

Three blocks later, there was another attack. Four guards this time, and Tibs dealt with them easily. They ignored Serba and her dogs even if she stayed at the edge of the fight, looking unsure what she should do. Did the Them not consider her a threat? Did they even 'see' regular people? It could be their essence was too thin for them to notice.

Unlike the previous time, where she only noticed the coins the golems had left behind after crumbling away as they were leaving the fight, now she gathered them as soon as the fighting was done.

Then it was five blocks until Tibs stopped, sensing them approach from the alleys. There were a lot of them, and he hoped he was right about this.

"This is up to you," he told Serba as the first dog stepped out from between two houses. It was more massive than crusher, with a mottled gray and brown coat.

"What do you mean, up to me?" she demanded as another followed it. "Just one of those things is going to rip my dogs apart." This one was smaller, with pure white, curly fur. Then there was a third and more behind them and becoming visible from the other alleys. Blocking all escapes.

"I don't want you to fight them. I want your to order them to stop. Maybe get them to fight for you."

"I can't do that! Tibs, do you have any idea how long it takes to train a dog? And I doubt those things are—"

"They're your dogs, Serba." He formed an armor of ice. He'd heard how they'd bitten through Lawrence's arm, and he'd seen them snap wood posts without effort.

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

"Serba, you need to trust me." He suffused himself with earth for the added strength and protection. "I'll explain once we're no longer in danger from them."

"Tibs, I can't just—"

"Now, Serba!" He stepped before the massive dog as it jumped and punched it.

"By the abyss," she muttered as the dog that followed it closed its teeth on Tibs's arm, cracking the ice armor. "No wonder you hang out with my brother. You're just as crazy."

He shook his arm, and when the dog flew into others, it was because the ice had broken away. He filled the gaps and took a breath to both tell Serba to stop wasting time and ready himself for the mass approaching.

She let out a shrill whistle that went up and down in burst.

The dogs stopped advancing, head snapping up and ears forward.

"How?" she asked, confused.

"No!" The Them snapped. "Attack!"

Dogs shook themselves and resumed growling.

"Tell them to stop," Tibs told her.

"I don't know if—"

"Serba, please just do it," he said, trying to swallow the worry. "The Them is trying to force them to attack and coming here or dealing with your dogs was never part of my plans for today, so I don't have jerky on me."

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

Three dogs ran at them.

“Sit!” she snapped, then looked at Tibs. “What is it—I said, sit!” she yelled as one took another step after looking at the two who had stopped, seeming confused.

It, and every other dog in the street, sat.

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

Tibs readied for the dogs to break from Serba’s order, but they had their gaze locked on her as she looked around at them.

“How is this possible?”

Tibs didn’t take his eyes off the dogs as he spoke, waiting for the Them to force one to obey. “Sto needs to start with something he’s encountered. It was rats and bunnies on the first floor because they were things that had wandered inside when he was getting the floor ready. I think that was before the guild found him. Once he has one, he can try things with it; it’s how he made the Ratlings and Bunnylings.”

The Them had yet to give an order Tibs could hear, or simply control one of them. Maybe they couldn’t do that? He allowed himself to relax slightly.

“As he grew, his influence stretched out. It lets him make larger floor, but it also reaches more than halfway toward the town. Well, more than that really, since Kragle Rock’s grown so much.” He shook his head. That wasn’t import—

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

Maybe it was to her.

“No. Living things keep him from controlling what’s around them. And he wouldn’t do that. Unlike what someone thinks—” he glared at the ceiling “—Sto is a good dungeon. He only makes creatures within his walls, to test us, the Runners. But he can listen in and watch, the way dungeons do it, anywhere his influence reaches. He likes watching people when he isn’t busy. When he sensed your dogs, he made a copy of one, then played with how it looked until.” He motioned to the variety of dogs sitting around them. All watching her.

That the Them didn’t respond couldn’t bode well.

She continued to look around; the implications seeming to take time to sink in. “So they’re all my dogs,” she whispered. Then looked at him, awe replaced with annoyance.

