

Chapter 94

“Hasn’t it been quiet for too long” Carina asked as they cautiously moved through yet another hallway.

Tibs had noticed that the cracks in the floor which formed the tiles Ganny used for triggers weren’t entirely random. He’d identified four set of shapes that reappeared, and always had triggers. He was almost sure which shape hid the triggers linked to the traps, but Ganny was sneaky, so he was careful not to take it for granted. He also thought he understood what some of the other shapes did, but that left a few with no apparent uses, and Tibs didn’t like that.

And he didn’t put it beyond Ganny to have set them up like this specifically to kill him with worry over what they did.

He looked around and realized Carina was right. By now, Ganny should have dropped Gnolls on them. How many intersections had it been since the last fight? Three, four?

“Maybe the dungeon got tired of the easy money it’s been giving us?” Mez said, “so it decided to stop attacking?”

“Oh,” Ganny said, and Tibs shuddered at the smirk in her tone. “Just for that, I’m—”

“That’s cheating,” Sto cut her off. “You can’t change the way things are set to happen.”

“You,” she said incredulously, “are calling me out on bending the rules?”

“Well,” now it was Sto’s voice that carried the smirk, “considering how often you’ve come down on me for not following them, I think I’m entitled.”

“I supposed you are right,” she replied with a put-upon sigh.

Tibs stood, forming his sword.

“Something coming!” Jackal called, gleefully.

“But,” she continued, “since you aren’t in the habit of listening to me, why should I?” She cackled maniacally.

Ganny was enjoying herself too much for his liking. He listened and heard nothing. He believed Jackal, mainly because of Ganny, but how—he heard the steps in the distance. Boots on stone by the sound.

“Since those aren’t dropping on us,” Mez said, readying his bow, “I think we’re about to find out what the dungeon settled on for the... I don’t know to call them.”

“People golems,” Carina said. “And remember, whatever they look like, they are not our friends.” The tremble in her voice took away some of the confidence she tried to impart on them.

Tibs wasn’t worried. Whatever Sto and Ganny had settled on wouldn’t resemble people they knew. Sto had been too regretful about how he’d hurt Tibs with Pyan’s golem.

“Is it wise to simply remain here?” Khumdar asked.

“Are you saying we should rush them?” Jackal asked, the astonishment giving way to eagerness. “I’m all for it.” He stepped toward the sound.

“No,” Tibs said, glaring at the cleric, who took a step back.

“That’s quite the stare, isn’t it?” Jackal said, stopping, but not turning.

“And you know he did this how?” Khumdar asked, still looking at Tibs warily.

“When you’ve been on the receiving end of it as often as I do. You learn to feel when it’s happening to others.”

Tibs turned the glare on the fighter.

“Or on me.” Jackal’s raised hand stopped Tibs comment. “They’re almost at the intersection ahead.”

Five... people golems came into view.

They were shaped like people and wore leather armor, with one a robe instead. But they had no features. Their heads were without eyes or mouths, and where the nose should be was only a bump hinting at one. They were easily identifiable as the representation of Runners, but not anyone specific.

The fighter had a sword in its hand, the rogue held two knives, and the fourth in armor didn’t have weapons, so it might be a second fighter or rogue.

“This might be—” Mez started, but the faceless archer let loose the already notched arrow.

Jackal caught it in a stone fist and immediately dropped it with a curse. “That’s a corruption archer.”

Before Tibs could go to his friend to heal him, knives were flying at him and he used air to deflect them.

“Behind me,” Khumdar called as another arrow flew in their direction.

Mez responded with one, but its fire fizzled away halfway to them. “One of them has fire as an element!”

“The Sorcerer,” Tibs called, sensing the essence taking shape as it gestured. “Carina, down!” he switched to water and hardly had to think about the motion as his sword moved and formed the ‘x’ attack. The jet caught the sorcerer in the chest just as the gout of flame formed. The sorcerer slammed back into the wall and dissolved as it slid to the floor.

A blast of air broke the flame apart.

“I forgot to take into account how fast Tibs switched between elements,” Ganny said thoughtfully.

He curse as a knife sank in his shoulder. The opposing rogue flung them rapidly as it ran at him. So rapidly, Tibs realized as he formed a shield to take the others that they were forming mid motion. He pulled at the knife in his shoulder, and the shield almost fell apart at the pain trying to remove it caused. It was made of wood, and Tibs could sense the foreign essence digging into him as if they were roots.

He glared at the rogue. Okay, it was time to show that thing why knives weren’t the weapon a rogue should use.

He rushed it, blocking the barrage of knives, then slashed, only for it to leap over the attack and leave a line in Tibs’s armor with his knife. He glared at the damage wood shouldn’t be able to cut leather, and the inattention meant he was barely ready for how quickly the golem ran at him after landing.

