

## Stepping up-24

The room looked no different, five Whippers and a dozen rats. Papers rustled, and Tibs looked at Carina, who was looking through the papers, shaking her head. "This says there're eight golems, or maybe seven. We need new papers. This is getting to smudges. Maybe it's a five?" He mumbled. "I think they look like that in Kartian, and Olive is from there."

"Maybe you should stop referring to them," Mez said, "or just rewrite the whole thing?"

"These were supposed to help," she said in exasperation.

"Pounding on those Whippers will make you feel better," Jackal said, grinning.

"Pounding on things is a 'you' thing," Carina said, folding the papers and placing them in a pocket on her robe. She smiled and raised a hand, a small whirlwind forming in it. "I prefer blasting things apart."

Tibs watched the essence move, then tried to replicate it.

Jackal gave Carina a bow. "Then, my lady is welcome to strike first." He motioned toward the room.

Carina stepped in, causing the Whippers to activate. It wasn't as dramatic as the first-floor boss with the light already at full strength as they turned. She rolled her hand, gathering the essence around her, ripping Tibs's poor excuse for a whirlwind apart, and pushed her hand at the center Whipper. The air funnel hit it, and it flew across the room to hit the wall.

"Wow," Tibs said at the same time as Sto.

"Someone's been training," Jackal said with a grin.

"I don't think the dungeon's seen anyone do this before."

"I certainly haven't," Sto confirmed.

"Rho's all about coming up with our own ways to manipulate our essence," Carina said.

"Why are they not attacking?" Khumdar asked, "Carina is in the room."

"I'm appreciating the moment," Sto said. "And realizing I might have to raise the difficulty. You guys have gotten getting better since like time."

"The dungeon's impressed."

Jackal ran into the room. "Good to know!" His last step reverberated as right before it his body turned the gray of stone. The punch staggered the Whipper.

"Sto, what are you doing?" Ganny said. "They're going to just walk through it."

The rats ran up Jackal's legs. "Mez, shoot them."

"I'm going to hit you too," the archer replied as Tibs stepped in the room, knife in hand. He made the 'X' and only put a small amount of essence in it. It was enough to blast a chunk of stone off the Whipper.

"Don't make them explosive and I'll be fine," Jackal said, kicking the rats out of his way to follow the stunned golem and punch it again. Flashes of light followed his words as

Mez unleashed fire arrows one after the other.

Tibs continues blasting the Whipper with his water attack, pulling in essence between each to replenish the amulet and his reserve. Khumdar stepped around him, staff whirling in his hands, darkness trailing it and him.

The motions for the 'X' were natural enough Tibs could watch the cleric fight, moving to avoid the whip, except once, and Tibs lost his focus as Khumdar staggered under the impact on his shoulder, the darkness surrounding him flying back.

Pain in Tibs's side forced him to focus. The one disrupted attack had allowed his golem to go on the offensive and Tibs needed most of his essence to form an ice armor to reinforce his leather one. When he tried to make another 'X', the golem immediately whipped him, forcing him to jump out of the way.

Range was out of the question now. He grinned. That was okay—he ran at the Whipper—he had plenty of experience in close-quarter fighting at this point. He threw water at the golem's feet. And he still had tricks.

The golem jumped sideways as Tibs iced it, and he was so surprised at the action he stepped on the ice and nearly slid off balance, mentally latching into the essence under his feet. The stop was so sudden he tripped.

Cursing, Tibs rolled out of the way of the descending foot, absorbing the water in the process. He slashed at the leg, only to realize he was no longer holding his knife.

He pulled one of his air knives with another curse. If he wasn't going to throw them, he needed to make sure he didn't drop them.

A blast of air shoved him away as he slashed again, causing him to miss the leg, but putting him out of reach of the golem's stomping.

"Thanks!" He yelled, getting up and gathering essence. He started etching the 'X' and had to jump out of the way. He glared at the golem. "Okay, this is getting tiresome." He threw the knife, using the little air essence he had to keep it on target as he pulled the other one out and flicked a water jet.

