

Chapter 53

The only sound was that of pebbles falling as Khumdar stood and dusted himself, eying Tibs cautiously. Tibs realized each of his friends were looking at him as if there was something odd about him.

“Tibs?” Jackal asked. “Are you okay?”

“You heard him, right?” he asked in return.

“Heard who?” the fighter asked.

“You head me?” the voice asked cautiously. “Ganny! Get over here,”

“Him!” Tibs pointed to a wall. Everyone looked where he pointed. He wished the voice came from a specific place. That the speaker was there, instead of sounding all around him.

“What did you do now?” Ganny said.

“Why is it you always think I did something?” Sto replied.

Tibs looked at his friends, who were staring at him again. “You aren’t hearing that?”

“Sto, everything in here is your doing,” she said.

“Tibs,” Carina said, “maybe we need to have the clerics look at you.”

“I’m fine,” he said and looked up. “Come out!”

“I believe Carina may be right,” Khumdar said, joining the other.

“Is he talking to you?” Ganny asked.

“Tibs,” the cleric continued. “We do not know how your essence affects you.”

“I think so?” Sto answered her.

“It affects all of us in one way or another.”

“Khumdar,” Tibs snapped. “Stopped talking. All of you stay quiet.”

The cleric stiffened, his expression darkening, but he said nothing.

“He can’t do that,” Ganny said. “He doesn’t—”

“Sto,” Tibs ordered, “show yourself now!”

“You were saying?” Sto asked Ganny.

“How is he hearing you?” Ganymede whispered.

“You to Ganymede,” Tibs ordered.

“Did you tell him my name?” she accused Sto.

“If he can hear me, then he probably heard me say your name.”

“Of all the stupid things to—”

“Enough!” Tibs yelled, which caused his friends to look at one another. “I am not crazy,” he told them.

“I believe you,” Jackal hurried to say. Tibs glared at him. “What else do you want me to say, Tibs. You’re talking to no one and you tell me you’re not crazy. I’ve been

around fighters who've been hit in the head once too often, caused that a few of those, actually. I'm not going to contradict the guy who's responsible for me being able to walk."

"I'm not going to take my essence back," Tibs said in exasperation.

"I believe you," Jackal replied in the same hurried tone.

"Sto, if you don't show yourself right now I'm—"

"This should be interesting," Ganny said.

"Ganny," Tibs warned, "don't make me go look for you either."

"Did he just talk to me?" She whispered.

"Yes," Tibs said through greeted teeth. It was one thing to not see the people talking, it was another for them to act like he couldn't hear them at this point.

She shrieked, then fell silent.

Tibs looked around. "What happened?"

"I think you scared her," Sto replied, sounding baffled. "I've never seen her scared, and trust me, I've tried."

"At least you're answering me. How about you show yourself now? Before my friends tackle me and take me to a cleric."

"If it's going to stop this thing about you hearing me, I'd prefer they do that."

"It's not going to help," he told his friends who were spacing themselves around him.

Sto sighed. "Ganny, what are the rules about this? Ganny? Come on, it isn't like he can do anything."

"He can hear me," she replied, sounding further.

"He can hear me too. At this point I think we can just accept it and move past that? Can I tell him?"

"How would I know!"

Tibs turned to keep an eye on everyone. They wouldn't hurt him, but if they thought there was something wrong with his head and that it involved the dungeon, they might keep him out.

"So there aren't any rules about this?" Sto asked.

"No one can talk to us! Didn't you listen?"

"I'm the dungeon," Sto hurried to say.

"You can't tell him that!" Ganny yelled, sounding like she was back in the room.

"What?" Tibs demanded, looking up.

"You said there aren't any rules against me telling him."

Ganny sputtered something, but Tibs was too busy dodging Jackal to pay attention, then Mez. He felt the air essence around him take shape and shoved his against that, disrupting whatever Carina tried to do, but he'd lost track of Khumdar. Had paid little attention to him, Tibs admitted to himself as the cleric grabbed him in a bear-hug.

"Do not fight, Tibs. We are trying to help you."

"Alright, that's enough," Sto said.

Tibs wriggled in Khumdar's arms. He was stronger than Tibs expected, but

nothing like Jackal; and the robes created play Tibs could take advantage of.

“Tibs,” Khumdar said as Tibs used his weight to make himself slip lower in the hug. “Do not force me to weaken you, please.”

“I said enough!” Sto’s words were punctuated with a shaking of the room. Tibs used the cleric’s surprise to slip out and move away from the other.

