

Tibs slashed up, and the guard deflected the blow with its shield, losing part of it to the sharpness the filigree of Dhu added to the metal edge gave it. He jumped back instead of blocking the returned swing, having experienced how much strength they had even when they weren't overhead strikes. As soon as the guard's sword smashed in to the ground, Tibs ducked, sensing Khumdar's swinging in his direction. The impact staggered the gray-skinned golem person more than any of Tibs's strikes did; more than he thought the cleric's strength allowed.

He'd ask how that was later.

Khumdar caught the other guard's sword on his staff, deflected it and slammed the end into its face, cracking it and leaving wisps of darkness behind. Tibs spun on a leg before standing and swung at the guard trying to take advantage of the cleric's turned back. It wasn't as armored, going to speed over strength, and the tip of Tibs's sword left water in the cuts.

The golem didn't seem aware of either the damage or water; another reminder that as much as they looked like a form of people, they weren't. When enough criss-crossed its chest, Tibs sent the etching he'd held at the ready, and once it hit, the water turned to ice, spreading. It continued attacking, also seemingly unaware of that, and Tibs kept blocking and striking, adding more cuts and more water that immediately iced.

When it reached a shoulder, the arm no longer moved properly. But the golem attacked as if it was fine. The elbow, wrist, and hand moving, but unable to come close to Tibs.

Another cut and ice spread to a leg and the golem's attempt to step forward resulted in a limp that let Tibs inflict a long cut on the other leg, then turning to help Khumdar, confident this golem wouldn't be a problem.

The cleric had kept the two guards from landing blows and had managed a few of his own by the added darkness on them, but more were joining.

Tibs suffused himself with earth and barreled through the newcomers, and the pain in his side as the toothed lined sword bit into it was yet another reminder that Sto kept in mind the elements Tibs was immune to. He blocked the next strike and left shallow cuts on their armor. The spreading ice broke as they moved, showing it couldn't reach their body, but it impeded them sufficiently he was able to dispatch them.

He turned to help Khumdar in time to see the cleric smile and do a pulling motion that felt theatrical, but resulted into shadowed versions of the two people golems leaving the bodies, then them crumbling as he absorbed the darkness.

"You're teaching me that one," Tibs said, and Khumdar responded with one of his amused, enigmatic smiles.

"Okay," Jackal said, resting against a wall. "Other than taking too long, this was fun."

"The dungeon's found ways of making the golem people more resistant to fire," Mez said.

"And Corruption," Don added, wincing as he stretched.

"He's forcing us to think of new ways to fight," Tibs said, heading for the sorcerer. He was cut and had one break in his side. "I thought you were going to keep back." He applied a weave, keeping his sense on the approaching form. It was moving slowly, so he had time.

The sorcerer sighed in relief. "The dungeon is adapting to that, too. One of them

threw a mace at me.”

Tibs raised an eyebrow.

“It was made of something that resisted my corruption enough to do this.”

Jackal made a fist, grinning. “This always works for me.”

“We’re not all too thick headed for our own good,” Don replied with some bitterness.

“He’s thick everywhere,” Mez said. “That’s why nothing the dungeon throws at him works.”

“I am just that awesome.”

“That’s not the word I’d use,” Don muttered.

“Which is why I’m the one using it. There’s nothing the dungeon can do that will—”

The growl reverberated around them, and Tibs smiled, wondering if Sto knew Jackal well enough to have expected the statement and timed the response.

“You do love getting the dungeon to prove you wrong, don’t you?” Don asked, chuckling while Jackal looked around fearfully. The sound seemed to come from all around them.

“It’s there.” Tibs stepped toward the dark alley between two houses.

“Tibs,” Jackal warned. “If that’s where it is, how about we head in the other direction?”

He stood a dozen paces from the mouth of the alley and crouched, extending a hand. The head became visible, slightly higher than Tibs’s at the moment.

“Abyss!” Jackal exclaimed. “Tibs, move away!”

The dog’s growl intensified, its head locking onto the fighter as it stepped fully into the light. Jackal yelped, stepping back.

It was big, Tibs had to admit. If he stood, its shoulders would reach his stomach, and it had to mass as much as he did, at least. It was beautiful, with its black fur shimmering copper. He wondered if he could bring it out for Serba.

“Here, boy,” Tibs said, reaching into his pouch. The dog’s attention snapped back to him and it bared teeth. “Are you hungry?” He pulled the jerky out.

