

Serba came to a stop at the top of the stairs. “How...” she couldn’t seem to continue, and awe showed on her face. Tibs fought the urge to push her on. “How is this possible?”

“The dungeon can change things inside himself.” He wanted to explain about Sto discovering the city, but the Them could be listening.

“But...” she looked at him. “None of the stories talk about...” she motioned to the expanse before them.

“We can’t talk about the runs.”

She scoffed. “Oh, I’ve heard Runners talk about the city plenty of times. But they never said anything about this being a king’s city. I figured it was like Kragle Rock.”

“It’s bigger than that.”

“I can see that.”

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

“Of course,” she replied in surprise. “Why didn’t you order me to get over myself and move?”

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

She kept up with him. “You have met my brother, right?” Her dogs spread around them.

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

She snorted.

Guards massed at the bottom of the steps, half a dozen of the stout gray skinned golems, each one with an element.

“Don’t step on the ice,” he said, stepping on it as it formed in a narrow band all the way to the bottom. He used air to add to the speed he gained to make sure he’d be there first.

Fire, Metal, Earth, Light, Corruption, and one he didn’t know.

Unlike with people, the essence in golem people didn’t gain a tint that let Tibs know what element they had, even if he couldn’t sense it. The essence that gave them life and the essence that let them do magic remained separated.

He suffused himself with earth, turning his body to stone. He formed an armor of ice over that, then added metal. It was the best he could think of against the elements he faced.

He ignored the ball of fire for the diversion it was. His armor could take it, and he was more interested in what that unknown element was being etched into in his path, steps before the end of the stairs. He made out the shimmering of light on what formed and now knew what he faced.

Crystal was more versatile than he’d expected. All he’d thought it useful for was to play with light, and make fragile knives. But that was before he remembered that essence wasn’t crystal. It was what the Runner wielding it made it to be. It could be made as strong as metal, as slick as ice, or as hard as earth. He’d watched Crystal Runners train, a fighter using it to deflect arrows, light attacks, and even fire.

This would be sharp. He could make out the points, and the net stretched past the stairs, beyond what they’d normally do. The golem people couldn’t plan for a specific Runner, so they shouldn’t know how much he could do, unless they were being directed.

And since he knew Sto was in trouble, this had to be the Them’s doing.

But that was okay. All they had to go on was what they’s seen Tibs do.

It was a good thing Don wasn't here, because Tibs was going to have to try a lot of things if he wanted to be sure to surprise his enemy.

He just hoped none of them exploded...unless that was what he needed it to do.

He etched air ahead of him and connected the lines with filigree of Dhu at the point for sharpness. Over that he put corruption, with a filigree of Ike, to make it solid. He didn't bother with Kha, since there wouldn't be enough time for Ike to rip the etching apart, then connected that filigree to the one of Dhu with Ool so he could—the corruption leeches into the air essence, eating at that etching and—

He was out of time.

His etching folded under the impact, and corruption weakened the net, but Tibs still ended up cut to the point he could hardly think. Enough, he couldn't stop his reflexive switching to purity to heal, and the golem's stone fist shattered his ice and metal armor and broke a lot of things in Tibs's chest as he flew into a building's wall.

The injuries healed before he hit, then those healed before he fell to the ground and got back to his feet. But the memory of the pain fogged his mind, and he wondered what was taking Jackal so long to take advantage of the distraction he'd provided.

Only Jackal wasn't there. He needed to deal with the golems himself. And as much sense as it made to keep purity when he was a distraction. This required being able to act without them having the time to react.

He suffused himself with Darkness and etched his sheath, then ran at the guards.

They tracked him, partially stepping out of the way of his attacks, and sending etchings in the area where he'd be, which he easily avoided.

This wasn't how they should react. Sto made them to be the way he understood people. Even this not-regular golem people had always acted on what they saw and heard, or the essence they could sense. This was them knowing where he was.

No, that didn't seem right. Like Sto, the Them could 'see' Tibs's essence, so knew where he was, even with the sheath. So if they were controlling the golems, they'd know where he was and would aim better. This was as if they were telling the golems where he'd be, but couldn't control how they'd act on the information.

That...sloppiness let him cut the light guard after blocking its attack, then plant his ice sword in the crystal guard, letting it explode ice inside as he formed a new one in time to parry the light sword, which cut it in half as it was deflected off target.

Dealing with it directly wasn't working. They were made to fight like this. He needed something that plays off the Them's need to tell them what to do.

He suffused himself with light and let it explode around him. Then made a rough person form out of darkness, away from the guard. A shake of the head, and it responded by turning to follow the escaping felon, only to jerkily stop and turn back toward him in time for Tibs to plant his new sword into it. He raised the sword with earth strength, cutting it from midsection to shoulder, and kicked the already crumbling body away. Two down and—

Fire erupted around him, and he couldn't keep from crying out at the pain.

'Finally!' the Them snarled. "Something you're feeble against."