Neither attacks were enough to cause serious damage, but the golem focused on it, and let Tibs etched the 'X' in the air and pour essence in it. When the golem looked at him, Tibs released it, and the powerful jet shattered it.

Tibs placed his hands on his knees. Controlling how much of his essence the attack used still took too much out of him. The guild evaluators who had supervised his test had commented on it, but decided, like everyone did, that it was a side effect of his young age.

As useful as the excuse was, Tibs was getting tired of it.

"This was fun," Jackal said.

Tibs grinned at the fighter who stood at the center of rubble, shifting it with a foot, looking at the floor, searching for his well-earned loot, Tibs figured.

He straightened and pulled essence to him, refilling his reserve and transferring that to the amulet. He was getting faster, refilling it under five minutes.

"We have two amulets," Carina said. "You think we can keep them for Tibs this time?"

"Won't that depend on if there's something one of us needs more?" Mez answered.

"I think, Tibs deserves to take priority," Jackal replied. "He can't fight at full

efficiency without proper reserves of his essences, and he's up to needing five amulets in total."

"I wouldn't worry about it," Sto said and Tibs frowned, but he didn't relay the message.

"Let's see what other loot there is first," he said. "Amulets are common enough there's always some. Stuff specific to you is a lot more rare."

"A lack of essence is more of a shackle for you than a precious item will be for us," Khumdar said.

"We can still wait until we've cleared the floor to decide," Tibs replied. "Unless you leave the amulets behind, they're still going to be there once we have everything."

"Someone's getting cocky," Sto said with a chuckle.

"Khumdar," Carina called, "that dark aura, it's new. I didn't know a cleric could do that."

The cleric inclined his head. "Not having someone to guide my training means I am not limited by their preconceptions. I have been studying the two fighters who have darkness as their element. They create a shell as protection. I can't seem to manage to make it as tight and solid as they, but it still offers protection."

"Mindset," Tibs said, flicking water at his feet and icing it. "Alistair says that how we think affects what we can do." He placed a foot on it and it slid around. "Fighter are all about being hard, their attacks their defenses, so it makes sense any use of their essence will also be solid." He latched onto the essence, but that wasn't enough. "As a cleric, you don't think that way, so your adaptation of it will be different."

What had he done? It had been reflex, and in the middle of a fight, so he hadn't been able to pay attention.

"That is astute," Khumdar said.

Tibs gave up on the ice patch and absorbed the water. He'd figure it out later. He smiled at the cleric. "I ask a lot of questions."

Carina sighed. "I wish my teacher was as forthcoming with answers as yours is. Mine always goes on about how figuring out the answer is as important as the answer itself."

"He is not wrong," Khumdar said.

"And sorcerers are all about the research, right?" Jackal added. "Onto the next room," he said before Carina could do more than glare at him.

"Anyone needs healing?" Tibs asked.

"I'm good," Jackals replied. "I love my stone body."

"I have bruises," Khumdar said, "but nothing that will impede my fighting."

Carina and Mez were uninjured, having stayed out of range for the entire fight.

The ratling village looked no different from the entrance.

"This might not be accurate," Carina said, "but the notes from the other team claim the population has close to doubled."

"So we'll be ready for a big loot reward," Jackal said, grinning. "Same as usual? You and Tibs clear the tents while the three of us take on the bulk?"

"Go left," Sto said.

“No,” Ganny contradicted him.

“Yes, go left Tibs.”

“We talked about this, Sto,” she snapped.

“You talked, I listened. You were wrong, I am right.”

“You go right and I take the left?” Tibs asked Carina. She nodded. He wasn’t sure what this was about, but Sto hadn’t led him into traps yet, so while he and Ganny resolved their argument, he’d do his part to clear the room.

The first three tents were empty, the fourth and fifth had ratlings, and he easily dispatched them, collecting the silver.

“Ninth tent,” Sto said. Ganny had fallen mostly silent, grumbling her protest indistinctly. He was getting the sense that ultimately, Sto had the power here. She advised him, and if Sto let her, she could affect the dungeon, but in the end, what he wanted was what happened.