The growl broke with a whine as it tilted its head.

“Tibs…” Jackal warned.

“I guess he doesn’t feed you much, do he? Here, take it.”

It sniffed the air, then took a tentative step forward.

“Is it listening to him?” Mez asked in dismay.

“It’s okay,” Tibs said. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

It took another slow step.

“Tibs, you won’t be able to—”

It stopped and growled at the fighter.

“Okay, okay. I’m staying out of it!”

“So,” Don mused. “All dogs hate Jackal and love Tibs?”

It sniffed again and took another hesitating step.

“This is such a bad idea,” Jackal whispered.

With the next step, its nose touched the chunk of jerky, and it sneezed, then looked at

him with...worry? Tibs didn't move, and it leaned forward and closed its teeth on it. When it pulled, Tibs kept hold of it. The whine escaped as he looked at him.

"Stay," Tibs said, trying to match Serba's less angry way of ordering her dogs.

He let go, and the dog continued watching him. It tightened its jaw, and the jerky shattered. He reached for it as it chewed. "You're a good dog too, aren't you?" his hand pressed against the side of its head.

"What is he doing?" demanded a deep voice, resounding from all around him.

Tibs tensed in surprise, and the dog whined.

"I think that's called petting," Sto answered uncertainly.

"I know what it's called," the voice replied angrily. "How isn't it tearing him apart? Is this another one of the ways you're being soft on these people?"

"I'm not being soft on anyone," Sto replied defensively. "I don't know why he can do that. It's not like I can ask him, is it?"

Tibs forced his hand to relax and rubbed the dog's neck as it licked the pieces off the ground.

"Sto," Ganny said, voice far more deferential than Tibs had ever heard her. "Where did you take the template for the dogs? They aren't something that died within your range."

"From that human who patrols with a bunch of them. She spent enough time in the field before the door that I was able to get a sense of how one of them was made. It took a while to make a copy that was able to breathe. I didn't just want those to be animated, the way the BBs are. I wanted them—"

"Get on with it," the voice demanded.

"Well, when that one worked the way I wanted it to, I made more, playing around with how they look the way I do the golem people, then I set them to roam this floor."

How was there another voice? It had to be why Sto and Ganny didn't want him to talk to them. Which meant this new...person? didn't know about what he could do. What worried Tibs was how angry at Sto they seemed to be. He wanted to tell them Sto wasn't soft on anyone. He'd eaten a lot of them.

But now he was certain Sto was here. He took another piece of jerky and offered it to the dog when it had licked the ground clear of them. Okay, hopefully this was going to work. "Do you guys think there's going to be something to help with the sickness?" he asked, rubbing the dog's head as it ate.

"Does it even know what going on?" Jackal asked, and Tibs winced at the directness.

"What's wrong with the town?" Sto asked.

"That doesn't concern you," the voice replied sharply.

"That's where the Runners come from," Sto said. "If they're sick, I need to take that into account and—"

"No, you don't." The reply was more snarl than word.

Tibs had to forcefully ignore what his friends were saying in favor of Sto's conversation.

"I'm not here just to kill them," Sto snapped. "Ganny made that clear after some of them almost killed me and I was lashing out at the rest."

"You aren't allowed to make a floor any harder than the appropriate Runners for it can handle. If they brave it while not at their best, that isn't your responsibility."

“You’ve gone there,” Sto insisted. “How are they? Are they too weak for my floors?”

The voice had gone into Kragle Rock? Who were they? Wasn’t Tibs the only person who could hear a dungeon? Or at least, as far as Ganny knew. As well as Val and Craren.

“Your floors are perfectly adequate,” the voice replied dismissively.

“Ganny, how long has this going on?” Sto asked.

“Weeks,” the voice replied, annoyed.

“Is that a lot?” Sto asked.

“Time is something Sto has trouble with,” Ganny said, as a huff sounded. “It’s very much a them thing, and it’s never all that important to him.”

What? What did Ganny mean? Why emphasize it? She’d never really put the Runners as the outsiders the tone implied. In fact, the only time Tibs had heard her use it was...

The voice was them? The Them Ganny kept using to keep Sto from breaking the rules? The Them Sto kept scoffing at, and that Tibs thought even Ganny had been doubting they were real the last time she’d brought them up.

The Them was here, and by the tone—

“..Do not push me, Stone Mountain Crevice. My patience is more certainly finite.”

