

Stepping up-8

Beyond the room was the long corridor where Bardik had covered the walls with corruption essence. Tibs counted his paces as he stepped into it, sensing ahead. He felt the lines of essences crisscrossing the space and stopped one pace before the closest one. It had taken him the same numbers of paces as it did to walk from one room to the other.

That part of the corridor was actually a room. One filled with trigger lines.

Jackal stepped next to him and frowned, running a hand before one line, then another.

“What are you doing?” Tibs asked as the fighter stepped around him, following a line from one side to the other.

“Unlike you, I can’t feel those things unless I’m almost touching them.”

Tibs stared at Jackal. “Really?” he looked at the others.

Mez and Khumdar nodded.

“I can feel essence when projects mine ahead,” Carina said. “It interacts with the essences and I get a sense of what’s there. And there’s a lot. Is this supposed to kill us? I thought there was always a way to get through the traps.”

“There is,” Sto said.

Tibs quickly passed a hand through a line and almost immediately spears traversed the corridor, almost forming a wall that moved from their side to the other. It happened so quickly that by the time the first set of spears registered, the fourth or fifth one was activated.

“Yeah,” Jackal said, “that’s designed to kill us.” Tibs tried not to feel as defeated as the fighter.

“What is that?” Khumdar pointed down the corridor once the last of the spears retracted. At the other end was a pedestal, with the top part angled so Tibs could see what looked like a plaque.

“I think,” Carina said, “that it’s the way to turn the trap off.”

“Why put the think all the way on the other side?” Jackal asked. “By the time we can turn it off we’ve already crossed it.”

“Maybe it’s for when we come back?” Tibs said, trying to map out the lines and see a way through.

“If one of us who happens to be small and agile goes through it,” Carina said, “he can then turn it off for the rest of us.”

“Oh,” Jackal replied.

Tibs thought he’d worked out a path through the first ten layers, which was as far as he could sense. It wouldn’t be easy, but she was right. He could make it, and he trusted Sto for there to be a path beyond—

Tibs ducked and turned as something twanged, so focused on looking for the trigger and trap in what should have been a safe section. He barely registered something flying by his head. Not finding anything, he looked for anyone hurt, and only then noticed Mez lowering his bow.

“What did you do?” Tibs asked.

The archer shrugged. “Turned off the traps.”

Tibs focused on the corridor, and the lives were gone. “How did you know?”

“I didn’t, but I figured wasting one arrow on the change it worked was worthwhile.”

“It was,” Jackal said, moving his hand ahead of him as he stepped into the corridor.

“Okay,” Sto said, “that wasn’t how I’d expected you to beat this trap.”

“You expected me to step around, under and over the lines, didn’t you?” Tibs joined Jackal and kept pace with him, sensing ahead of them, in case the traps reactivated.

“Yeah, I designed this as a test of agility.” He fell silent. “Although, I guess it works too, as one of cunning. Not every team is as smart as yours.”

Some were a lot smarter, Tibs thought.

Then they were on the other side, and Tibs studied the pedestal. Like everything in the dungeon, it was stone, and the plaque could be pushed in easily. It was why the arrow had been enough. Tibs expected that on their next run, it wouldn’t be this easy. Sto had said he works for cunning, but he had made it for agility, so he’d try to ensure that was how it was beaten.

He joined the others at the entrance to the other room and swallowed hard. It was large, bigger than the village rooms, with columns holding the ceiling up. In the distance were three golems, three BBs, one Bigger Brute, with a Big Brute on each side, but they weren’t what made it hard for Tibs to breathe. Or the Ratlings and Bunnylings around them.

This was where he’d almost died.

The room shifted, covered with corruption eating at the walls. The BBs broken by Bardik. Bardik, who Tibs had known didn’t view him as a friend, but still had hoped they could be, had been willing to kill him in the end, rather than fail at his plan of destroying Sto.

A hand on his shoulder made him jump, and someone kept him from stepping into the room.

“Are you alright?” Khumdar asked gently. “Do you prefer we not do this today?”

Tibs looked at the room again. The walls were immaculate, polished pale gray stone with abstract designs carved into them. The floor was tiled, hexagonal ones in varying shades of gray. The damage was only in his memory, as was the worse of the pain.

