

Chapter 82

The attack came out of nowhere.

The tunnel had widened until they could stand side by side, and Tibs wondered if this would qualify as a room when he felt the essence above him shift, and before he could work out what was happening, creatures dropped on them.

They were numerous and fast, armed with swords and shields. Tibs had a sense of lean stone creatures as he worked with Jackal and Khumdar to create space for Carina and Mez to join in the fight.

Even using his bow as a staff, Mez wasn't effective in close range and Carina only had ranged attacks.

Tibs iced the floor, but they didn't fall. A glance as he blocked a sword with his shield showed him they had claws that dug into the ice. Their faces were dog-like, with sharp fangs they sometimes tried to bite him with.

Would Sto call them Doglings?

Once the creatures were all destroyed, Tibs let go of Water and used his essence to stop his wounds from bleeding. He caught his breath, then looked at the others. Jackal's stone body was scratched, but they didn't go deep. Carina had managed to keep them at bay, while Mez only had bruises.

Khumdar's leg was broken, so Tibs went to him and wrapped it in essence. "I need to practice with Purity, so I can figure out how to properly heal." He stepped away and channeled Water, studying what happened to Khumdar's wrap. It remained as he'd set it.

"You're bleeding again," Mez pointed out.

"This is why. The essence I use on you stays, but on me, it changes to whatever element I'm channeling." He iced his wounds.

"Why don't you just switch to Purity, heal yourself, and then back," Mez said. "That's not going to be long enough for you to screw things up, is it?"

"It isn't that simple," Carina said, while Tibs focused on going through the rubble instead of acknowledging the archer's tone. "It's not just pushing essence in. New clerics will practice night and day before they can get that right."

"It is unfortunate that watching others struggle to achieve results does not impart the knowledge of how they succeeded."

"I sensed how the clerics healed during the siege," Tibs said, "but until I can trust my actions while channeling Purity, I can't practice it." Not that he thought how they did it would work for him if copying how Carina used her element hadn't before.

"Then try it now," Mez said.

"No," Jackal replied, taking a sword from the rubble. "If something goes wrong, and he hurts himself worse, it puts everyone at risk. We stick with what we know works." He looked around. "Does anyone know what happened?"

"I think the dungeon's using the same kind of doorways it made for us to bypass floors to keep the creatures out of Tibs's sensing range," Carina said.

“Smart woman,” Ganny commented.

Tibs considered what Mez said. He couldn't just switch to Purity, but he could switch between water and his element easily and without affecting his behavior. The problem was maintaining what he'd made once he switched.

He could manipulate outside essence even while channeling a different one, so his problem was how to get his element from outside without drawing it from his team. He looked at the broken creatures. They had none left. Once they died, any essence they still had returned to Sto, not that they had much then. The level of essence they had seemed to indicate how much life they still had.

He'd have to remember that going forward.

He'd also have to practice pulling his essence out of them a little at a time. Sto didn't want him to kill them that way, but he'd have to be okay with a slight drain. But that didn't help him now. The ice would crack the instant he had to move quickly, and he'd bleed again.

He studied his bracers and the reserves there.

Curious, he emptied the one of Water essence into his main reserve. The crystal felt like any of those they found, empty of essence. Which meant he could put a different element there. He switch to his element and filled it. Going back to channeling Water did not affect it.

He now had nine elements he could access, but as soon as he pulled on his element, he was channeling it, the same as with the others.

So it wasn't that easy.

But if he had a reserve of his element when he channeled Water, shouldn't that give a wrap he applied to himself something to remain anchor to once he switched? Was that even how it worked?

He melted the ice on his injuries and replaced it with a wrap of his essence, focusing on only using what was in the bracer. The wraps nearly drained it completely. Working with such a vast reserve, even as low as it currently was, made him forget how much each wrap required.

Another reason to get a handle on Purity as soon as possible.

This was just another version of sensing and manipulating, he told himself. Once he'd already done with Earth.

He slowly changed to channeling Water, not that it helped. The change was sudden, and he'd feared he'd lost the sense of the wraps but once his sense settled, the wraps were still there.

He smiled.

Just like the wrap stayed when he placed one on Khumdar, now that he had a little of his essence still, it remained. He couldn't sense any connection between the reserve and the wraps, but it worked, and that was what mattered.

He noticed the silence, then his friends watching him.

“You did something,” Carina said.

He pointed to his no longer bleeding injuries. “I found a way around my essence changing when I channel Water.” He tapped the bracer. “With some of my essence in there,

it's staying. I won't be able to make wraps in a hurry, but what I'll make will stay now."

"Are you sure there's no risk they'll vanish in the middle of a fight?" Jackal asked.

"No, but I don't have to think about it for them to stay, so it should be fine."

"Okay. That works for me. Since Carina says the dungeon can drop creatures on us without warning, I want us to—"

Stone grinding against stone came from further ahead, stopped, started again, then stopped and started.

