

“Jackal!” Tibs snapped as the ground shook and the disks began to turn at different rates.

The fighter ran out of the building. “Sorry, I didn’t think it—”

“That’s not new,” Mez said, tuning to face the walls growing from the ground to surround the plaza. He cursed when pulling on the bow’s string did nothing. “I have a score of arrows,” He warned, taking one from the quiver at his hip, “and I don’t think they’re doing to regenerate without essence to feed it. Once I’m out, I’ll be useless.”

“And I’m already useless,” Don said.

Tibs peering into the room to look at the rings’ motion and immediately saw he’d been wrong; most turned, but the bottom two didn’t. It had to mean something.

“Do I look like I have a staff!” Don yelled, pulling Tibs attention to his team.

“I meant—”

“I’m a sorcerer!” Don yelled at Jackal. “I’m not a fighter, throwing myself into a fight to die!”

“Don,” Mez started.

“It’s your job to protect me!” the sorcerer looked around, terrified, and Tibs went to him.

“The wall has holes!” Mez yelled, and Don ran for the closest one.

“You aren’t leaving me behind!”

“People are coming through!” Jackal yelled as Don fell, trying to stop and turn.

“We aren’t going to leave you,” Tibs told him, uselessly trying to sense the golem people. “Breathe, Don. Breathe yourself now. You’re on my team, and dying’s not allowed, remember?”

“How is the dungeon making them work if there isn’t any essence in here?” Mez asked, joining Tibs and Don.

The sorcerer’s breathing was ragged, but as he looked around at the stout gray skinned golem people, the fear left his eyes, replace by calculation.

“The same way we aren’t dead,” he said, his breathing steadying. “Tibs says they’re filled with the same essence everyone has, so just likes it’s protecting us, it’s protecting them.”

Tibs helped him stand.

“Would that not mean they are as limited as we, if that is the case?” Khumdar asked.

“Except they’re golems,” Mez replied as the creatures stepped away from the wall and the holes that had let them in closed. “Stone’s a lot tougher than most of us.”

“People Golem,” Tibs said, wishing he didn’t need essence to be able to sense through it. If Sto could change the wall, it had to mean there was essence there.

“But the ones made like these,” Don said, straightening his robes, “are tougher than the ones that look like us. Like they’re made of a mix of flesh and stone. And there are twelve of them.”

Tibs pulled his attention away from the wall.

“I’ll deal with half of them,” Jackal said. “You four deal with the rest.”

The people golems were the problem to face. Then, the rings, since they had to be the puzzle, and once that was solved, the walls would go down.

“May I remind our leader he is not currently made of stone?”

They looked like the guards they'd encountered patrolling the streets.

"I didn't have that for any of the pit fights before I came here."

Muscular and wearing armor. Two were slightly taller, maybe matching Tibs, and they wore metal armor where the others looked to be armored in something made of scales, like the dragons, except they didn't glow. If that was because they weren't enchanted or the lack of essence kept the glow from being visible... Tibs would find out when they fought.

"But were are armed and armored in those pits?" Mez asked.

"So they aren't fighting fair. Like that's any different from the fights I've been in. Don, stay by Mez. If you can think of a way to help, do so, but don't get yourself killed, or Tibs is going to have to yell at you."

"Doesn't that go for you too?" Mez asked.

"I'll be fine," Jackal replied.

"I'll do my best to help him," Mez said. "Are you going to be okay, Khumdar?"

"Fortunately, I have had to teach that cleric how to fight staff to staff. It has improved my own abilities."

"Tibs?" Jackal asked.

"I'm fi—" The knife didn't materialize out of wherever they went when Tibs sent one away. Sto had said it was in his armor, but there were no hidden sheaths for them. Tibs figured it was the same kind of weave that let Jackal's and his coins pouch take more than they look like they should, only... somewhere he didn't know.

