

Stepping up-27

Tibs looked the room over. The colored hexagonal tiles were mostly hidden by rats, ratlings, bunnies, and bunnylings. At the back, between two columns, were the two Big Brutes flanking Bigger Brute.

“The dungeon added rats and bunnies,” Mez said.

“We have to clear them,” Jackal said, tone grave.

“You can kick them on your way to the golems,” Mez replied.

“Are you okay?” Tibs asked the fighter. For all his bravado, Jackal and nearly died here during their last run.

Jackal smiled. “I’m fine. I just don’t want the golems to be healed this time. That’s too unfair.”

“Right,” Carina replied with a chuckle, “because you are all about the fair fight.”

“Tilting the odds in my favor is how a fair fight goes,” Jackal said, grinning. The smile faded almost immediately.

“We don’t have to fight them,” Tibs said, squeezing Jackal’s arm.

“There’s loot to get,” the fighter said, his features hardening.

“Tibs,” Carina called him before he could object to Jackal. She formed a whirlwind in her hand. “This is what the essence should be like.”

Tibs looked at Jackal before focusing on the whirlwind. “We’re going to have to watch Jackal,” he said. “Or he’s going to do something stupid.”

Carina smiled. “That’s our team leader. Don’t worry, we won’t let him die. Now pay attention.”

He felt now how the essence wasn’t just moving in the whirlwind, it interlocked in patterns.

“It’s an etching,” he whispered. “Can you stop it, so I can study it?”

“What’s an etching?” she asked.

Tibs sighed. “For all the claims the guild makes about everything being the same, they really aren’t all doing the same thing. What do you call this?” he indicated the etching spinning within the whirlwind.

“A spell.”

Which showed that he’d been right; etching didn’t need a knife to happen. The wind stopped. And he studied how the essence was etched, then recreated it, finding that it didn’t want to stay still something about the etching put the air in motion.

“I hate to interrupt the lesson,” Jackal said, “but we have a room to clear.”

“I’ll practice it later,” Tibs said, then went back to the threshold, both of his air knives in hand.

“We clear as many of the rats and bunnies as we can before going after the ‘lings,” Jackal said. “Then the ‘lings, and after that, the golems. We’re leaving the bigger one for last if we can.”

“That sounds a lot like strategy, Jackal,” Mez said. “Be careful you don’t turn into a

competent leader.”

A smile cracked Jackal’s stern expression, then was gone. “Are we ready?” The others nodded, and Jackal stepped into the room.

Tibs threw his knives as soon as he stepped across the threshold. Focusing on the air essence, he had them wrapped in, guiding them to cut rats and bunnies. When one knife embedded itself in a bunny, Tibs tried to pull it out, but the essence unraveled under the strain. His second knife got stuck in another one not long after that and he switched to water blast and coating his knife in fire when a ratling got within range.

Around him fire and air exploded, taking out rats and bunnies and ‘lings. As large as the room was, Tibs was still surprised to only feel slight heat of air movement. Mez and Carina had more precision than he could manage.

A dozen ‘lings had retreated to the golems and Tibs looked around. The rest were being finished. He tried to wrap air around one of his knife to bring it back, but it was too far, or there was something else about it he hadn’t understood yet and he had to walk to them to retrieve his knives.

Not being able to ask questions about them sucked.

“Looks like we don’t get a choice in the matter,” Jackals growled.

“Is there another threshold we have to cross before they will activate?” Khumdar asked as the two Big Brutes took a step in their direction. “That will be a no, then.”

“Tibs, you and Khumdar do your best to thin the ‘lings. We don’t want them healing the brutes.” Jackal stepped toward the golems as Carina called for him to hang back. There was no keeping Jackal from this fight. Only helping him survive it.

Tibs threw his knives and sacrificed them to kill two bunnylings. Then he was flinging water and sliding around on it, just barely controlling his movement.

He was getting the hang of this.

And lost his footing.

He planted a knife in the ratling’s foot coming down on him before rolling away, his next knife when in the side of a bunnyling, then the next was thrown at one heading for Khumdar, who was sending more ‘lings flying with sweeps of his staff.

