They didn't target Serba or her dogs, even if she was barely outside the fight. Maybe the Them didn't consider her enough of a threat to bother with.

As with the previous fight, she picked the silver coins the guards left behind on crumbling away.

Four blocks with no attack. Then he stopped as he sensed them. They were too close for him to do anything other than—

"This is up to you," he told Serba, just as the first of the large dog stepped out of from between two houses. This one was mottled gray and brown and more massive than Crusher, Serba's largest dog.

"What do you mean, up to me?" she demanded, as another stepped out behind this one, slightly smaller, pure white, with curly fur. Another one was next to this one and Tibs sensed more behind. As well as behind the other dogs, stepping out from alleys and buildings surrounding them. "One of those things is going to rip my dogs apart."

"I don't want you to fight them. I want you to order them to stop, or maybe get them to fight for you."

"I can't do that! Tibs, do you know how long it takes to train a dog, and those things aren't—"

"They're your dogs, Serba."

"I'm pretty sure I'd know if I'd trained something like that."

Tibs suffused himself with Earth. "Serba. I need you to trust me. I'll explain after we're not in danger from them."

"Tibs, I can't just—"

"Now, Serba!" He moved and hit the dog that jumped at them.

"By the abyss," she muttered as another dog bit Tibs's arm. "No wonder you hang out with my brother. You're just as nuts."

He shook his arm until the dog lost its grip and flew into others. Before he could tell Serba to stop wasting time, she let out a shrill whistle that went up and down in burst. Every dog, hers and those around them, raised their head, ears straight.

"How?"

"No!" the Them said. "Attack!" A few dogs shook themselves and resumed growling.

“You need to tell them to stop,” Tibs told her.

“I don’t know if—”

“Serba, please just do it. The Them’s trying to get them to attack, and I didn’t have the time to grab any jerky on the way here.”

“You can bribe them with jerky too?” she asked, offended.

Three dogs stepped forward.

“Sit!” She snapped at them, then looked at Tibs. “What is it—I said sit!” she yelled the one that took another step. It, and every other dog, sat.

“No!” the Them exclaimed in exasperation. “I told you to attack them.”

Tibs readied himself, but none of the dogs moves. They looked at Serba.

“Tibs, how is this possible?” she asked, slowing turning and watching them.

“Sto needs to start with something he’s encountered. It was rats and bunnies on the first floor. They’re things that found their way inside before the runs. As he grew, he’s influence stretched. Toward the town, he can reach halfway across the gathering grounds now.”

“Are you telling me the dungeon can have monsters just appear among the people there?”

“No, living things interfere, and he wouldn’t do that. He only makes creatures within himself. But he can sense everyone out there, listening in and watch. He wanted to add something new on this floor, so, when he sensed you and your dogs, he made a copy of them, then started altering them.”

“But they’re still my dogs,” she whispered. “Who you can bribe,” she added, annoyed.

“Only when I have jerky.”

She whistled, a different cadence from earlier, and as one, the dogs laid down.

The Them cursed Sto as its voice receded.

Tibs hoped that without them to fight for control, Serba would be able to use the dogs in the coming fights, because Tibs didn’t believe they were done trying to kill him.

“Do you think you can get them to follow us?”

She whistled, and they stood. A different one, and they walked closer. Tibs remained on his guard. The dogs who’d come in with them moved among the new ones, sniffing them, but the dog creatures only took positions.

When Serba stepped forward, the mass of dogs moved with her. She grinned at Tibs. “You have no idea what I’d give to keep them.”

“Maybe Sto can make some that can leave,” Tibs replied, taking the lead.

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Serba knelt where the dog had crumbled away. It was the first casualty of a fight. The previous three and gone entirely in their favor. This group of guards had included one who’d had void, Tibs had realized after it had used essence to split this down into two and invert the part’s positions.

The other dogs tore it apart.

“What happens to them?” she asked, standing.

“I’m not sure. They’re made of the elements, so Sto can make more, but I don’t know if it’s going to be this one, or just another that looks like it.” He looked at her dogs. They

remained closer. “Something like that will happen to those who die in here. Sto absorbs everything and makes use of it. It’s how he gets stronger. Is it going to be a problem? Them dying.”

“I’m not going to break down,” she stated. “It’s why I train them. To do the brunt of the fighting. I’m just not as thoughtless with my troupes as some commanders are. How far to go?”

“A lot. Sto’s in the City Hall, and that’s almost on the other side of the city. It’s closer than the King’s house, I think. We haven’t reached that yet.”

“So, you know where you have to go during a run, and it’s just about surviving all the monsters?”

“And beating the puzzles. The permit office and the City Hall have them. The King’s house will too. Ganny likes to come up with puzzles.”

“Who’s that.”

“She helps Sto, guides him, tries to keep him from breaking the rules.”