“What was that?” Mez asked, readying himself for another shake.

“Right,” Sto said with a sigh. “They can’t hear me.”

“That was the dungeon saying we shouldn’t be fighting,” Tibs said.

“That isn’t what I said.”

“Then tell them otherwise.” Tibs grinned.

“I can’t and you—oh, you are going to make me regret helping you, aren’t you?”

“Didn’t you say you liked how clever Tibs was?” Ganny asked, sounding far again.

“I’m reconsidering my position on that,” Sto answered. “You’re a lot more interesting when you aren’t using that wit against me, Tibs.”

“Then how about showing my friends I’m not crazy?”

“They can’t hear me, remember?”

“I said showing, not telling.”

“How—”

In the distance, Ganymede laughed.

“This isn’t funny, Ganny.” Sto sighed. “Fine, tell your friends not to hurt BB.”

“Don’t attack the golem,” Tibs said to his friends, who were back focusing on him.

“What golem?” Jackal asked as something stomped far away in the corridor.

“I think he means that one,” Mez said, notching an arrow.

“I said not to attack it,” Tibs stated.

“That sounds a lot like the last time,” Carina said.

“You mean that time the big golem came and didn’t attack Tibs?” Jackal asked, looking thoughtful. “You know, where we threw everything we could at it and barely hurt it?”

“Oh, I am so glad they think that,” Sto said. “They almost destroyed BB before he could help you.”

“Tibs was better after that encounter,” Khumdar said.

“I’m no longer so sure of that,” Carina said, looking at Tibs. “Tibs, are you controlling the dungeon?”

“You even think of saying yes,” Sto warned, “and I’m opening a pit under you, let’s see you get out of that.”

“Can you do that?” As far as Tibs knew, the dungeon couldn’t make changes when they were in a room, but then again they also couldn’t talk, so he needed to keep that in mind.

“Try me and find out.”

He looked under his feet. How deep would it go? How wide? “No, I can’t. He’s

doing it himself.”

“Any by him, you mean?” she asked.

“The dungeon,” Tibs answered. “Should I tell them your name?”

“Absolutely not!” Ganymede yelled from wherever she was.

“I’d rather you didn’t,” Sto said.

“It has a name?” Carina asked.

“He,” Tibs said, “he has a name, but I’m not going to tell you.” He paused. “Do you care if they call you it? Are you an he? I don’t know how dungeons work.”

“I don’t know how dungeons work either,” Sto said. “It’s why Ganny’s around. Does it matter, Ganny? I don’t really care. This is the first time I’ve been addressed by anyone other than Ganny, and I do my best to make sure she sticks to calling me Sto.”

“He doesn’t care,” He told Carina, who was looking confused. “He sounds like a guy to me, so I’m going to stick with he, while—”

“Don’t tell them!”

Tibs winced at Sto yelling.

“Tibs?” Jackal asked, eyes on the opening the stomping came from. “What’s wrong?”

“No need to yell,” he told Sto.

“Don’t tell them about Ganny, please. She’s already freaked enough with you knowing about her. I’d love to know how you do that, by the way.”

“He hears me through you, dummy,” she grumbled.

Jackal cursed and his friends stepped back. Tibs looked at the opening and gawked. The golem nearly filled it. It had thick legs, arms, torso, and head. It was big and looked exactly like what Tibs thought of when he imagined a brute.

“That is what I took the essence of?”

“It was nowhere that big,” Mez said.

“This is the upgraded BB,” Sto said, “Bigger Brute.”

“You are not calling it that!” Ganny yelled.

The golem waved. “Hello everyone.”

“Did you hear that?” Tibs asked hopefully.

“They didn’t,” Sto replied as his friend shook their head. Jackal timidly waved back. “I haven’t figured out how to get one of them to talk. Your speech is really complicated, did you know that?”

“Then how are you talking?”

“Oh, we aren’t. I’m thinking.”

“Tibs,” Carina called to him. “I’d really appreciate it if you could explain what’s going on.”

“The dungeon brought Bigger Brute here, so you’d see he’s talking with me.”

“Tibs, dungeons don’t talk. I don’t know why that’s here, but it isn’t to talk.”

“Maybe Tibs taught it to do tricks?” Jackal said. “You know; like trainers do with dogs.”

“Now that’s insulting,” Sto said.

“He doesn’t mean anything by it,” Tibs said, “it’s just how Jackal is. You should see the trouble he gets himself into with Kroseph at times.”

