

Chapter 54

Tibs cracked an eye open.

"You okay?" Jackal asked, crouched next to him and no longer shaking him by the shoulder. Offering a healing potion.

Tibs's attempt at snorting came out as a pained groan.

"This'll make you feel better." Jackal pressed the bottle to Tibs's lips.

The pain vanished as he drank. The sensation of the muscles wriggling as the potion repaired them, his wounds closing, was odd, but short-lived.

"Next time," Tibs said, offering his hand to the fighter, "you do it."

Jackal pulled him up with a laugh. "Sure, then you can take over fighting the boss."

Tibs rolled his eyes. "Even half-dead you won't let anyone else have that fight." He stretched to work out the stiffness healing with a potion left him.

"This is why we get along so well. I know you, you know me. It's like we're meant for one another."

"I'm telling Kroseph you're putting the moves on another guy," Mez said as he walked by.

Jackal closed his mouth on the reply. "Did he just make a joke?"

"Are you putting the moves on me?" Tibs asked.

Jackal made a face. "You're like my little brother, Tibs. That'd be weird."

"Then he's making a joke."

"I didn't think he knew how. He's been so serious since coming back."

Tibs watched the archer's back. "He has serious stuff to deal with."

"That's no way to live."

"Some people don't get to choose."

They caught up to Mez and Jackal patted his shoulder. "Don't worry. I'll make sure you remember to have fun."

Mez let out a pained breath. "I have a bow. I'll shoot you before you're close enough for it."

"There you go." Jackal grinned. "You're remembering to make funny quips at me."

"He's not joking," Carina said.

"That's what makes it funny."

"I believe we have more important matters to deal with." Khumdar pointed to the room they approached. Bigger Brute, as well as the two Big Brute were still at the back, but the number of rats, bunnies, Ratlings, and Bunnylings had increased.

"That is a lot of them," Carina said.

"We can handle the flood," Mez replied. "It's that the boss has changed that worries me."

Bigger Brute no longer looked like a mass of stones stuck together in the shape of a person. It looked more like a person, dressed in a stone version of leather cuirass and skirt Tibs had seen the occasional fighter wear. The exposed arms and legs had a blockiness to

them, but looked like muscles.

“This is going to be fun,” Jackal said, grinning.

“Before you comment,” Ganny said. “We got some strange reactions before Sto put the armor on. Something about not wanting to fight someone naked.”

“I don’t think Jackal cares about it,” Tibs replied. He looked the form over trying to determine if it looked more like a man or a woman and couldn’t. “But Kroseph might.” He didn’t elaborate when Jackal looked at him. There was no point in distracting the fighter with possibilities.

“Me, Tibs, and Khumdar rush it,” Jackal said. “We clear the room until only the brutes are left. If they join the fight, we deal with them, but last time, they let the horde soften us up. So let’s stay away, in case being close also triggers them.”

“The dungeon might have changed things,” Mez pointed out.

“That’s why we stay alert. Mez, Carina, go with area-of-effect if we aren’t going to be in your range. The more you can take out, the better shape we’ll be to deal with the boss.”

“Don’t you mean ‘you’ll be in’?” she asked.

“I need you to keep the other two from healing the boss.” Jackal looked up. “I remember that trick.”

“He has you,” Sto said, “I have my brutes.”

Tibs took out his knives, looked at them, and sheathed one. He pooled water in his hand, then flicked it, icing it as it stretched. The resulting blade was uneven and jagged, but Tibs didn’t mind this time. He added earth for durability, dirtying the clear blade. He considered adding corruption, but he didn’t know if it would act like a poison, or if it would affect the essence that made up his weapon.

Something to test later.

Jackal nodded in approval and slapped his hands together. “Let’s fill this room with rubble.”

He stepped into the room and it came alive. Tibs ran past, throwing his air imbued knife ahead and controlling it. It cut two bunnies while they were in the air, and got stuck in a third. He sliced at the swarming rats and grinned at how easily his sword cut them.

Wind buffeted him as it detonated on the other side of the room and was followed by a rain of small stones. A louder explosion heated the room and the stones resulting from that were hot enough Tibs had to protect his face after one burned his cheek.

Tibs iced his arm to block a jumping rat, batted it aside, and hurried to throw a knife at it, and missed.

He should just give up on throwing normal knives. He found the air knife among the rubble and recalled it. He turned to face a hissing Ratling, catching the knife by the feel of its essence and rat at it, sword high.

