

Fumes of orange blossom and alcohol wafted through the stone corridors, cutting through the standard bouquet of mildew and rotting flesh until they burned their way into Gher's nostrils. The Phennek lowered his burlap sack down to the cobblestones with such care that even his large ears couldn't hear the metal and gems shifting within. Once his hands were free, he lifted his wooden staff and sniffed for the intruder.

The stench of the intruder's perfume would have masked the natural scent of its wearer to anyone but a Phennek. Gher's button-like nose may have seemed tiny in comparison with his long black furry ears, but he had smelled the sweet tint of steel long before he actually heard the plate mail clunking. The odor of the stranger was harder to suss out, but he caught elements of gamey flesh and musky fur—a Phennek, just like Gher—but with a certain edge that his body reacted to even before his brain made the connection.

"Gher? Where are you, love?"

Gher's long orange tail tensed underneath his robe at the sound of his husband's voice. Urges to run out and either throttle or embrace Ruet waged war in Gher's mind, but years of self-preservation beat them both back. A mouthy adventurer was a dinner call to half of the inhabitants of the dungeon..

With ears perked up and nose held high, he scanned for any sights and sounds. There were no buzzing wings and no burbling slithers, and the walls still stank from neglect. As Gher had hoped, the only creature stupid enough to wander blindly into the gauntlet of traps around the treasure room was his husband.

A loud click resounded through the labyrinth, and Gher broke into a run, barking out Ruet's name. He bounced off the corner overlooking the pit of spears, hurdled over the acid pit, and managed to tackle his husband just before the falling rocks crashed against the ground where he had just been standing.

"Hey, handsome," Ruet said, nuzzling against Gher's cheek. "Good to see you too."

After two full weeks since his husband had left on his latest adventure, Gher was tempted to bury his own face in Ruet's fur. Frustration kept him from giving in, and that sickly sweet perfume gave him the strength to pull away.

Gher stood up and brushed the dust off of his burlap robe until he noticed Ruet looking up at his exposed legs. He gave his husband a playful kick with the ball of his bare foot against the plate armor, and then offered him a hand up. "What happened to the quest? Don't tell me the humans all died already."

Ruet groaned on the way up, and then leaned down to gather his fallen helmet. "You know, all of this time locked in here with monsters hasn't helped your sense of humor. We're heading out to the capital tomorrow, but I told them I needed to make a quick stop first."

"Wait, you brought them here?" Gher grabbed Ruet by the scruff of his neck and forced him to keep eye contact. "The whole reason I maintain the dungeon is to distract wandering heroes, and you bring them here? What happens if they discover the village?"

"They're not going to do anything." Ruet tried to look away, but Gher kept his grip strong. "Come on, love. Give me some credit. I left them back at the inn in town, and before you ask, yes, I covered my tracks and checked over my back as I went. I am the great Phennek Phantom, after all."

Gher released Ruet's fur, but he cut off the reconciliatory nuzzle with a toothy snarl. He stalked around in a circle, knocking the fallen rocks into a small pile with the pads of his black feet. Once he was able to free his staff from under the remaining rocks, he wedged it into the pressure panel that Ruet had triggered and the empty trap chamber slid open overhead. He turned the staff until it clicked into place, and a metal lip rose up at the edges of the sloped walls.

He hefted the first rock as hard as he could and it resounded so hard against the metal inner walls of the trap that he winced in anticipation that it would bounce back down toward him. It had been a while since he'd had to reload the rocks, and his irritation with Ruet didn't make it any easier to toss them in without having a stone fall right back down onto his head.

"Let me help." Ruet's head slid in between Gher's legs until Gher felt himself lifting on his husband's shoulders. Once they were steady, Ruet stooped low to gather rocks and Gher stood on his back and shoulder, accepting the rocks and sliding them up into the chamber. Gher caught Ruet looking up again, but his husband just grinned and said, "Just like when we were kids gathering apples, huh? Well, in reverse, anyway."

"You were trying to sneak a peek at my tail even back then," Gher said, stepping down and twisting the staff free of the trigger. The metal lip slid away, but the stone plate slid in place before the rocks could rain back down on them. Once again, he helped his mate up until they were eye to eye again, and Gher fought the urge to nip at his well-coifed neck fur. "What brings you back here, Ruet? I know it's not because you were lonely."

Ruet's lip jutted out into a wounded pout, but Gher countered with a hard glare, and Ruet gave up the act. "Lonely, no, but I needed to see you before we left. Once we leave the capital, we're heading straight to the Karibak Teeth."

"Karibak?" Gher studied Ruet's scent, but there were no odors that smelled of a lie. Nerves, perhaps, but that was expected of anyone heading into the dragon's mountains. "Surely there is some other way around. It's not worth passing that close to old Spat."