He reached into his coin pouch, but only felt coins and papers. Why hadn't he thought to keep at least one knife there for when—He pawed at his bracer and felt the end of the pommel in the hidden sheath. "I'm good."

Not great. The knife looked so small. But at least it was a weapon. Tibs looked at Don. "It's going to be okay."

The sorcerer's responding nod was sharp, and Tibs figured the stoic expression was to hide the fear.

Tibs stepped away and set his sight on the smallest of the golem people. Maybe he was a rogue too, with the short sword and a set of armor that seemed to be more leather than scales. They could win, he reminded himself. Sto didn't set the traps to outright kill, but to teach.

And this was about teaching them how to fight without essence.

When he couldn't breathe the fear away, he swallowed it. He'd do this.

The 'rogue' picked up speed, pulling away from the others, and Tibs walked in its direction. At the last moment, he reversed his grip on the knife and used it to block the sword, then shouldered his opponent hard, staggering it away.

Good, just like the other guards. Even if they looked like they were part stone, they were still more like actual people. Sto was sticking to what he had established instead of adding challenges. He dodged the swing, only to stagger back from the punch it distracted him from. He moved his jaw through the pain.

So they had numbers and skill. Sto knew there wouldn't be essence here, and he'd made the golem people so they wouldn't depend on that.

Tibs stepped as his opponent moved, maintaining the distance, evaluating it the way Quigly had taught him, looking for the patterns in its motion he could take advantage of. He

had grown lax, depending on his sword's changing length to surprise his opponents.

As they move, he caught sight of Jackal, surrounded, hitting as much as he was hit. Mez stood, arrow notched and waiting, with Don behind him, the fear visible now that he wasn't the focus of attention.

Khumdar was...he'd be who was fighting behind Tibs.

He rushed the golem person as they started the swing, sidestepped the already in motion sword and cut through its armor into its 'flesh', leaving a deep gash, then his grin, and motion were ended by the sword coming down through his chest.

Tibs stared at the pommel, trying to understand why he was still alive, or at least why he wasn't screaming in pain. The golem person stepped back, pulling the sword out. Why wasn't it covered with blood?

The question was chased away by the sword coming back down, and Tibs jumped out of the way. Why ever he wasn't dead meant he had to stay in the fight. He could look for answers once they'd won.

He dodged the next attacks, then darted in and scored another gash, this time getting out of the way from the following attack.

They circled each other.

This couldn't be something Sto had done. They'd had that talk a while back, and he wouldn't treat Tibs any differently than the other Runners. Then why was it?

Why wasn't the sword—

He hesitated, was that—

The golem person was on him, the sword heading for—the metal sword—his chest again. It went in and through. Like before, like anytime metal was used in an attempt to hurt him, he didn't feel anything. His armor resisted slightly as it exited, finding a part of leather that wasn't already damaged.

It wasn't because he couldn't use his essence that he no longer had his elements.

Metal couldn't hurt him. Even here, where essence didn't exist.

He grabbed the rogue's hand as he pulled the sword out and slammed the knife into the wrist. With a hard push, he severed the hand-off, then dodged the punch, and he pulled the sword out.

He put all his strength behind the slice, and the golem's head flew off its body as the sword's weight carried Tibs into a near fall.

He'd forgotten swords had weight to them. No matter how much metal he added to his ice sword, it weight nothing. Even when he picked up a metal one, he made them weight nothing. But without essence, it was all there.

Although... Tibs swung it, once he regained his footing, and with expecting the weight, it the motion was even, if not entirely expertly done. Somehow, he remembered the short sword he'd trained with before making his ice one being heavier.

Well, since he was armed, Tibs needed to go help his team. Jackal was down to three golem people and grinned like a madman. Mez and Don had moved as the fighting shifted, but were still without direct opponents, which left Khumdar.

Tibs ran at the cleric, who kept the four golem people from crowding him through spinning his staff far more expertly than someone who'd just 'gotten better because he had to teach Clara'. Him and his secrets, again.