“Who is this Kroseph? He’s come up in a few of your conversations.”

“He’s Jackal’s special guy.”

“Don’t you dare talk about Kro with the dungeon, Tibs,” Jackal warned.

“He can’t talk with it,” Carina said in exasperation, “it’s nothing more than an animal, you don’t talk with dogs, do you?”

“You haven’t met my sister,” Jackal grumbled. “Fine. Since the dungeon can’t understand anything. Hey, did you know that Carina had been spending time with—” he was silenced by a gust of wind sending him into the wall.

“How do you know about that?” she demanded.

Jackal grinned from where he sat. “I know people. Now that’s out of the way.” The fighter looked up. “See, Carina—”

“Jackal,” she warned.

“But the dungeon can’t understand me, right?”

“I believe she may be more concerned about us hearing what you were about to say,” Khumdar said.

“Tibs,” Sto said, “do me a favor and ask Carina if the name Robert of Gentry means anything to her.”

Tibs bit his lower lip. Whatever this was, Carina didn’t want it spoken too loudly. “Carina, can you come here? I have to ask you something,”

“Tibs, I’m not telling you about—”

“I don’t need to know who you spend time with. I have enough of Jackal and Kroseph’s stuff.” He motioned for her to come.

She glared at the fighter before joining Tibs.

He lowered his voice. “The dungeon asked me to ask you—she rolled her eyes—if the name Robert of Gentry means something to you.” Her expression was answer enough.

“How do you know, Tibs?” she hissed. “If Jackal—”

“The dungeon told me.”

“Tibs, dungeons don’t talk, they don’t think, you don’t have to hide behind it, I just want to know who told you.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “I don’t hide behind anyone. I’m telling you, the dungeon told me because he told me.” He looked up. “How do you know?”

“Robert was on the team who came in twenty-two teams before you. He mentioned Carina with enough details I thought she could be the one. Tibs, he—”

“I don’t want to know.”

“Tibs—”

“No. It’s her life, If she didn’t tell us, she has her reasons.”

Sto sighed. “Alright.”

Carina looked at him, her expression between horrified and amazed. “You’re talking with it?”

“I said that more than once.”

She seemed to have trouble figuring out what to say. “And what you don’t want to know is about me?”

“The dungeon hears what we say. All the teams,” he added.

She blushed. “And Robert talked about me.” The red deepened. “With his team.” Air whipped at her feet hard enough to move some of the smaller rocks. “I am going to send him flying,” she snarled and began pacing.

“Well, maybe she’ll take care of things herself,” Sto said, “do me a favor, before she goes and tells him how much of a creep he is, remind her not to mention I can understand all of you. Half the fun of having you come in here is listening to you talk.”

“What’s the other half?”

“Watching you overcome my traps, of course. Tell me, how did you do that to Whipper?”

“Don’t you know?”

“I was sort of busy working on something, I don’t really watch you do the first floor anymore, you know it too well. I guess I still miscalculated, I didn’t think you’d be here so soon.”

“Or you, you know,” Ganny said in the distance, “lost track of time again.”

“Yeah, that time thing is another one I’m fuzzy about.”

“I just did what you told me to do, I pulled his essence into me. It was harder than the first time, but it’s the same thing.”

“You could hear me then?”

“Yeah, but I don’t know why. Why me and not the others, I’m just Rogue.”

Sto snorted. “Right, just a rogue. One with five elements, something even Ganny didn’t know was possible. She freaked when you came in with water and earth.”

“You know my elements?”

“Of course, I know everything inside myself. Please tell Jackal not to hurt BB, if he wants to fight something, there’s a bunch of Ratlings in the next room.”

“Jackal,” Tibs called, and the fighter startled, acting like he’d been caught sneaking into Kroseph’s room by his father. “The dungeon would rather you kill the Ratlings in the next room.”

“I wasn’t—” Jackal protested. “What next room? After this is the long hall.”

“I redesigned it,” Sto said. “That was just there for you.”

“It’s changed.”

“I told you that wasn’t a mistake on the map,” Mez said. “Tandy wouldn’t have made that kind of mistake.”

Sto chuckled.

“Don’t even think of telling me about him and Tandy,” Tibs warned.

“I won’t.”

“Why did you have that for me?”

“In that last run, you and Jackal talked about arranging an audience with Air and Fire. I asked Ganny how I could help you do that and she—”

“Refused to help in any way to do something like that,” she said.