He cleared the tents, ignoring Sto’s insistence he hurry. There was a group of five ratlings in one tent, a repeat of the cooking scene from his first time in the village, but this time, he ended the fight quickly.

The ninth tent was empty, except for a chest in the middle. He crouched before him and looked it over for traps.

“It’s safe,” Sto said in exasperation.

Tibs believed him, but he still only opened it once he confirmed there were none. The inside was the right size for the chest this time and contained a set of leather bracers. Tibs frowned. They were plain, no essence weave on them, they were even scuffed. They felt too ordinary for a second-floor loot.

He picked one up and nearly dropped it as he felt the essence in it on contact.

“You like?” Sto said with pride.

He placed it down again, and it was a regular bracer. “This is like the pouch that kept Walter’s amulet hidden.”

“The hiding part of it, yes, the rest of all for you.”

He picked them up. He couldn’t work out the weave, it was too tight, but he could make out there were a lot of different essences involved. One thing he understood, once he stopped focusing on the weave and felt for what it was hiding, was the reserves in it.

He turned the bracers over, then felt inside. “Where are the amulets? I can feel the reserves but this is just leather.” He frowned. “Can you turn leather into essence reserves?”

“No, that can’t be done as far as Ganny knows,” Sto said. “Just like I did for the bow, it needs to be gems.”

“Tibs,” she said, “put them back, please.”

“It’s his loot,” Sto replied, tone hard.

“Okay, what’s going on?” he asked.

“Sto is breaking the rules again.” Instead of the usual annoyance, there was worry in her voice.

“Who cares,” Sto said in exasperation.

“They’re going to notice.”

“Well, I don’t care. Tibs saved my life. He deserves a reward.”

“I think you’ve done enough already,” she said.

“I don’t want to get you in trouble,” Tibs said, sensing the reserves. They were big, each much larger than his current amulet. Five out of the eight were filled, and he couldn’t tell what the other three would contain, but he could guess.

“You won’t. Ganny’s just trying to scare me into staying on the ‘straight and narrow’, whatever that means. She’s never seen those ‘them’ so I doubt they’re real.”

“They are,” she stated.

Tibs shook his head. Dungeon stuff was beyond him, but it was Sto’s decision as to what happened here, so Tibs was going with his wishes. He placed a bracer next to the one he wore. Other than the scratches on it, they were identical, down to the knife sheath on the left one. No, the new ones were a little thicker.

“How did you copy my bracers?”

Sto snorted. “I didn’t copy your bracers. I copied that from one of the other Runners. A lot of them wear the same kind of armor as you.”

The Runners he’d sent to Darran.

“How did you hide the amulets in this? Is it like with the chest that and they are larger on the inside?” He didn’t want to think about everyone who’d died. Or that it had been someone he’d known who had provided Sto with the model to make these.

“That’s an idea,” Sto said, “but no. The amulet in your pouch is large because it’s pretty bad quality. It can’t hold much essence for the volume it contains. The ones in your bracers, on top of being shaped to fit without being visually noticeable, are much purer.”

“And there’s eight of them. Four on each.”

“You said you are going to get more elements, so I planned ahead.”

“I said that when I was here, Sto. You didn’t have that much time to make this.”

“Tibs, you saw how quickly I reformed the puzzle. Coming up with how to make the bracers to me a while, but now that I do, it’s just a question of having the essence.”

And a lot of Runners had died.

“Tibs, please,” Ganny said. “I know you like having loot and I know this is going to help you, but...”

“I’m sorry, Ganny, I can’t give them back.” People he’d known had provided the essence to make them. He’d honor them by making use of it. By using the reserves they contained to get stronger. To beat Sto by staying alive.

The sigh she gave was tired more than angry.

“Why make them looking already used?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Sto asked. “So you can keep them without having to pay the guild for them.”

“But they’d think they are ordinary leathers.” Unless the person looking over their loot picked them up.

“You really want to give the guild even one copper you don’t have to? I’d make all your loot like this, but the cost in essence is high.”

“And it would look suspicious if we always came out of normal gear.”

“Huh, I guess that’s true. So you can put them on now, and not have to tell anyone about them, not even your team.”