“I’m good.” Sto had survived. Tibs owed it to him to see this through. To beat this room with his team.

“So, we have Ratlings, bunnylings, and two types of golems,” Jackal said, looking at Tibs.

“Big Brute and Bigger Brute.”

The fighter rolled his eyes but didn’t comment. “At least there are none of those Whippers. We can handle the rats and bunnies, but they’re going to give the brutes time to get shots in. Any ideas?”

“When we encountered the smaller of the Brutes,” Khumdar said, “we barely did it any damage. They will be the larger threats.”

“No,” Mez replied. “If we start on them, the rats and bunnies are going to tear us

apart. We can deal with them if we're not distracted. We need to thin them out and then focus on the Brutes. They aren't exactly fast, the room is large."

"We're stronger than we were when Tibs walked into the fire," Jackal said. "We can take on the Brutes."

"Not at the same time as the rest." Carina glared at the fighter. "I agree with Mez. It doesn't matter how strong we are. They have numbers with which they can overwhelm us. Me and Mez have area attacks now, but even that's not going to work if they're all on you. I haven't found a way to make my attacks only hurt those creatures."

"Can that be done?" Jackal asked, and she glared at him harder.

"And there could be traps," Khumdar said. "The tiles do lend themselves to that."

"No," Tibs replied, then hesitated. "I don't think that's how it works. A room either has traps or monsters. There might be a warren system under the floor, with the tiles flipping for more bunnylings to jump out of, but I don't think we have to worry about traps." Not this time, Tibs was confident, although the discussion might give Sto ideas.

"Can you sense bunnies under the floor?" Carina asked.

Tibs shook his head. "But that just means they're staying away. The dungeon knows I can sense them and at this point, he probably has an idea what my range is."

Sto remained silent.

"Then can you tell if some of the tiles can flip?" she asked.

Tibs crouched and studied the floor. The varying colors made it difficult. And Sto could have learned from the previous warren rooms and made the weight system less visible.

"No, but that doesn't mean anything. So we're going to have to pay attention to where we step. Keep an eye out for where they jump out of. I'll try to look for a pattern, but it's not going to help us this time."

"I count at least thirty, of the rats and bunnies," Jackal said.

"Thirty-six," Khumdar said.

"How can you count them so quickly?" Jackal demanded, "and with them moving about?"

"Twelve seems to be a significant number for the dungeon. I don't know why, but there are twelve light stones between the entrance and the first room. Twenty-four rats in the boulder room, twenty-four rabbit in the warren room."

"One Whipper," Jackal replied grinning.

"A boss monster."

"Five Whipper on the second floor."

"And nineteen rats."

Jackal frowned and counted on his fingers. "That's twenty-four." Khumdar nodded. "The other rooms?"

"I haven't been able to count them, but I expect it will thirty-six or forty-eight."

"He's right," Sto said, sounding surprised. "I didn't notice I did all of them in twelves."

Tibs kept that information to himself. It wouldn't help, and by the time they were

back, Sto would change things now that he knew about them.

Jackal studied the room. “Alright. The three of us engage and keep the small ones busy. We have lots of room so we make use of it. Carina, Mez, we’re going to try and give you shots into groups, but it’s going to be on your judgment which to take because we’re not going to have much control over how close to them we’ll be. If you can’t get a shot in, weaken the Brutes.”

Tibs took his knives out, looked at them, at the creatures, and sighed. Swords, he was definitely learning how to handle a sword after this.

He ran into the room with Jackal and Khumdar, and split away a third of the way in, as the ratlings and bunnylings ran at them. Instead of splitting into three, they split into four, with one group running past them.

“Carina, Mez!” Jackal yelled, but an explosion informed them the two were aware of the danger they posed.

Tibs ducked, blocked, and parried, covering himself in ice after the first set of claws cut him. Too damned close to them. He sliced and stabbed, adding fire to the blades, and cursing himself for not thinking of starting the attack at a distance. He had range now, even if he could only target one opponent at a time.

“Tibs, back up!” Mez yelled. As Carina yelled Khumdar’s name.

Tibs retreated quickly, and before the group caught back up to him, a burning arrow hit the ground in the middle of them and exploded. The creatures that were sent flying picked themselves up as soon as they landed and ran at Tibs again. But that had taken care of half of his opponents.