It moved fast, parrying Tibs’s attacks, the knives almost imperceptible. Was that why

Bardik felt knives were the better weapon? Or was this it being a dungeon creature allowed it to do? Only Quigly's training and the ease with which Tibs moved his sword allowed him to keep up.

Tibs took a strike on the shield and slammed it into the rogue, grinning. Knives meant it had to come in too close when not throwing them.

It recovered from the staggered, casually shook its head, then raised its hand and slowly brought it down.

Tibs's shield moved down.

He fought against the motion, and pain exploded from his shoulder to his wrist.

Those roots. Tibs hadn't kept track of them as they fought and they were now through his arm, moving it against his will.

He cursed. How far could they spread? How much control could they take away from him?

He needed a different element.

He absorbed the shield since it was useless and kicked when the rogue came in for an attack instead of throwing a knife.

What could he use?

He cried out in pain as his arm bent in a way it wasn't meant to. He glared at the rogue, and Tibs swore he could see it smirk at him. He dropped to a knee as the pain intensified. He stopped trying to stand. He'd just fall from the pain. It wasn't trying to kill him this way, this was about breaking his concentration.

He grinned at it.

Too bad for it, he'd had to fight through pain to gain control over one of the elements recently. It was never easy, but knowing he was able to do it help endure it. He didn't look at his bent arm. Knowing he'd be able to heal any damage it was causing help endure that.

He reached for the one element that was the enemy of wood, that crave it, consumed it with ease.

He stopped, horrified at what he'd nearly done.

He couldn't channel fire, his friends were her, he was inside Sto.

What else could he do?

It was spreading through him. Would it turn him against his friends or simply kill him?

He had control of ever his other elements now. Surely what he'd learned mastering them meant controlling fire would be easier.

The pain flared, but toward his chest.

Fuck it.

The heat felt good spreading through his body, burning the intrusion, but that wasn't enough. The cause was still there, outside of him. He pushed the heat out, growling at the hated thing that had hurt him. He got to his feet, the flames licking over him. He was going to reduce that thing to ash, consume everything that made it. Then he was moving on to Sto for having made the thing. For having caused him pain, for thinking it was okay to hurt him.

The punch staggered him, nearly brought him down, and he glared at his attacker, fire

pooling over his hand. He was going to destroy—

“You fucking promised!” Jackal yelled. “No matter what, no fired!”

“That hurt,” Tibs snarled.

“Fucking deal with it!”

“I am.” Tibs expanded the fire. “I will burn this place down. I am going to stop everything that’s ever caused pain.”

“Sto!” Ganny yelled. “Tell me you can deal with this.”

“Then you’re burning me down too, right?” Jackal asked.

“You saw what he did the last time he channeled Fire,” Sto replied. “I’ve made changes, but—”

“I as well.” Khumdar stepped next to the fighter and Tibs stopped paying attention to the dungeon. There was nothing Sto could do to stop him, anyway. These were the larger threat.

Carina joined the two, silent, except for the loud disapproval on her face.

Mez stepped between them and Tibs, placing his bow on his back. “I guess this is where we find out if the size of your reserve is a match for my training?”

“Do not stand against me,” Tibs warned. “You can’t stand that heat.”

“You aren’t the element, Tibs,” Mez replied. “Just like that’s not fire.” He motioned to the large ball of flames around Tibs’s hand.

“You think this is Fire?” Tibs replied mockingly. “This is me! This is me having fucking enough of being hurt, of this place hurting me, hurting you.”

“It’s not the one doing the hurting right not, Tibs,” Mez said, his voice steady. “You are.”

Tibs snorted. They had no idea what pain was. What pain he could inflict if he chose to. If they forced him to.

“You broke your word to us. You’re going to hurt your friend.”

“Then get out! Get out and you aren’t going to be caught in what’s coming.”

“I’m not leaving. We’re not leaving and letting you hurt another one of your friends.”

Another one? What the fuck was Mez going on about? He was giving them a way out. “Then,” he snarled, “I’m—”

“Being a child!” Mez snapped. “Pain exists! Pain serves a purpose!” He took a breath. “Only children lash out at it without care for who else will get caught in the blast, or the consequences. You helped me understand some of what it means to wield fire, to be a man, and not a child. I am telling you, Tibs, that nothing comes from childish anger.”

Tibs’s snarl was silent as he sense the essence Mez had woven between them. It was intricate, but it would never hold against him. Nothing could stop him from consuming those who hurt him. He took hold of the weave and readied himself to show the archer what it meant to wield fire. He was going to make him regret for not standing at his side.

His hold on the weave fell as the implications hit him. He burned the doubt away. He was in the right here.

“Are you ready to burn everyone you care about, just for some fleeting satisfaction?” Mez asked, searching his face.