Ruet took a deep breath, eyes drifting down to his side. "We are going to see old Spat. He took something precious from the human king, and we're going to get it back."

Gher gripped his husband's shoulders, studying his eyes, his heartbeat and his scent, but there was no sign that he was joking. "This is madness. The king doesn't need a handful of hired hands, he needs an army."

"He has an army," Ruet said. "It was the greatest army in the land. Now half of it is fertilizing the singed Karibak grass. I guess the cost in coin to hire us is less dear than the cost in lives."

"I don't care about his money or his soldiers, Rue. I don't want to lose the only man I've ever loved because he thought he could kill a dragon."

Ruet shook himself free of Gher's grasp. "We're not going to fight the dragon, we're just stealing the treasure back. The king asked for me personally. He said, 'Get me this Phennek Phantom I've heard so much about.' I'm the most famous sneak in the kingdom."

"Is that what you want engraved in the village memorial? 'He died the most famous sneak in the kingdom?'"

"I am doing this for the village," Ruet said, his voice finally dropping from the sophisticated human tone down to the gravelly growl of their home village. "If I die, I die a hero. Bards will sing

of the brave Phennek who stood before Spat. Imagine walking into a tavern and hearing a song about one of our own that wasn't about how we're all thieves or cannibals or worse."

Gher felt his own fangs gnashing, but he couldn't argue with the logic. Their sword master had chosen the pair to be the village's defenders, both for their sword skills and their natural insights. Gher was a survivor, so he was sent to maintain the dungeon that distracted the kingdom from their home. Ruet was a charmer, so he braved the human world to put a more pleasant face on their race. Dying for the crown would help the village just as much as living for the dungeon had, but that didn't mean that Gher had to like it.

Ruet seemed ready for Gher to bark at him, but he let out an audible squeak when Gher pulled him into a tight hug and nuzzled against him. "You're worth even more to the village if you deliver the treasure to the king, and it'd be much nicer to be married to a living legend than a dead hero. You get me?"

Ruet's reply came in the form of a hand cupped Gher's muzzle, pulling him in for a kiss. It was one of those human peculiarities that Ruet had picked up, but as his lips pressed against his husband's, he couldn't deny that it had its charms. Their breathing lined up as hands explored metal, burlap, and fur.

The scent of Ruet had Gher's head swimming, but he pushed away from the embrace long enough to continue his missive. "I want you to promise that if Spat spots you, you do what we do best—run and hide. Dragons' scales are great armor, but it creates so many blind spots that you can stand right at the tip of their nose and be functionally invisible."

"Yes, yes," Ruet said with the tone of a pup being scolded for not cleaning his bedding.

"Cheeky!" Gher worked a claw under the armor and poked his husband in the side. Ruet made a show of doubling over, which never failed to earn a giggle out of Gher, but when he looked again, he saw something was missing. "Rue, where's your dagger?"

Ruet rubbed the scruff of his neck. "Actually, that's the other reason I'm here."

"You lost my betrothal gift?" The hours of work that had gone into making the dagger seemed to itch in Gher's knuckles, and he was starting to get an idea how to itch all four knuckles at once.

"I didn't lose it," Ruet said, guarding his face against the punch Gher was still contemplating. "It's in the chest at the inn, but come on, love. You can't expect me to face a dragon without a full sword."

"I absolutely can expect a sneak thief to go in with just a dagger, but that wasn't your plan, was it? You're still thinking about throwing your life away in some dumb act of heroism, aren't you?"

"I'm planning on standing with my crew. If I hide in the shadows, I may as well not go."

Gher gripped his staff tight in both hands. "You can't fight a dragon. You wouldn't stand a chance."

"How do you know?" Ruet said, showing his own fangs. "I was already the best swordsman in the village before I left, and since then I've faced fighters and monsters from all over the world. I haven't just been sitting in some musty old cave. I've been training for this task."

"You'd be surprised what you can learn in a musty old cave," Gher said, his voice lowering to a growl. "And you have no idea how dangerous dragons can be. You've never faced anything like it."

“Oh, and you have? Is there a dragon hiding somewhere in here that you’re not telling me about? Or did you kill it before I got here?”

Gher’s fangs ached with all the biting words he wanted to attack his love with, but all that came out was “Fine.” He turned on his heel and waved for Ruet to follow him. Gher led his husband back to the bag of loot he had dropped, making sure to steer wide of the traps so that he wouldn’t have to look back to check to make sure his love hadn’t been smashed, stabbed, or melted in acid..He scooped up the burlap sack and continued on his way.

When he reached the treasure chest he’d just restocked, Gher rapped his staff on its lid. The rims of the chest’s lid and body rolled back, exposing the mimic’s sharp fangs, but Gher knocked it directly on the blue crystal in its top. “Not now, Lip.”