Tibs threw himself into the fray and regretted it immediately, as his ice armor was chipped away and he received more injuries. Again, he’d forgotten to attack at a distance.

When the last bunnyling fell, Tibs put his hand on his knees and caught his breath. He wanted to go help his friends. At least one of them was still fighting. But his amulet was out of essence, and he needed a few seconds to refill it. When he straightened, only Jackal was fighting.

He had a handful of opponents, and one shattered under a kick from the fighter. Another from a punch, then another as Jackal used one to bash the other with, then broke the one he held over his knee. The last fell from a fist through the chest.

If the creatures had had any survival instincts, Tibs expected they would have all run off the moment Jackal joined the fight. The strength he gained when rocked-up as he was, was scary.

Tibs opened his mouth to congratulate the fighter, but the ground shook. It shook again as Tibs looked to the Brutes. Bigger Brute was taking heaving steps in their direction, the other two trailing behind him.

“Does anyone need Tibs to heal them?” Jackal called, “we don’t have long.”

Tibs did an inventory of his injuries. Mostly cuts and bruises. Fatigue was the problem, and he couldn’t do anything about that. Khumdar was fine, and Jackal seemed to be nearly impervious in his form. Mez and Carina joined them.

“How are you two on essence?”

Mez patted his bow. "I'm good."

"I'm running a little low," Carina said. "I need to either get a second amulet or be more careful with how much I use."

Tibs opened his mouth—

"Then stay behind," Jackal ordered. "If you run out, stay by the exit because if we need to run, I want you to be the first out. No arguing," Jackal snapped. "I'm not losing the team's sorcerer to stubbornness." He grumbled something Tibs barely made out about the only sorcerer he was willing to sacrifice being Don.

Tibs smiled as he sheathed his knives. Mez had the time to raise an eyebrow at the action before Tibs pulled the knife out and flicked it at the Brute. The jet of water splashed over it without visible effect, but Tibs was proud to have thought of it this time.

Mez fired fire arrows after fire arrows, leaving scorch marks as the Brute walked, the floor shaking with each step. Flecks of stones flew off with each arrow, but they didn't slow the golem's steady approach. Tibs flicked water at it along with the arrows, then tried to do it with both knives, but it threw off his focus.

A blade of air hit the Brute's face and sheared off part of it, but that also didn't affect its speed.

"Our turn!" Jackal said. "Khumdar, take the left. I have the right. Just bash at it, the moment it focuses on either of us, we back and draw it while you three go back to hitting it."

Jackal stepped to the right with a deliberateness that made Tibs feel he should feel the ground shake with the fighter's steps, too. Tibs got in a last jet of water before Jackal and the clerics were close enough to strike. Instead of trailing darkness as it had before, Khumdar's staff sported a dark pointed end and he used it to stab and cut the golem. The point went in easily, even cutting the Brute's arm at the elbow when it swung at him.

Khumdar backed up as the golem fixed angry eyes on him.

"Your turn again!" Jackal called as Bigger Brute followed the cleric's quick retreat. Tibs noticed one of the Big Brutes pick up speed as he flung water, and Jackal's cursing said the fighter noticed it too.

Before Jackal could join Khumdar to cover his flank, the Big Brute broke into rubble as it impacted the Bigger Brute. Tibs felt the essence transfer from one to the other as part of the stones reassembled to fix the cut arm and injuries.

Tibs stood frozen.

"What?" Jackal demanded.

"Oh fuck," Carina said.

"Keep it busy!" Mez yelled as the Bigger Brute took advantage of their distraction and slammed its arm into Jackal, sending the fighter flying across the room. "Carina, whatever you have left, you and me have to take down the other small one. We can't let them pull this trick a second time."

Khumdar was using his staff to block the golem's blows, the darkness over it seeming to keep the fists from touching the wood. Tibs ran to help the cleric, grumbling about Sto being a cheater. Fortunately, the dungeon remained quiet. Now was not the time to

get into an argument, and Tibs didn't think he could stop himself.

Jackal was back on his feet and running to join them when Tibs used water to slide between the golem's legs, cutting at the ankles. The knives bit deep, but unlike with people, it didn't prevent it from continuing to step with Khumdar's retreat.