Tibs shouldered two out of the way, then felt the sword's pressure through his armor. "Should you not—" Khumdar dodged a swing and replied with the butt of his staff into the golem person's chest, but metal armor meant it only staggered slightly. "—be more cautious?"

"It's fine." Tibs cut a sword arm as the sword in his back pushed through his chest and the already present gash in the armor there. "They can't—"

The punch sent him skidding on the floor, his armor ripped from center to side. The pain in his face went away, and he realized he was suffused with Purity.

"We can suffuse ourselves!" he exclaimed, then scrambled away from the fighter in the metal armor approaching. Where had his sword gone?

"I am well aware of that fact," Khumdar said, shattering a golem person's arm with a staff strike, then another so hard that when it hit the floor, it crumbled away.

"Well, I didn't know that." Tibs formed his shield to block the incoming fist, then cursed as the impact on his arm broke it and sent him sliding on the floor again. It was healed as he got to his feet. He dodged another punch, then slammed a palm against the metal arm to divert it, and was surprised the metal was warm against his skin. Then the essence there—

His head still spun as the slide came to a stop. He groaned, pushing himself to all fours. How had he sensed the essence in the armor? His head cleared, and he looked at his hand. The ripped apart glove. He'd made skin contact with it.

"Tibs!" Khumdar yelled, and he barely rolled out of the way of the kick.

He reached for the golem person's face. He could—no, he couldn't. He dodged the punch. He couldn't simply drain the essence out. He'd agreed to that. He reached for the golem's face again.

So he'd put essence in.

He grabbed onto it and sent fire into the golem. The punch lifted him and broke the contact, but as he raised his head and pushed himself off the floor, the golem person was staggering, smoking, as parts blackened.

Beyond them, Mez was fighting a golem person, hitting them with his bow to little effect.

"Don!" Tibs yelled at the sorcerer, who had backed away from the fighting until he was against the wall. "It's like with the green stone! Touch means you can affect it!"

Don looked at him uncomprehendingly and Tibs stepped around the crumbling golem person as Khumdar let out a pained groan.

"Help Mez!" he yelled, cursing internally for forgetting the cleric was already in trouble.

Tibs hoped this worked. He suffused himself with earth and he collided with Khumdar. The golem person's hit sent Tibs to the ground hard enough his breath left him, but nothing had broken, and Khumdar was getting to his feet.

In the distance, Don let out a scream that sounded more terrified than aimed at inspiring terror.

Tibs hoped that wasn't him running away. He wanted Don to be better than that.

His head rang from the following punch, and his head left a crack in the ground from the impact there.

There was motion around him. Black, the clacking of something on something else. Sounds that were different.

“...need help.”

He knew that voice.

“Tibs,” Khumdar said, that was who owned the voice. “I will need assistance if we are to be victorious.” There was strain in it, and he hoped that the Tibs in question would come to help Khumdar. He liked the cleric, even with all his secrets.

“Tibs.” The strain was greater.

Didn’t he know that Tibs, too?

Of course he did. He was Tibs.

He suffused himself with purity, and his mind cleared. Earth again, and kicked the legs out from under of the golem person Khumdar was keeping from striking Tibs. Khumdar helped it down with a strike in the back, then Tibs kicked its head with enough strength it ripped off and the body crumbled away.

“It appears that you must still be cautious while fighting.” The cleric offered his hand, then pulled Tibs to his feet.

Tibs picked up the sword. “I think this is the dungeon showing we’ve gotten used to relying on our essence.”

“I had gathered as much.”

Tibs looked around and stared at Don on the back of a golem, clinging as it pummeled him with blows until it melted, then crumbled away, leaving Don curled in on himself on the floor. He took a step toward the sorcerer as Jackal punched the last of the golem person he’d been fighting. He turned, waved at Tibs, then toppled over.

“Jackal!” Tibs ran for his friend.