“That’s why you can also bribe—”

“Only when I have jerky.”

That did not appease her. She whistled a different sequence and, as one, the dogs laid down.

The Them didn’t say anything.

Tibs wasn’t sure they were even here anymore. Hopefully she’d be able to use them in the coming fights, because Tibs didn’t think the Them going elsewhere meant they were done trying to kill the two of them.

“Can you get them to follow us?”

She whistled, and they stood. A different sequence, and they approached.

Tibs stayed on his guards, but they ignored him, or her. The only animals behaving the way Tibs expected were the dogs that had come in with them, moving among the new arrivals and sniffing them as the dog golems took position.

Serba took a step forward, and the mass of dogs moved with her. She grinned. “You have no idea what I’d give to keep them.”

“When this is over, Sto might be able to make you some that’ll be able to leave with us.”

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Serba knelled where the dog had crumbled away, leaving a silver coin behind.

It was the first casualty of a fight. It had taken four until the guard they encountered had one sneaky enough to surprise them by splitting this dog into two using void. Tibs only knew the element it had by what it had done, forming a doorway in the middle of the dog and closing it.

The other dogs had torn it apart before Tibs had gotten over the surprise.

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

“I don’t know.” He thought back to what Sto had told the Them. “They’re made of essence, so Sto can remake them. He has templates, but I don’t know if it means they’ll be like this one, or just look like it.” He looked at her dogs. They stayed closer to her than the dungeon made ones. “Something like that’s going to happen to those who die here. Sto absorbs everything that’s left behind and makes use of it. It’s how he grows. 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.” He started walking. “How much further?”

Tibs looked at the coin she left behind, then joined her. “A lot. Sto’s in the City Hall, and that’s almost on the other side of the city, but it’s closer than the king’s house, I think. We haven’t found that yet.”

“So, you know where you have to go, and it’s just about surviving the monsters while you get there?”

“We have to figure out where to go. And there are puzzles and traps. A lot of buildings have them. I think those are the important ones. The ones where Ganny put the clues that will lead the teams to the king’s house. She likes working with puzzles.”

“Who’s this Ganny?”

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

“So, there’s a woman keeping the place in order?” she asked, smirking.

“I don’t think she’s a woman. I don’t know what she is. She isn’t a person the way we are, just like Sto is a person in a different way than us. But she sounds like a girl to me, and Sto sounds like a guy. They don’t care if you call them it.”

“And the dungeon’s a boy.” Her tone sounded like learning that made something fall into place.

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

“So, someone could come in and kill—”

Tibs raised a hand as he sensed something at the limit of his range. He focused through the miasma to work out why they didn’t feel like golems. Then he ran as he made out the tint to their essence.

“Runners!” he yelled as a reply to Serba’s call. Four of them, one of which was losing essence fast. He reached in this pouch and cursed. He’d left the potions with his armor, since there weren’t scheduled for a run today.

“It’s Tibs!” he yelled when he thought he was close enough to be heard. He still had

to stop to keep from colliding with the etching that formed in a wall of swords.

“What are you doing in here?” Quigly demanded, glaring. “It’s our run.”

“She needs help,” he replied, reaching into his pouch. “How come she didn’t drink a potion?”

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

If they didn’t have one, how was he going to pull this off? Or did it matter anymore if they knew he had more than one element? His fingers closed on something that wasn’t a coin and he pulled it out. “This will help.” He showed the small crystal and worked at not showing his puzzlement. He had no memory of putting that in there, and it had been a long time since his fingers had found pockets without him noticing.

Or maybe it was just that he’d stop noticing if the coins in his pouch at the ends of a day matched didn’t what they should be? It wasn’t like he looked in it all that often.

“It’s like the dungeon’s gone feral again,” Quigly said; the wall disappeared into essence.

“It’s not that.” He put the crystal in Jen’s hand. “It’s being attacked.” He made a splint over her body to keep her essence from leaking, then made a weave of purity.

“Not again,” the sorcerer said, her word barely audible through her exhaustion, as the mass of essence rounded a corner.