—and comments, they were judging Sto.

Where they the secret he and Khumdar has sensed about the town.

The dog whined.

Tibs reached into his pouch, but it was empty. “Sorry, boy. I don’t have anymore.” It canted its head as Tibs stood. “This is where we go back to you being a dungeon creature, I guess.” He took careful steps back, not taking his eyes off it. It remained relaxed, but he wasn’t sure if that meant anything. He’d seen how Serba’s dogs tensed when they were about to attack a criminal she set them on, but this was a dungeon creature.

“What is it waiting for?” the Them demanded.

“I don’t know,” Sto answered, perplexed.

“Tell it to attack.”

“I can’t,” Sto snapped.

“It is part of you,” the Them replied. “Everything here does what you want them to!”

“They would,” Sto replied angrily. “If someone hadn’t forced me to cut all ties to the creatures I made, after he caught in the third-floor boss kicking Runners around! Now, the creatures are independent. You want me to be able to control some of them? I’m going to have to remake them just like I had to remake the golem people for this team’s run so I’d have enough essence to make that fog you ordered me to put on that one so he’d be blinded.”

Thank you, Sto, for the explanation.

“Are you going to change the rules on me because you aren’t happy with what they cause?” Sto demanded. “Is that what rules are? There only to keep me from doing thing you don’t want?”

“So,” Tibs asked the dog. “What’s it going to be? If you don’t attack, I’ll bring you more jerky on my next run.”

“Is he...” The Them seemed at a loss. “Offering a bribe?”

“Can it remember him?” Ganny asked.

“Does it understand him?” The Them demanded, getting angry.

“How should I know?” Sto replied, exasperated. “You watched what happened just like I did, so you tell me. I didn’t give it the ability to understand the word they use, but there’s clearly something I don’t understand about the animal I made it from. And Ganny, I also don’t know that. It’s not like the Ratlings and Bunnylings. Those I made with specific instruction on how to imitate how people work. The dogs I only adjusted enough they could work inside me. I mean, unless one of the Runners kills it, I don’t have a reason to remake it, so... maybe? They are definitely more clever than I thought.”

The dog slowly turned its head and growled.

“Hey, I stayed right here,” Jackal protested.

It snorted, turned, and ran off.

“Okay,” he demanded, “What in the Abyss was that?”

“Maybe you’re about to get your answers,” Sto said.

Tibs shrugged. “It’s a dog. I figured I had nothing to lose by being nice.” He wasn’t telling the Them anything if he could help it.

“You could have lost a hand,” Don said, “at the very least. That was...risky.”

Tibs shrugged again. “I was ready to suffuse myself with earth if I had to.”

“I’m not scared of them the way Jackal is,” Mez said. “But I think that was almost Jackal-stupid level.”

“Way more stupid than that,” the fighter protested. “I know better than to go toward one of those things.”

“Are you sure there wasn’t more going on?” Don asked. “For a time, it looked like you weren’t even aware we were talking.”

Tibs smiled. “You could say I was listening to the dog.”

“I knew it!” Jackal exclaimed. “It’s all those essences you have. They let you do stuff to them, like making them like you.” He turned and headed in the opposite direction the dog had run off into.

“I don’t make them do anything,” he called after the fighter, then followed him at a leisurely pace, the sorcerer at his side. “What were you talking about?”

“The sickness. Your question about if we’d find anything that could help made me theorize about what such a thing would have to do.”

“And what’s that?”

“Well, this is just a theory. I can’t know if it would work, since all I have to work from is what I can see of the sickness’ effects and even the clerics don’t know the cause. It would have to be something that either prevents the drain of life, or somehow replenishes it. I don’t know if you’re aware of it, but Jackal’s man has something that’s been keeping the sickness at bay. An heirloom,” Don added when Tibs’s eyes widened in fear. “I know about it, because I helped adjust it to do more than simply slow the sickness. The ring lacks a way to efficiently pull the essence from around it to balance what he loses to the sickness. So whatever we find would have to be something that came with its own reserve, as well as a faster recharge, or, and here I’m not even sure if this is possible, but a way to convert the essences around us to the ones appropriate to helping the people.”

Don fell into silent thoughts. “We’d have to be extremely lucky to find such an item,” he finally said with a defeated sigh. “And as you are fond of reminding us, Tibs. Luck isn’t a thing.”