Lip whimpered, but it opened wide, giving Gher access to the sheathed blade within. Gher lifted it out, replacing it with the burlap sack. Lip purred at the weight of the cache of arms and jewels, but Gher warned him, “You’re just holding onto this for me, got it?” Lip cooed his understanding, but the mimic still seemed to have a wide smile on its lid.

“The Howling Blade,” Gehr said, drawing the smoky grey blade from its scabbard with a hiss that resounded like a growl. “This is what you came here for, right?”

Ruet’s fingers stretched toward the blade, but he stopped with a scowl. “You know that’s not the only reason...”

“This isn’t about us,” Gher said, giving the blade a spin before returning it to its jeweled home. “You’re right, though. If I had to fight a dragon, this would be a formidable ally. It’s too nice to just give away, but if you’re up for a duel, I’ll wager the sword.”

Gher studied his husband’s eyes. Ruet knew him well enough to know that he had an angle, but he had never let that stop him from accepting a challenge in the past. “If I win, the blade leaves with me. And if you win?”

“The blade leaves with me,” Gher said with a smirk. “And you take my place.”

Ruet barked out laughter, but when Gher just lifted an eyebrow, his laugh dulled into an uneasy smirk. “Even if you had any chance of winning, don’t you think that people will notice if a different Phennek waltzes in?”

“You tell me,” Gher said. “I’ve never met a human who could tell us apart, and I’m willing to wager that none of your companions could tell the difference between us with the helmet on. Besides, I know for a fact that I would be a better match for a dragon than you will ever be.”

The mates stared each other down until Gher tossed his husband the blade. Ruet freed the blade from its scabbard and tested the heft. “What’s the challenge? Points? Last man armed?”

“Last man clothed,” Gher said, tightening the rope around his robe. “And you may want to put on your helmet for this one.”

Ruet laughed and tossed the helmet down to the floor. Lip sniffed toward the helm, but the mimic was too stuffed to consume any more treasure. The mates bowed to each other, then lifted sword and staff.

Ruet lunged straight for Gher’s robe, nicking the rope but receiving a smash across the chest that unbuckled one of his breast plate’s clasps. He backed away to snap the clasp closed again, but was immediately hit with a strong poke that undid the other clasp. The breastplate fell as two heavy metal sheets, slamming against the dungeon floor.

“Point for you,” Ruet said, kicking the armor over toward his helmet. He lifted his blade and looked back just in time to see the staff coming around in a wide arc. The pole made contact with his shins, taking his feet out from under him. While he fell, Gher grasped his ankles and yanked his boots off.

“That’s a cheap shot,” Ruet said through a pained groan.

“That’s the way the monsters of our dungeon fight,” Gher said, tossing the boots down next to the helmet. “Anarchrids draw foes in and counterattack, horrornets sting with deadly precision, and slimes bring you down to consume you. You’d better pay attention. You’re going to have to look after them when i go off to face the dragon.”

The blade roared upwards in a crescent arc, giving Gher just barely enough time to dodge out of its way. The tip of the sword bit through his rope belt, splitting it open and sending it to the floor beneath him. As his robe billowed open, Ruet flipped up to his feet and gave a wolf whistle.

Gher and Ruet exchanged attacks and deflections, one in a bulky open robe and the other in just a pair of trousers. Under other circumstances, this fight could have gone in a completely different direction, but Gher had to force the thought of Ruet’s muscular chest out of his mind.

“Maybe you should quit now,” Ruet said, driving his blade cleanly through a loose corner of Gher’s sleeve. “Unless you’ve got a monster in here whose special attack removes pants, you’re going to be very naked very soon.”

Gher checked the hole in his robe, and discovered a dozen nicks along the hemline. Ruet hadn’t just been feinting, he’d been working at the seams of the robe. One well-placed cut would take the whole thing apart.

“You want to know how a dragon fights?” Gher dropped his staff and lifting up his robe. He could see a mix of intrigue and suspicion rising in Ruet’s eyes, but the tip of the blade was dipping. “Here you go!”

Gher gathered the robe in his hands and tossed the loose cloth at his husband’s face. The sword sliced through it without even a hesitation at impact, but it obscured Ruet’s view just long enough for Gher to pounce in, wrestling his husband to the ground and out of his trousers.

“You need practice,” Gher said. “Fortunately, living in a dungeon gives you plenty of opportunity. I’ll grab you my spare robe.”

“But I won,” Ruet argued, awkwardly scrambling up to his feet. “You took off your robe first!”

“That’s true,” Gher said, slipping into his husband’s trousers. “But how many times have I told you not to go into battle without underpants?”

Ruet’s jaw fell open, watching his husband strapping on his armor while the stale dungeon breeze rustled his bare fur.