As he stood and searched his body for another knife, two ‘lings approached him. Grinning and he stopped backing up, hands empty. Tibs returned the grin and water flowed over his hands until they formed into jagged weapons nearly the length of a short sword. They crinkled as he iced them.

Tibs was disappointed not to see them hesitate. Then he was on them, slashing and stabbing and being cut and stabbed in return as he realized he was getting in too close for the length of the blade he gave himself.

Training. He needed training in fighting with swords. He shortened them and dispatched the ‘lings with ease. Then moved on to the next one.

He and Khumdar rejoined as the last of the ‘lings died. Jackal was fighting one brute while the other was kept from joining by Carina and Mez, who unleashed all they had.

“They have been made stronger,” the cleric said.

Tibs nodded. It was what Sto did, and he expected they’d were stronger than average

because of Jackal being Lambda now. Did Sto know about the ranks?

Tibs sensed the golems, but unlike with people, the essence flowing through them didn't match their bones and he couldn't tell how injured they were. Only that the one Jackal was fighting had much less than the other.

Tibs felt the change in the essence an instant before the golem taking the barrage from Carina and Mez stepped in the other's direction. Most of it shifted to the hand.

Tibs took out his knife and etched the 'X', then pours all the water essence he had left in it. When he released it, Khumdar caught him, and the brute shattered under the impact. Tibs pulled essence back so he could stand and watched as Jackal punched the other into pieces.

As they regrouped, Tibs felt Jackal's essence. It was cracked in places, but with his body stone, the fighter didn't seem to notice it.

"It was coming to heal?" Jackal asked.

"I figured so," Tibs replied. "Why else move toward it?" He didn't want to voice what he'd felt. Sto already had too many advantages already.

"Not that I'm complaining," Mez said, "but is anyone worried that the big one didn't join in the fight?"

Tibs looked at Bigger Brute, which was still.

"Did Jackal catch the dungeon by surprise with his strategy?" Mez asked.

"I doubt it," Tibs replied. That Sto was silent worried him more. It meant he was busy with something else, or he was planning something.

Bigger Brute raised a hand and pointed at Jackal.

"You," Sto said in Tibs's mind. "Damn it, why can't I get it to talk." He sighed. "Tibs?"

Tibs snorted, and his team stared at him.

"Come on, Tibs, take this seriously," Sto said.

"I think you're getting your wish," he told Jackal. "That's the dungeon calling you out."

"You mean I get a one-on-one fight with the dungeon?" Jackal asked, gleefully.

"Unless we join in," Carina said, "I don't see it bringing anything else. We've killed all the monsters it had here."

Tibs dropped to his knees and placed a hand on the floor. He sighed in relief once he confirmed there were no tunnels under the floor.

"Yeah," he said, "no other monsters."

"How are we doing this, Jackal?" Khumdar asked.

"I'm fighting it."

"Wouldn't it be better if we just blasted it?" Mez asked. "Get the loot and leave? You're hurt."

Jackal looked down at himself. Cracks were visible on his exposed skin.

Carina handed him a vial.

"How about it, dungeon? Is me healing considered fair?"

"Just take the thing and drink it," Carina ordered. "I thought you never fought fair."

“I’m not going to tell the dungeon that,” Jackal protested.

“I believe it is too late,” Khumdar said. “You have recounted many stories of your times in the pits while we were in the dungeon. It knows you cheat.”

“I don’t care about that,” Sto said, sounding smug.

Jackal toasted the dungeon and drank the potion.

Tibs watched Jackal, sensing the cracks in his essence close as they did on his stone body. He couldn’t sense how the potion worked. Something else for later.

Jackal stepped toward the golem. “No hold barred,” he stated. “This ends when one of us is in pieces.”

“Of course,” Sto said.

“If it looks like you’re about to lose,” Mez said, raising his bow as flaming arrow formed, “I am blasting it.”

“No,” Jackal stated.

“Yes,” Tibs and Carina replied.

Tibs looked up. “I’m sorry, but I’m not letting you kill him just because of his ego.”

“I understand,” Sto replied, still smug. “If you have to rescue him, it means I won.”

“Tibs, I have to do this,” Jackal said.

Tibs eyes him. “You are not dying.”

“I’m going to beat it.”

“Then you don’t have to worry about us.”

The fighter sighed and stepped up to the golem.