The Ratling dodged and swiped, its claws leaving scratches on the armor and Tibs cursed. Darran had just repaired the damage to it from his last fight. Without looking he threw the knife at a Bunnyling, who tried to sneak close while Tibs was distracted. It leaped out of the way as Tibs blocked the Ratling, and he changed the direction of the knife and it slammed into the Bunnyling’s back. He cut the Ratling’s arm off, then its head.

He caught the returning knife as he quickly assessed the battlefield.

As Jackal predicted, the Brutes remained where they stood. The fighter was smashing creatures with abandon, while Khumdar's staff only had minor effects in smacking them away.

Tibs slashed at rats and bunnies as he ran to help. "I have your back."

"It is appreciated."

Tibs swung at Ratlings, who jumped out of the way, exposing a Bunnyling in mid-leap, arms extended, claws out, fangs bared. Tibs only had the time to raise an ice-covered arm for the Bunnyling to bite into, through the leather, and into his flesh.

Tibs felt the corruption seep in as he noticed this creature's eyes were the purple of the element. He cleaved it into two and moved the spreading corruption to his reserve. "Watch for the eyes," he yelled. "Some have a corruption poison with their bites."

"Which creature?" Khumdar asked, staff smacking the Ratling by Tibs's side and sending it reeling away.

"The Bunnyling I just killed, but there's probably others."

"Are you capable of targeting them specifically?" the cleric asked, blocking a Bunnyling attack. "The dungeon has made them tougher against my staff. There is only so much damage my robes can absorb before a bite will get through."

Tibs tried to feel the difference, but he was interrupted by a group of bunnies rushing them. Those that made it through his defense did no damage, but they unbalanced him enough that he backed into the cleric, and Khumdar nearly fell as a result.

"Too many of them for me to focus. Just look at the eyes."

"I have had enough of this," the cleric growled.

Tibs felt, instead of heard, the impact of the staff's end against the ground. Then a wave of darkness rushed past him, dropping him to a knee, barely able to breathe.

The air was around him, he could sense it, but it act of breathing in took almost more strength than he had.

He forced his head up. Rats and bunnies were dissolving, while Ratling and Bunnylings struggled to remain standing. Khumdar stepped around Tibs and swung hard. Those hit fell back and turned into rubble.

Tibs looked around and, within a dozen paces, only the lings were standing, until the clerics reached them and brought them down with a blow from his staff.

The darkness had weakened them, and him. Tibs tried to counter it with his darkness, then to absorb it as he had the corruption, but neither worked. Sensing inward, he found it, the darkness seeping into him, weakening his essence. He pushed against it, hardening his essence, and made slow progress until, suddenly, the darkness was gone and Tibs could breathe again.

"I apologize," Khumdar said, panting, hand on his shoulder, "but these creatures were simply more than I could handle the usual way."

"It's okay," Tibs enjoyed the feel of the air filling his lungs. "I didn't know you could do that." He stood and the cleric steadied him. Not all his strength was back.

"It is not in the nature of one who holds secrets to reveal something."

Tibs rolled his eyes.

“Are you two okay?” Carina called. With a gesture air sliced through one of the last groups of rats remaining.

“I’m good,” Tibs replied. “Just getting my breath back.”

Mez exploded Ratlings, while Jackal hit anything getting close to him hard enough one strike broke then.

“You should have protected him from the effect,” she chastised the cleric.

“Not all of us have the luxury of—”

A loud whistle brought their attention to Jackal, who pointed to the three waiting brutes. “Assign blame after.”

“Maybe we should rest, since they aren’t attacking,” Mez said.

“I’m fine,” Tibs replied. Without having to fight against Khumdar’s darkness, his strength returned as he added his essence from his reserve to that of his body.

“We’re no risking finding out the dungeon as surprises for those who think they get to rest,” Jackal said. “Take a potion if you have to but we’re still in the middle of a boss fight.”

Sto’s chuckle made Tibs sense around them, then curse.

“There’s a warren under the floor. I’m not sensing creatures in it, but it extends outside my range.”

“I didn’t see anything jumping out of trap doors,” Carina said.

Mez cursed. “Which means they’re reinforcement. I hate it when Jackal’s right. I can take it from the rest of you, but he’s Jackal. I’m smarter than he is!”

“Now you get it,” the fighter replied happily and Mez shook his head in confusion before looking at Tibs.

He shrugged. “He’s Jackal. Trying to understand him is a waste of time.”