The cleric strained, and a block wasn't correct. Instead of deflecting strike away, it resulting in a glancing blow on his shoulder. Tibs saw the essence break, even if Khumdar didn't react to the injury.

With a scream, Jackal jumped over them and landed on the golem with punches to the face that sent stone flying. But Tibs couldn't tell whose it was. He ran to Khumdar, who tried to shake him away as he placed a hand on his shoulder.

"We don't—" the cleric began.

"Shut up." Tibs poured his essence and shaped it around the injury. "You can't fight with only one arm." He tightened and hardened the essence and turned to the fight. Jackal flew over them. But the golem's face was a mess of broken stones, with only one eye remaining.

Tibs flicked a water jet at it. If he could blind it, they'd have the advantage, but he missed. The water splashing on the side of its head. His aim with the jet was no better than with throwing his knives. The only advantage was that he lost nothing this way, not even essence. He could refill his reserve as fast as the ability used it.

"Tibs," Khumdar said, the staff coming down before him to deflect the arm aimed for his head. "Move."

Tibs did as told, slicing at a leg at the same time. He glanced at the other golem. Mez was the only one still firing at it, each arrow exploding and taking chunks of rocks out, but not slowing it as he walked toward the Bigger Brute.

With a cry Khumdar fell to a knee, staff over his head, holding the stone arm away. Jackal slammed into the golem and staggered it. His essence was broken in multiple places, but his stone body seemed to keep everything in place despite that.

Tibs stepped away as stone flew off the golem with each punch from the angry fighter. His fist was covered with spiked that left gouges into the golem's stone. The Big Brute was still advancing. And it still had a lot of essence, even with its mounting injuries.

Unlike with his friends, the essence didn't break when it was injured. It flew off with the broken stones, reducing the total. He hadn't kept track of how much Bigger Brute had lost, but he was damaged enough it had to be significant.

And it meant nothing of Big Brute reached him.

Tibs stepped aside to give himself a clear view of Big Brute. He took out his knife, channels water essence to the point while pulling from his amulet, and refilling it. He cleared his mind as he traced the 'x', sensing the essence left in the wake of his knife's point.

He readied himself for the drain as he stabbed the center, and a watery jet materialized and stuck Big Brute, pushing it back and blowing stone off it. Unlike his previous attempt, exhaustion didn't hit as hard, and the jet continued. The surprise broke Tibs's focus and the amulet, along with his reserve, emptied and he dropped to all fours,

panting.

He tries to pull essence into his reserve, but he can't focus. All he can do he breathe. Try to slow his pounding heart.

When he could finally hear something other than it. Once his mind was clear enough, he refilled his essence and looked around. All that was left was his panting friends. Jackal the only one not panting, still standing. But Tibs didn't know how he managed it.

He ran to his friend. "Jackal, are you okay?"

"No," the fighter said through grinding teeth.

"How are you?" Tibs couldn't finish.

Jackal snorted. "Will. I am not dying here. I am not putting Kro through losing me."

Tibs sensed the essence in Jackal. Tried to find something that wasn't broken. "I don't know if I have enough essence to heal you."

"Don't."

"Jackal, I can't—"

"Your essence stops me from using earth essence there." He stopped and Tibs felt him pull earth essence from the floor. "I can't survive without filling myself with earth. The cleric will fix me." He paused and let out a sigh. "I hope. Because I'm not sure how Kro's going to feel about his special guy being made of stone all the time." He smiled. "Course I would be hard all the—"

Tibs gagged, and Jackal laughed, then groaned.

"You cheated!" he yelled at the dungeon.

"No, I didn't."

Tibs pointed to the rubble. "You healed Bigger Brute! You can't—"

"I just did for them what you do for your friends," Sto said calmly.

Tibs opened his mouth to contradict him, but he couldn't. It was what Tibs did, and Sto hadn't prevented him from doing it. He didn't consider it Tibs cheating.

He looked at his friends, tired, injured, but alive. They'd survived and based on the chest at the back of the room, Bigger Brute had been the boss monster.

"Someone go check on the loot," Jackal said. "I'd like to do it, but I'm worried if I move more than I have to, I might fall apart." He looked at himself, the breaks in his stone body. "Quite literally."