“She gave in when I said I’d let her design the third level.”

“That was unfair and you know it,” she called.

“So I made the room.”

“What if I’d needed to have one with Air instead?”

“Oh, there was a second room, on the opposite wall, but when I saw you had Air already, I locked it.”

Tibs nodded, watching Jackal carefully squeeze between BB and the wall.

“He’s going to check if there’s a room,” Mez said, sounding annoyed. “So you’re really talking to the dungeon?” Tibs nodded. “And he understands everything we say?” Tibs nodded again. “Why are you killing us?” Mez demanded loudly. “What have we done to you to deserve that fate?”

Silence.

Mez looked at Tibs expectantly.

“Well?” he asked uncertainly.

“Sto’s not going to answer,” Ganny said. “It isn’t a part he’d particularly happy with.”

“Then why do it?”

“Tibs,” she said, “dungeons are vital to the world. It’s where adventurers come to become stronger. Nowhere else can they do it so efficiently. But people don’t fight at their best unless the risk is real. So dungeons have to create real threats. What Sto makes has to be a danger so you’ll push yourself. And yes, that means some of you die.”

“More than some,” Tibs said, fighting to keep his anger in control. “I have lost a lot of friends in here. Walter didn’t die because you pushed him to be better.”

“I’m sorry, Tibs,” Sto said. “I hate how much pain you were in.”

“Then why do it!”

“There are rules,” Ganny said. “Dungeons have to do certain things, and can’t do others.” There was clear reproach in her voice saying that. And Tibs remember the belt. How lucky it had been to find it.

“Dungeons seem to be the only place a thing like luck happens,” Alistair had said.

“You gave me the belt so I could keep the amulet.”

“Yes, he did,” she replied sharply.

“You were so angry, and I couldn’t tell you how sorry I was.”

“I lost it, along with the amulet.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“He’s not giving them back,” she said with finality.

He looked at Mez, who was still waiting. “The dungeons are here to push us to get better, and we won’t work as hard as we can to survive unless the danger is real and deadly.”

Mez didn’t move, didn’t take his eyes off him until he nodded. “There this is a point to this. There is a way to survive. It isn’t all just an excuse to make us suffer until it eats us.”

“That’s right,” Sto said.

Tibs nodded.

Mez smiled. “Then, Dungeon, do your worst.” He turned and headed to the opening blocked by BB.

“Not the reaction I was expecting,” Sto said.

“It’s fair,” Tibs said. “Hard, but fair. Mez respects that.”

“Maybe you should like him then,” Ganny said.

“Tibs’s more fun,” Sto replied.

“Can you tell me why Fire said I broke some rule when I had my audience with him?”

“Ganny? You’re the one with all the rules.”

“The ones that apply to you. I don’t know the rules for an audience other than the way to get someone there is through intense emotions while being surrounded by the element they want to meet.”

“Thank you.”

“Guys!” Jackal called from the other side of the golem, “there is a room! And it’s filled with stone rat people! You have no idea how creepy they look.”

“Thank you,” Sto replied proudly. “Tibs tell him to move out of the way. I’m going to send BB back where he belongs. You aren’t set to fight him until deeper on this floor.”

“But not the last room?”

Sto chuckled. “Oh no, I have something much better in store as a boss.”

“Jackal, BB’s leaving, give it room if you don’t want it to trample you.”

“I wouldn’t,” Sto said, offended.

Tibs shrugged as Jackal scrambled away from the golem. “He doesn’t know that.”

The golem walked away faster than Tibs expected for something that large and made of stone.

“How did you know, Tibs?” Jackal asked. “Pyan’s map didn’t mention anything about creatures in that room.”

Sto chuckled. “Not the fastest of the Runners, is he?”

“The dungeon told me. I thought you believed me,” Tibs accused the fighter.

Jackal grinned. “Come on, you know I’d have said anything to keep you calm at that moment.”

“It didn’t work, and the dungeon really talks with me.”

“I really believe you now. And since Khumdar was right about you making friends. How about asking for all the loot in the dungeon?”

“Sure,” Sto said before Tibs could refuse. “So long as he can earn it.”

Tibs smiled.

“I’m not going to like the answer, am I?” Jackal asked.

“You have to fight for each coin you want.”

“Oh, come on, friends do friends favors.”

“Do you want to point out I’m not *his* friend? Or wait until he has to take on some

of the larger creatures I have in mind?”