"That isn't a door," Carina said.

"Sounds like someone dragging an injury," Jackal said.

"One of the Doglings?" Tibs asked.

"They're called Gnolls," Ganny said.

"They're called Gnolls," he corrected himself.

Carina shook her head. "The dungeon needs to come up with better names."

"I didn't come up with that one," Sto protested.

"It sounds too heavy to be one of those," Jackal said. "And it's coming toward us."

"I didn't make up the name either," Ganny said. "It's something another dungeon made, I copied."

Tibs closed his eyes and rubbed his temple.

"Tibs?" Khumdar asked.

"Sorry. Too many conversations right now." He focused on the distant sound.

"Sounds like there's only one. Are we checking it out?"

"Oh definitely," Jackal replied, grinning. "If it's big and lumbering, I want a go at it."

"Let's not get overconfident," Carina said. "It could be a decoy. The dungeon has plenty of creatures that can move quietly." He motioned around them. "Or just drop them on us."

"How many coins did we get from the Gnolls?" Tibs asked.

"Thirty-six silver," Mez replied.

"And this sword." Jackal handed it to Khumdar and headed toward the sound.

Tibs was alert for any change in the concentration of essence around them as they followed Jackal. The creature came into view as they went around a bend.

It was of a height on par with Jackal, but thicker all around, blocky. It had no weapons, and instead of raising its feet, they dragged on the ground.

"What does the dungeon call this one?" Mez asked. "The Not Big Brute?"

Khumdar chuckled.

Tibs looked up at the lack of response. "He isn't saying." He frowned. "Maybe something else got his attention."

"Hey, dungeon," Jackal called. "You're really going to miss another time I win a fight against one of your creatures?" He grinned at Tibs. "I think it just doesn't want to see this massacre."

"Or it's busy setting up this ambush," Carina warned. "If you plan on taking it on alone, get to it."

Jackal ran at the golem and punched it in the head. He landed three solid blows before it started reacting to him.

It was too slow, Tibs thought. Jackal was slower when he was stone, but nothing like that. It wouldn't stand a chance unless it was tougher than any of the previous ones.

"I think this is a failed attempt," Jackal called over his shoulder.

"Pay—" Mez started yelling as the golem's slow fist impacted Jackal's chest. "—attention." The impact was powerful enough Jackal slipped back a few paces.

"This doesn't make sense," Carina mused as Jackal threw himself at the creature. "What can you sense, Tibs?"

He focused, trying to tell apart the creature from the rest of the essence around him. "There's Earth, my essence, but everything else's too faint to be distinct from here. Maybe Jackal's right.

"It can take a pounding," Mez said as Jackal hit it over and over and barely cracked the stone.

"The dungeon is well aware Jackal enjoys hitting its creature," Khumdar said. "It would create some with that in mind."

"Fine, but how long are we letting this go one?" the archer asked. "He might be having fun, but I'm—"

"Don't finish that," Carina warned. "You've already given the dungeon enough ideas."

"Oh," Ganny said casually as Mez's mouth snapped shut. "You don't have to worry. You aren't going to be bored for long."

The punch made the golem stagger as part of its head flew off. "Finally!" Jackal exclaimed.

The chunk bounced and landed a few paces away from Tibs. Instead of being jagged, broken stone, the inside was smooth, shaped as if the golem was hollow.

"Abyss!" Jackal stepped back, moving to return to them.

As the golem turned to follow him, where the stone was missing revealed a face underneath. Skin, not stone. With metal gray eyes and brown hair. Only half her face was visible, but Tibs recognized her.

"Pyan?" Jackal asked, pausing in his retreat.

"You have no idea," a voice said, coming from her mouth, but not sounding like her. It was slightly deeper. "How happy I am you reacted like that. It makes carrying all this weight around worthwhile."

"Who?" Jackal stammered, and Tibs was as confused as the fighter.

"Come on, Jackal. Where did you think I'd be if I wasn't watching you fight?"

"Sto?" Tibs asked, his voice breaking. He didn't sound anything like when he normally spoke.

"Yes." Pyan smiled in a way he's never seen her do. "Now, hit me again so I can get out of this. I didn't realize it would be impossible to break it from the inside."

"Oh, I am going to pound you into dust for this," Jackal snarled. Then he was on her—him—it. Each punch sent stone flying.

Tibs wanted to look away but kept staring as Jackal attacked their old friend hard

enough he was going to kill her again. He knew she was dead, that this was just some other creature Sto had made, but each hit against the stone body, exposing more of the flesh under it, or worse, when Jackal connected with flesh, hurt Tibs. His friend had never fought against her so viciously.

“We have to stop him,” Mez said.

“That is not our friend,” Khumdar stated.