“So, there’s a woman keeping this place in order?”

“I don’t know what she is. She isn’t living like we are, but she sounds like a girl to me, and Sto sounds like a guy. They don’t care if you call them it.”

“The dungeon’s a boy,” she said, in a tone that made it sound like it answered something.

“I don’t think Sto’s anything like we understand,” Tibs said. “He’s all this. When we break a wall, he feels it.”

“So you could kill—”

Tibs raised a hand as he sensed something at the limit of his range. For him to be able to tell a group was approaching meant they were strong, but before he worried about what that meant, he sensed the tint to their essence.

“Runners.” Tibs ran in their direction, ignoring Serba calling after him. He only sensed four of them, and one’s essence was fading.

“It’s Tibs!” he called before rounding the corner on them and still found himself almost colliding with the wall of blades that formed.

Quigly glared at him. “What are you doing in here? It’s our run.”

He pulled a healing potion. “I think she can use one. How come you don’t have any left?”

“Took all we had to get out of that palace alive,” the archer said. “Then this abyss cursed place went wild.”

“It’s like the dungeon’s feral again,” Quigly said.

“It’s not that,” Tibs said. “It’s being attacked.” He handed the potion to the rogue and as she drank it, he applied a weave of purity.

“Not again,” the sorceress said, sounding exhausted.

“They’re with me,” Tibs said. “Well, with her, and she’s with me.”

Serba maintained her distance from the group.

“Serb?” the archer called.

“Damon,” she replied.

“What is she doing here?” Quigly demanded. “Tibs, what the fuck is going on?” he

motioned to the dogs around her.

“It’s complicated.”

“No shit. Whenever isn’t it when you’re involved?”

“I didn’t—”

“I so don’t want to know.” The warrior ran a hand over his face. “I have enough problems of my own.”

“I’ll explain everything after I’ve saved the dungeon.”

“I’ll help,” Quigly said.

“We’ll help,” the archer added.

“No. Jen’s tapped out, and unless you lied, you barely have anything left.”

“I’m fine,” the rogue said. “That was one strong potion.”

“Then you can escort them to—”

“You’re all leaving,” Tibs said.

“Tibs, you can’t do this alone.”

“I saved him once already on my own,” Tibs replied, “and this time I have help.”

“Does she even have an element?”

“No.”

“Then how much help is she going to be?” Quigly winced. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to —”

“My feeling are fine,” Serba said. “But if you want a demonstration of what we can do, I’ll be happy to set my dogs on you, metal man.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Quigly said. “But you can still use the help, Tibs.”

“No.”

“Tibs, you need to—”

“You need to go back to Cross.”

The warrior stared at him. “Are you fucking kidding me? That woman wants to rip my b—” he glanced at Serba.

“Balls is the word you’re looking for,” she replied. “And my understanding is that you deserve it.”

“Of course she told you,” the warrior grumbled.

“She’s going to be pissed at me if it’s my fault you die and she doesn’t get to punish you. I don’t want her angry at me.” He’d learned enough from Jackal and Kro to know that Quigly and Cross would work things out after a good amount of screaming, and then time afterward.

“Tibs,” Quigly said calmly. “I’m not going to tell Jackal I left you here to die.”

“Then don’t tell him you saw me.”

“Tibs, why are you looking to die?”

“I’m not, but—”

“He can take care of himself,” Serba said. “He took on half a dozen guards at one time, did stuff I didn’t know was possible. And now we can help.” She motioned to the dogs.

“You need to take your team out,” Tibs said. “It’s not going to get any easier to reach the stairs.”

“Tibs,” Quigly said in exasperation.

“I’m going to be fine. I know what I’m doing.” Mostly. There was still stuff he needed to work out.

“If you don’t walk out of this dungeon, Tibs, I’m—”

“Jackal will probably beat you to it,” Tibs said.

“Alright. You heard him. We’re heading out. Stay on your guard.” The warrior glared at Tibs, then walked away.

“You and Damon?” Tibs asked once they were out of his range.

“He’s just a guy I know.”

“So,” the Them said, as Tibs started to ask if all the guys she knew called her ‘Serb’. “That’s why the dungeon takes it easy on your kind.”

“No,” Tibs said, looking up. “Sto doesn’t take it easy on us. He just knows the difference between Runners and townsfolk.”

“You’re all the same.” It snorted. “And I will see to it you don’t get to save this dungeon.”

“Why don’t you come here and stop me directly, then?”

The only answer was a retreating chuckle.

Tibs resumed walking.

“Is goading whatever you’re talking to a good idea?” Serba asked as she joined him and the dogs surrounded them.

“People say things they don’t want to when they get angry.”

“Only that’s not people, right?”

“It still makes mistakes.”

“And what mistakes has it made at this point?”

Tibs smiled at her. “It ignored you until it was too late.”