“Kroseph manages it,” Carina said.

“People,” Jackal called. “There’s a boss fight waiting. I’m doing that with or without you.”

“You think you can take them on alone?” Mez asked in disbelief.

Tibs headed by the fighter’s side. He wasn’t finding out.

“I wish you guys didn’t have to deal with the smaller brutes,” Jackal said.

“You’re not fighting all three,” Tibs warned.

“I know. But you’re going to be too busy to watch my fight. Who’s going to recount it afterward?”

“One,” Carina said, “we can’t talk about our runs outside the dungeon.” She ignored the disbelieving snorts. “Two, you’re going to be telling everyone about it, anyway.”

“But they sound so much more awesome when it’s someone else saying how awesome I am.”

Mez sighed. “Let’s get this done.” He raised his bow. “Or do you prefer debating how to tell the story over fighting?”

Jackal ran and reached Bigger Brute before Mez released the fire arrow at the brute

to the left. Tibs followed on the fighter's heel but attacked the one on the right.

He caught Bigger Brute block Jackal's punch, deflecting the fighter's run to the side with a whoop of joy from Sto, then Tibs was busy with his fight.

He used the old trick of icing the ground, but the brute was more agile, leaping aside before it reached it. Khumdar was there to hit it as Tibs slid on the ice, slashing at its back as he passed. The edge of the sword broke, instead of cutting it.

He absorbed it, using his knives to attack. They survived without damage, but only left shallow cuts. On the other side, the cleric blocked every attack, but couldn't get in any of his own.

These brutes were much tougher, and, by the glimpses of how Bigger Brutes forced Jackal on the defensive, the boss was a better fighter.

Tibs thought about absorbing the essence and ending the fight quickly, but beyond Sto being angry about it, and the possible repercussions, Tibs realized he wanted this fight.

He blocked the arm and despite not letting himself slip on the ice, he still slid back. He got the knife in the armpit, but it skidded off the stone. Khumdar used the brute's split attention to land a blow on the side of its head and regain its full focus.

Tibs wanted to be pushed.

He wanted to see what he was capable of here so that he could bring it out to the town when Sebastian caused problems. This was the one place he could practice his other essence and not worry about who saw what.

And thinking of other essences, he figured this was the time to try something. To borrow from Khumdar but use it in a way Tibs was familiar with, since trying to do exactly what one of the other did rarely worked.

Instead of corruption, he coated his knife with darkness. Sto protected everything against corruption after Bardik's attack, but darkness could also weaken, as Khumdar had stated and shown.

He sliced at the brute's back but the cuts weren't deep enough to let the darkness in. Then he was dodging as it attacked him. As he moved he saw Carina and Mez pummeling their brute with air and fire and slowly hurt it. And Jackal, now in a more even exchange of blows with Bigger Brute.

Tibs blocked, feeling the impact under the ice, earth, and leather. Khumdar attacked, using a darkness edge at the end of his staff, but this time the brute wasn't getting distracted. Tibs got in a few solid cuts, and a little of the darkness made it in, but something fought back against it. The brute had a resistance against darkness too.

Tibs cursed, and in his attempt to force it deeper was struck hard enough he flew back against a pillar.

He had broken bones and wrapped them in his essence, pushing through the pain to stand and run at the brute's back, who was back to attempting to kill Khumdar. He jumped on its back with a yell and planted the knife in, then holding on with an arm and his legs as he pushed all the darkness he had into it, fought against its resistance.

It staggered and Khumdar had to step out of the way. "You are a fast learner," he said with a smile.

“Thanks,” Tibs replied through gritted teeth, “but I’d really prefer if you did something to it rather than compliment me. I’m pushing as hard as I can, trying to weaken it, but it’s resisting.”

The cleric spun his staff before him. “Of course.” Darkness trailed behind it as it picked up speed, then Khumdar raised quickly and brought it down against the brute’s neck. The staff stopped without even chipping the stone, but the trailing darkness caught up to it and kept going through the stone neck and chest.

Tibs pushed off as the brute’s upper body slid against its lower one.

Tibs looked up as he caught his breath, Carina and Mez had their brute chipped down to little more than stone bones, but it was Bigger Brute catching Jackal’s punch and slamming the fighter into a wall that had Tibs’s attention. His other fist ready for what could be a killing blow.

“Sto, Stop!” he yelled before he could stop himself.