He threw himself out of the conflagration, absorbing some of the fire to replenish his reserve and switched to—

Raw corruption hit and staggered him. But this didn't cause pain. He made a sword to

parry the metal guard's attack as he suffused himself with purity. The metal had already been eaten before it connected with Tibs's ice one and shattered. Another way Sto had made them like people was that they weren't immune to their teammate's attacks. He took hold of the corruption and engulfed the metal guard in it. It kept trying to hit him until there wasn't enough of it left to move.

Tibs jumped, using air for added height, as he felt the fire etching form, then a torrent of wind sent him out of control. He suffused himself with earth before hitting the ground. Had he missed one?

Spreading sense revealed the approaching golem.

He stayed on the ground, channeling earth, as the earth guard slammed its foot on his back. There was no point in trying anything else with the fire guard there to hurt him. He sent his essence into the ground and ripped control of it away from the Them with more ease than he expected he'd manage with Sto. They fought him for it, but it was already too late. The ground under the guard opened up and closed once it had swallowed it.

He sent more essence to do the same to the corruption and earth guards. The corruption one sent himself up on a jet of essence while the other ignored it. Tibs opened the ground under it, and only then realized it had an etching stretching as the ground moved, keeping it from falling in.

Tibs stared, impressed at the cleverness. It had to be something Ganny had come up with. This was her kind of clever.

The guard's foot continued slamming on Tibs's back, to no effect. He had too much essence for the guard to hurt him. He pushed himself up, and it switched to punching him. The earth guards Sto made were a lot like earth Runners. Direct, without bothering adding sneakiness to their attacks, the way Jackal did.

When Tibs punched the guard, he didn't bother with just earth. Like him, a punch wouldn't do much damage, but the added corruption he wrapped his fist in seep in, with etching of Ool, since he'd already seen how it made that element spread, speed things up enough he turned his back to it and face the corruption guard.

An etching of air formed, and Tibs looked in that direction. "Not this time." He wrapped earth essence around the buildings on each side of the golem and slammed them together.

When he looked at the corruption golem again, the etching it had been forming shifted, became far more complexed and large than anything Tibs had seen before.

"I am done with this," the Them snarled. "Lets see how you deal with this."

Tibs smiled. "Well, if you're going to be this nice about it. I've been looking for a reason to try this one." He channeled purity and threw it raw at the guard.

The purity didn't 'hit' the etching or the golem. As far as Tibs sensed, it went right through them, but it also took some of what made them away at the same time. Just like Carina's body had faded away under what the purity clerics had sent at her, the golem became translucent, then transparent, then it and the etching were no longer there anymore.

He looked up, absorbing the essence back into himself, and was mildly surprised there was nothing else there. Where had what made the golem gone to? "Nothing to say? Sto and Ganny usually comment after I pull off something like this."

"What are you?" a woman asked, and Tibs spun. He'd forgotten about Serba. She

watched him and the battlefield with a mix of awe and fear. The dogs were seated around her, so Tibs knew she had been standing there for a while.

"I'm a runner."

"You took on..." she motioned around Tibs.

"What you are," the Them said darkly, "is an abomination."

"I can do more than most," Tibs answered her. "Doesn't mean I'm anything other than a Runner." He looked up as she stared in disbelief. "As for you. What have you done to Sto?"

"The dungeon broke the rules."

"You mean the way you are right now?" Tibs replied.

"And now I understand why," the Them continued as if he hadn't spoken. "You made them do it."

"Sto helps because he cares," Tibs snapped. "The town was sick and he could help, so he did."

"Dungeons don't care," they replied. "They exist to perform a function and nothing more."

"Make us better. I know, we—"

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

"I think something's gone wrong then. We get stronger when we survive. We get loot from the dungeon."

"You need the enticement," they replied dismissively. "The living are all the same kind of cowards. You grow until you choke the essence out of everything without doing more than the bare minimum. Only when your greed is fed, do you take risks. So a few of you survive and 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'll see to that myself."

"Then what's the problem with telling me, anyway?"

The Them didn't reply. Tibs cursed. They'd left to do something, and he doubted he was going to enjoy it.

"Tibs?" Serba asked, tone fearful.

"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 taken control."

"Who is Sto?" she looked like she was debating running up the stairs.

He motioned around them. "He's 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 her plaintively.

He took a step back and spoke cautiously. "I know it sounds like I've fallen into the abyss and left something down there. But dungeons are people, in a way. But no one knows it."

“Except you.” She didn’t sound convinced.

“I’ll explain everything. I promise, Serba. But we have to save him first.” He motioned to her finger. “He made the rings that stopped the sickness. It isn’t the first time he helped us, and now it’s our time to help him.”

“Why isn’t the entire guild here helping you?”

Tibs snorted. “Because all the guild would do, if they knew, is find ways to take advantage of him more than they already do.”

“What about the other Runners? Your team?” she narrowed her eyes. “Does Jackal know about...” she motioned around them.

“Of course he does,” Tibs replied, not meaning for the exasperation to come through. “He’s my team leader. But I... I didn’t have time to get anyone else,” he lied. “You’re the one person I need helping me.”

She smiled as she straightened, and Tibs realized she thought he’d considered her more important to this than Jackal. She wasn’t wrong. This was one time when she was better, but he didn’t point that out. He didn’t understand why they didn’t get along, but he’d make use of it.

This one time.