“Then how come it looks like her?” the archer demanded. “Everything in here’s made of stone! Maybe the dungeon didn’t kill her, and it’s just using essence to... I don’t know, control her! Jackal’s going to kill her!”

Jackal hit the creature and stone went flying.

“Finally,” it said. “Now we can have a real fight.” She—it. Tibs refused to accept that was Pyan. It wore the same armor Pyan had on the last time he’d seen her; when she was still mourning Geoff. If Mez was right and that was her, did it mean Geoff wasn’t dead? How about Walter? The other friends he’d lost to the dungeon?

“That is not Pyan,” Carina said, her voice cracking. “It’s just a copy the dungeon made.”

“How do you know?” Mez demanded.

Jackal threw himself at the other fighter, but it easily stepped out of his way and when it hit him, he staggered back.

“Because Pyan could never hit Jackal hard enough so he’d feel it in his stone body,” Tibs said, making his voice hard.

“But...” Mez trailed off, his voice cracked too. “Everything the dungeon makes is stone.” He sounded as if hope had been wrenched away from him, and Tibs wondered if there was someone Mez had cared for who had died in the dungeon.

“That’s all we’ve fought until now,” Carina said, the sorrow in her voice tainted with curiosity, “but it’s on us for having assumed that’s all there would ever be. No one said that’s what would happen. Definitely not the dungeon.” Her voice hardened. “We should have known better.”

Jackal was trying to strike it—Sto, but Sto was too agile now that he wasn’t encumbered by stone. It was like he’d trained for this moment... or had always lived with the body.

“Fuck this,” Mez snarled, and the arrow hit with an explosion that sent Jackal flying back.

“Hey, that’s not fair!” Sto yelled, now in his usual voice that only Tibs heard, as Pyan’s body burned until it melted away, leaving behind the full set of her armor. “Tibs, tell Mez he had no business getting involved.”

“I had it!” Jackal yelled, storming in their direction. “You have no business shooting it!”

“See,” Sto said, “Jackal feels the same.”

“Business?” Mez demanded. “That was my friend it used. My friend you were happily pounding on!”

“Happy? Did I fucking look happy? I was going to make this fucking dungeon hurt for

using her face like that. I was going to break each and every bone in that flesh sack until it begged me to stop!”

“Okay, that’s excessive,” Sto said, sounding puzzled.

“Jackal,” Carina said.

“No! Was going to make it suffer, but Mez had to go and just kill it!”

“Tibs? What’s going on?” Sto asked.

Tibs looked at the empty armor and wiped the tears away. It shouldn’t feel this raw. She’d died months ago.

“I couldn’t stand watching you hit her!” the archer yelled.

“That is enough!” Khumdar yelled as Jackal raised a fist. With the words came lethargy, and Tibs sat down. He should fight against it, counter it, but at least not the pain wasn’t as strong. “I do not know if turning us against each other is the dungeon’s plan, but I will not allow it to happen.”

“I think we made a mistake,” Ganny said.

“I don’t understand,” Sto replied.

“I don’t either, but this isn’t what we thought would happen.”

“What did you think was going to happen?” Tibs demanded. He couldn’t tell if his anger carried through the exhaustion.

“I thought you’d enjoy watching a good fight,” Sto said. “I thought Jackal would like fighting with Pyan again. She always talked about how much they enjoyed pitting themselves against one another. Why are you all so angry?”

“She was our friend,” Tibs snarled.

“And you got to see her again.”

“No, we didn’t.” Tibs got to his feet, the weakness vanishing. “I got to watch you in a creature that looked like her.” The others were watching him. “I watch Jackal try to kill her! I watched her die again!”

“I’m sorry, Tibs,” Ganny said meekly. “I didn’t realize it would affect you like that.”

“Are you telling me none of the other teams recognized her!”

“We didn’t do this with the other teams,” she said. “This was a special treat for you and your friends.”

“Well, thanks a lot,” she snarled. “Sto and Ganny didn’t realize this would hurt us,” he said dismissively as he walked by them.

“Tibs,” Sto began.

“No!” Tibs stopped and looked around, wanting a target for his anger; someone to scream at instead of the ceiling. “You don’t do this to me and expect me to be okay with it! You know how it hurt!”

“When they die, but—”

“It still hurts!”

“But I—”

“Leave it, Sto,” Ganny said softly. “I don’t think this is something we can fix by explaining ourselves.”

“But the rest of the floor,” Sto said.

“No one touches that armor,” Jackal ordered, joining Tibs as he retraced their path. “I don’t want that thing floating around the world.”

“You’re giving up loot?” Sto asked, confused. “Jackal, there’s so much more for you to get. Tibs, tell him about all the loot we readied. Please!”

Tibs didn’t say anything. He didn’t even acknowledge he heard Sto. This was the best way he knew to hurt the dungeon, and right now, he wanted Sto to suffer.