Tibs's answer was interrupted by noticing the fear on his friends' face, but them not moving, knowing he was ready to burn them along with this hated place. He had given them the opportunity to leave, to be safe, to avoid his wrath. Now, they could pay for betraying him.

The dismay hit him hard enough the fire flicked.

What was he contemplating? He loved them. They were his family. He'd do anything for them.

No! They deserved to burn for not agreeing with him.

But they were doing it because they care for him. Loved him back. Wanted the best for him.

Lies!

Everything needs to burn.

They are—

“Stop it!” He grabbed his head as his hate and love kept flaring. He couldn't think. He had to think. What had someone said about the way Fire affected him? It pulled his emotions to extremes.

Fuck, did he have a lot of anger.

He thought about letting go of it. He was terrified the fire would consume him along with everything else if he didn't. But that terror was another emotion being ripped out of his control.

And he had let terror control him too much already.

Mez said something, but the words burned away in the conflagration happening inside Tibs.

He couldn't do this, something whispered fearfully.

He shouldn't do this, another yelled angry it.

He must do this, another encouraged him.

On and on feelings given words assaulted him consumed him. Tore him about until nothing remained but—

Him.

He was Tibs.

He was angry. He was loved. He was afraid. He was prideful. He was so many things, and each burned.

But he was Tibs.

His anger was justified, in places. The way he was loved was justified, at times. His fear was warranted, but not always. His pride was earned, but only in moderation.

His emotions had their place, and they could, would, be out of control at times. He didn't need to wield fire for them to consume him.

And he could wield fire and not be consumed by them.

He let out the breath, and some heat left with it. He pulled the essence he'd radiated back into himself. It resisted him, no; he resisted ending the fire.

There was comfort in that heat. In letting an emotion burn everything else away.

But it was the comfort common to every element he'd Channeled. One that only cared about the now.

Tibs cared about tomorrow too.

He opened his eyes, and Mez smiled at him.

Anger spiked, and Tibs considered wiping that smug expression by ripping apart the barrier the archer had woven. Only it wasn't smug, that was the anger trying to get him to unleash it.

Mez was proud.

"That was dangerous," Tibs told him.

The archer shrugged. "I'm a Runner, danger is sort of our thing. You're eyes are still fire," he pointed out.

Tibs nodded. "I'm not letting go. I've been afraid of it for too long. I have to get used to how it makes me feel."

"Isn't that dangerous?" Mez asked.

Tibs grinned. "I'm a Runner. It's king of our thing." He looked around the archer at Jackal. "I'm sorry for breaking my word."

The fighter shrugged. "Hey, this caused you to get control, so it's good. And if you had lost it, at least here, the town would have been safe from that inferno."

"Kind of casual about how I could have been damaged," Sto commented dryly.

"Sorry for scaring you and Ganny."

"I wasn't scared," Sto replied smugly. "Well, not much."

"I was," Ganny said. "You shouldn't be able to hurt Sto the way you did, Tibs. I don't mean you're too nice of a person to do it. I mean that by everything I have been taught, it should be impossible for one person to cause the kind of damage you did the other time, and almost did now. I felt that heat all the way here." She sounded awe and afraid. "You're an impossibility, Tibs. A dangerous one. I'd hate to think what could have happened if it was someone else who'd chosen what you did."

"I'm just sorry I waited until I didn't have a choice before dealing with it. After how the others went, I should have known better than hope there would be a right time to do it."

Jackal rubbed his hands together. "Now that's done, how about we collect the loot and move on to the next fight?"

"Maybe we should head out," Mez said. "Tibs should heal up and rest." He pointed to the mess that was Tibs's arm.

That brought the pain back to the surface and Tibs stifled the cry. The knife was gone, as were the roots it had spread, but his arm was still broken in ways no limbs should be. He'd been too consumed by his emotions and the problem of resolving them for the pain to register.

He suffused himself with Purity and immediately feel better. He felt good, and the look of horror on his friends' face as his arms unconvulsed itself seemed amusing to him. When he let go of the element, the sense he had slept soundly after a day of work remained.

He hesitated, then channeled fire.

Anger returned, demanded that he—

He pushed it down, back where it belonged... or at least below the surface of his thoughts.

“Are you thinking of burning me down again?” Sto asked casually.

“No. I’m not burning down anything.”

Not even the guild?

If Ganny said he could do the impossible in hurting Sto, didn’t that mean the enchantments protecting the building would just burn away under his fire? That all he’d have to do was feed it until it burned them away?

Yes, he could do it. He realized. If not fire, then corruption.

But who else would pay for his revenge? For indulging his rage? Did the whole of Kragle Rock deserve to burn along with the guild?

He smiled to himself. That settled it. He wasn’t burning anything down. His role was to protect the town and its people. Not avenge them.

He smiled and rubbed his hands together, mimicking Jackal. “Let’s go see what else Ganny has in store for us.”