Bigger Brute froze in mid-swing, fist lined up with Jackal’s head. The fighter looked too stunned to react.

“My fight,” Jackal said, words slurred.

“He’s going to—”

“My fight!” the words were harder, the slur less pronounced.

Tibs wanted to protest. He couldn’t lose Jackal, Kroseph couldn’t lose him.

Khumdar placed a hand on Tibs’s shoulder. “It is how things must be. We get stronger, or we fall.”

“We die,” Tibs growled. “I hate it when you use some other word. It doesn’t make it better. Jackal’s going to die if I don’t stop the fight.”

“Jackals never going to forgive you,” Carina said, joining him. An explosion punctuated her arrival and hot stones fell around them.

Bigger Brute continued to look at him. Tibs wanted Sto to say something. To justify why he was doing this, instead of letting the cleric’s words be what did. Instead, it was a silent look asking for permission.

Tibs almost closed his eyes as he nodded, but he wouldn’t look away. He would honor his friend by watching what happened.

The fist moved as if it hadn’t stopped.

Until Jackal caught it in his hand. The sound of stone hitting stone seemed louder than it should be as Tibs watched in surprise.

“Here’s the thing,” Jackal said, all traces of slurring gone, grinning, “that you didn’t think about.” Bigger Brute pulled, but his fist didn’t move out of Jackal’s grip. The fighter didn’t even seem to notice the effort.

“How?” Sto asked, confused.

“You’re stone, I’m earth. Stone’s included in that. We’ve been fighting like this, and it’s been fun, but I was never going to lose. Want to know why?”

“Why?” Sto asked.

“I’m going to act like you just asked because, otherwise, I can’t gloat. I cheat.” Jackal twisted his hand and Bigger Brute’s fist broke off at the wrist. “Stone on stone, I can pull

Tibs's trick and absorb the essence. Which means you aren't that tough." He wrenched his hand out of the one holding it, and the fingers shattered. "Better luck next time."

Jackal planted a fist through Bigger Brute's head and it exploded into dust. The body broke down immediately after.

Jackal grinned as Tibs stomped toward the fighter. "See, I—"

Tibs kicked him in the shin. "I thought you were going to die!"

"Come on, Tibs. I'm—"

Tibs kicked him again.

"I'm stone, Tibs. I'm not even feeling it."

Tibs glared at the fighter and coated his hand in darkness. He didn't have much left, but Jackal couldn't know that. "I figured out something new today. Do you want to see what happens if I fill you with darkness? How tough you're going to be then? I'm also going to kick high enough Kroseph's not going to be able to enjoy special time with you."

"I would advise against antagonizing him further," Khumdar said, joining them. "Darkness can steal strength, and Tibs has learned quickly."

Tibs smiled at the fighter nastily and moves his hand closer.

"I'm sorry, Tibs." Jackal took a step back and stopped at the wall. "I didn't mean to scare you, I just wanted to surprise the dungeon."

"He did," Sto said, sounding awed. "That was well played. I should have known you'd don something. You've told plenty of stories about how you won by cheating."

"He can't hear you," Tibs snapped. "And I'm not repeating it. I don't need you encouraging him with compliments."

Jackal beamed, and immediately stopped as Tibs narrowed his eyes. With a sigh, Tibs hugged the fighter.

Jackal wrapped his arms around him. "I am sorry."

"You should have told me what you were going to do. I wouldn't have said anything."

"I know, but I wanted the fight to be awesome. It wouldn't have been this awesome if you'd know what I was doing."

Tibs kicked him in the shin again.

"I said I'm—" Jackal closed his mouth as Tibs readied for another kick. "I will warn you next time."

"You're better."

"It was awesome," Carina said.

"Don't encourage him," Tibs warned. "You're not stone. You're going to feel my kick. She smiled. "Only if you connect."

Tibs stepped in her direction, "do you want to test it?"

Khumdar stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "That is enough. Jackal deserves your anger, but Carina does not. We are all well. Let the anger go."

"I'm telling Kroseph what you did," Tibs told Jackal, then smiled. "Now, I can let it go."

"I think that qualifies as torture in some kingdoms," Mez commented.

“I deserve it,” Jackal sighed. “Let’s collect the loot, deal with the guild so I can get my punishment, and then tell everyone how awesome I was.”

“If you aren’t careful Tibs,” Sto said. “I’m going to start liking him more than you.”

“You’re welcome to him,” Tibs replied. He smiled innocently when Jackal looked at him quizzically.