“Okay,” Sto said, “Tibs when you say so we start—”

Jackal struck the golem in the featureless face, then the chest, then the shoulders. On the fourth punch, it raised its arms but was too slow to block it and this punch staggered it back, cracking the chest.

The golem swung at Jackal but missed. Jackal watched the fist, then struck the arm, cracking it. A foot in the golem’s chest and it was stumbling back.

“Is that all you have?” Jackal taunted.

Sto sighed. “This is a lot harder than you all make it look.”

The golem rolled out of the way and Jackal landed on the floor, his feet cracking the tile. The golem swept a leg, and Jackal jumped out of the way. The golem was up before the fighter would strike again. The golem’s motions were still slow, but they were precise now.

“You’re not controlling it anymore,” Tibs said.

“I thought I’d know how to move it, but instructing it on how to behave isn’t the same as controlling it myself. Next time I’ll give him a proper challenge.”

Jackal grabbed the punch, twisted until the golem’s arm broke and he used it to strike it in the head, shattering the arm. Then he kicked it in the knee, shattering it and he ripped its head off once it was on the ground.

He turned his back to it, dusting his hands as it finished crumbling to rubble.

“Okay, dungeon, why did you leave?”

“You could tell?” Tibs asked, as Sto stammered in surprise.

"I know how my opponents fight. It nearly killed me the last time. It started barely knowing how to move then it was back to being a decent fighter."

"He underestimated how difficult fighting was," Tibs said.

Jackal nodded. "So, you're going to give me a better fight next time?"

"I really like him," Sto said.

"Yes, he will."

"Good. Now, onto the loot."

Tibs looked at the cracks in Jackal's essence. The golem had gotten in a few hits and those had left their marks, but Jackal acted like they didn't affect him. They were done fighting, so Tibs didn't worry.

"Really?" Ganny said, and Tibs looked around. She sounded angry again. Mez had pulled a black robe from the chest. "I leave for a few minutes and you pull this again?"

"You went pouting," Sto replied. "And I didn't do anything."

"Really? So a black robe with metal and darkness essence woven through it is what?"

"Random."

"You expect me to believe that after everything you've done for them?"

"I really don't care what you believe, Ganny," Sto replied, sounding annoyed. "This is me! I get to decide what happens. You're only here to help. You bossing me around is really getting old. And yes, this is just random. It's not my fault the cleric can also wear a sorcerer's robe. It's not like I've even had cleric's robes at this point. None of them have stepped inside except for Tibs's friend."

She didn't reply.

Sto sighed. "Yeah, go sulk again."

"What have you been doing for us?" Tibs asked.

"Nothing, she's exaggerating. I reward you for saving my life and now anytime something plays in your team's favor, she goes on and on about how I can't play favorites, about how those 'they' will not let me get away with it. I'm not seeing any mysterious 'they' show up. I think she's just annoyed that she doesn't have as much to contribute as when I was younger."

"Maybe you could let her help more?"

"She designed the entire third floor," he said, sounding exasperated. "How much more help do I have to let give me? How is it my fault if I'm learning what she taught me?"

Tibs remained silent. Sto was too angry. He didn't want advice. Hopefully, he'd be calmer during the next run and they could talk about it.

Tibs walked around the chest and studied the wall. He could feel the same type of pattern as in the entry hall. Activating it was the same thing, and with a shimmer, the section of the wall vanished.

"Well, now that's useful," Jackal said. A metal chest section of armor over his shoulder. "We don't have to worry about that puzzle to deactivate the triggers on the bridge anymore."

With a curse, Tibs looked back the way they'd come.

"What?" Jackal asked, looking back too. "Did we miss something?"

Tibs shook his head. If he mentioned the cache he was confident was under the water, Jackal would insist they went back for the loot, but Tibs had enough of the dungeon right now.

“Okay, then, let’s go hand the loot over to the guild and buy the pieces we want.”

His friends stepped through and Tibs looked around. The room was clear of the rubble now.

“Tibs?” Carina called, her voice distorted.

He looked up and whispered. “Talk with her. You said she’s there to help, so there has to be a reason why she’s scared and angry. She’s your friend. Don’t let a bad mood ruin that.”

He stepped through the doorway and headed for the exit.