“They’re with me,” Tibs said as they got ready for a fight. “Well, with her, but she’s with me.”

A whistle from Serba and the dogs came to a stop.

“Serb?” the archer called.

“Damon,” she replied, returning the greeting in a flatter tone than his had been.

“What is she doing in here?” Quigly demanded. “Tibs. What the fuck is going on?” He motioned to the army of dogs sitting at her feet.

“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.”

Quigly gave Tibs an indignant look. “I’ll help.”

“We’ll help.”

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

“I’m fine,” the rogue said, handing the crystal back to Tibs. “That thing’s magic is strong enough, I can still feel it working.”

“Then you can escort Mort and—”

“You’re all leaving,” Tibs said. They were all injured, and without healing potions they wouldn’t— “hold this and pass to the others,” he told the archer.

“Tibs, you can’t do this alone,” Quigly said.

As soon as Mort took it, Tibs applied a weave of purity. Hopefully, there would be enough left to help through the other fights.

“I saved him once without help,” he replied. “And I have it now.”

“Abyss, what is this thing?” the archer asked, peering at the crystal.

“Just something I found.”

The sorcerer snatched out of Mort’s hand. “I don’t feel any—” Her eyes went wide as Tibs applied the weave to her.

“Does she even have an element?”

“No.” He motioned for her to hand it back, and when she hesitated, he took it and offered it to Quigly.

“Then how much help can she be?” he winced, reaching for it, and looked over his shoulder. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“My feelings are fine,” Serba replied. “But I’ll be happy to demonstrate what I’m capable of, if you really need me to, metal man.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Quigly’s eyes widened as Tibs applied the weave. He shook himself. “But you can use more help, Tibs.”

“No.” This wasn’t about the help he might or might not need.

“Tibs, you need to—”

“You have to go back to Cross!”

The warrior stared at him in disbelief. “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 said. “And my understanding is that you deserve it.”

“Of course she told you,” Quigly grumbled.

“She’s going to be pissed at me if it’s my fault you die and she doesn’t get to punish you so you can make up with her. I’ve seen her angry and I don’t want her angry at me.”

“She isn’t going—”

“You two are going to scream at one another, then you’re going to talk about it, then you’re going to make up and have you time with her. Trust me, I’ve seen Jackal and Kroseph go through that often enough.”

Quickly shook his head in amusement, then sobered. “Tibs, I’m not going to tell Jackal I left you in 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, annoyed. “He took on half a dozen guards at one point. Did that magic stuff you all do and won.” She motioned to the dogs. “And now he has our help.”

“Take your team out,” Tibs told the warrior. “It’s not going to get any easier getting to the stairs.

“Tibs,” Quigly said in exasperation.

“I’m going to be fine. I know what I’m doing.” Mostly. This was no different from a run. There was always stuff to work out on the way to the boss room.

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

“Jackal’s going to beat you to it,” Tibs said.

The warrior let out a slow breath. "Alright. You heard him. We're heading out. Stay on your guard." He gave Tibs a glare, then walked away.

"You and Damon?" Tibs asked once they were out of sight.

"He's just guy I know."

"No wonder the dungeon takes it easy on your kind," the Them said in disgust as Tibs was about to ask her how many guys she let get away with calling her 'Serb'.

"Sto doesn't take it easy on us," Tibs replied. "We've all lost too many friends in here."

"And you are going to lose more," they taunted. "Once you are dead, I will ensure the things that exist outside this pitiful dungeons suffer despite the protection they received."

"How about you come here and stop me right now, then?" Tibs called back. "Come on, I'm right here. Not brave enough to take on someone as Street as me?"

The only answer was a retreating chuckle.

Tibs resumed walking.

"Is goading whatever you're talking to a good idea?" She asked, stepping next to him and the dogs surrounding them.

"People say things they don't mean to when they get angry."

"Only that's not people, right?"

"They still make mistakes."

"What mistakes had it made at this point?"

Tibs smiled at her. "It's ignoring you."