Tibs patted the fighter’s arm. “Friends know what’s really good for you and make sure you get it. Don’t worry, there’s going to be fighting.”

“Have you seen those things, there’s hardly your height.”

“There’s bigger stuff coming,” Tibs said, heading for the hall. “Bigger than Bigger Brute.”

“That can’t be what it’s called, that name sucks.”

“Told you,” Ganny said.

“It doesn’t suck, it’s descriptive,” Sto replied. “Tibs, we need to talk about something.”

“Sure, what?” he slowed his walk.

“You can’t do what you did to Whipper again.”

“Why not? It’s something I can do. I thought that what you put against us was so we’d get better?”

“It is, but if you start turning all my creatures to rubble with a touch, I’m going to have to come up with much tougher ones. How is everyone else going to deal with them? I’m not here for you to get better. I’m here for everyone. I can’t make changes for only one person—Don’t start Ganny, those rooms were a one-time thing.”

“It would be easier if I did it,” Tibs said.

“I’m not here to be easy, Tibs.”

He nodded. “I don’t know how easy it’s going to be for me to control it. It’s a new thing for me.”

“Alright, I’ve been there. So we’re going to consider this run a trial. Do your best not to drain any of the creatures you encounter, and I won’t hold those you do against you.”

“Okay, that’s fair,” Tibs said. “Hard, but fair.”

“I figured you’d respect that too.”

He fell silent and Khumdar fell into step with him. “I did not wish to intrude in your conversation. I admit to finding it difficult to believe the dungeon speak. Nothing I have uncovered mentioned this.”

“I don’t think it’s something that’s happened to anyone before.”

“Your element, then?”

Tibs nodded, although he wasn’t sure that was all there was to it, not if the hissing from before had been him hearing something of Sto and Ganny.

“Do you want to ask him something?”

The cleric shook his head. “Unlike the others, and you, I do not have a history with the dungeon. And my curiosity is the kind that requires me to do the work.”

“Can you sense secrets here?”

Khumdar laughed. “So many you would not believe me, Tibs.”

“Dungeon,” Tibs called. “Do you normally talk when we go through the rooms?”

“Sometimes, when it’s entertaining, Ganny and me will watch and comment.”

Tibs nodded. “Can I ask you not to comment when it’s me? Hearing you talk

while fighting for my life is going to be distracting.”

“That’s a good point. Ganny, is there a way we can turn this off?”

“Oh, and how do you figure I’d know the answer to that question?”

“You know everything,” Sto replied matter-of-factly.

“Well, that’s clearly no longer true, is it? We’re going to have to test things, but I figure that while Tibs is in a room isn’t the time to do it; unless you don’t mind losing him.”

“I’d rather not be lost,” Tibs said, which earned him a raised eyebrow from Khumdar.

“Tibs,” Jackal called and motioned him over. “Look at this.”

The room was larger, more round than square. The floor was uneven, but in the way the ground was and looked to be dirt. Huts were spread around the room with rat people working around them. This was a village of them, Tibs realized.

“How many do you think you can turn to rubble?”

“None,” Tibs answered with a sigh.

“What do you mean? You took down that golem, and it would take three of those to match it.”

“If it’s too easy for me, the dungeon has to make it tougher.”

“Okay.”

Tibs rolled his eyes. There were days when Jackal tested his patience. “If he makes it so it’s hard for me when I can kill one with a touch, how hard is it going to be for you then?”

The fighter looked at the room. “I could still fight them,” he said confidently.

“I’m not so sure,” Mez said, “and since Tibs is considerate enough to think of all of us, instead of only his greedy little self, I’m going to be happy with him only having his normal impressive array of skills.”

“Yes, Jackal,” Carina said, “stop trying to take advantage of the youngest of us. I thought you were better than that.”

Jackal sighed and looked over his shoulder at the cleric.

“I have nothing to add. I believe you have been appropriately chastised.”

“When this is over, you’re going to explain to me if that makes it all worse or not,” Jackal grumbled.

Carina chuckled.

“Alright, if everyone ready?” Jackal asked. “What did you call these things?”

“The dungeon calls them Ratlings.” Tibs pulled out two of his imbued knives.

“I’ve heard worse,” Jackal said.

“Hey now,” Sto protested and Tibs looked up. “Sorry. I’ll be silent.”

Tibs looked at the room. At the Ratlings going about their business with no idea what was coming. So he couldn’t use his essence to make things easier. He hadn’t had it before, and they’d won plenty of fights.

This was going to be fun.