

Stepping up-7

Tibs pushed the little fire essence he had to the surface of his body to dry himself and his clothes, then walked to the pool of broken ice, looking it over before pulling essence back into his reserve and channeling that into the amulet until it was full.

“I guess that means there’s no safe way across anymore,” Jackal said.

Tibs motioned to the wall. “Unless I deactivate the traps.” He could barely make out the maze of essence channels at the edge of his senses.

“Is it worth it?” Mez asked. “We crossed the ice because it was simple, but the bridge isn’t that difficult to cross.”

“Unless the dungeon has changed that, too,” Khumdar said, stepping onto it, then pausing. “This set of triggers feels like the last time we used it.”

“He isn’t talking,” Tibs told Jackal at the quizzical expression from the fighter. “Other than to encourage us, or mock us, he doesn’t talk about the rooms and what he did in them.”

“I don’t—” Sto started then stopped. “Hmm, right, I do mock you once in a while. But there are times your team deserves it.”

“You’re just evil,” Tibs replied with a smile. “I’m not being serious,” he hurried to add to the worried looks the others gave him. “We have more rooms to clear.” He looked up. “Did you change the layout of this floor since I ran after B—” Tibs’s throat constricted. “When he tried to kill you?”

The memory of the pain crawled through him, being eaten alive by the corruption, his own essence turning against him, defeating attempts to heal him from the clerics.

A hand on his shoulder made him jump. “Tibs?” Carina asked gently.

“I’m okay,” he hurried to reply.

She searched his face. “Are you? If this is too hard.”

“I’m okay,” he said, an edge to his voice.

She nodded, and he followed her to the other room.

“No obvious changes here,” Jackal said. Five whippers, a dozen stone rats. “Let’s stay on our guard for surprises, but we know how to deal with them.”

They took longer than the first-floor boss, but they ended up as rubble too, with only a few cuts and bruises on Tibs’s and his teammates. Nothing any of them felt needed to be healed, and he was happy about it. He didn’t want to risk it while his essence was infected.

“Tibs,” Jackal called, lobbing something at him, an amulet.

“You’re in luck,” Mez said, lobbing another one after searching the rubble. “I think that makes a full set.”

“Sto,” Ganny said, an edge to her voice while Tibs looked at the amulet. Three of them in one run. They’d never found that before.

“Hey Ganny, I didn’t know you were back up here. How’s the work going?”

“It’s going—don’t try to change the subject. We need to have a talk.”

“But they’re heading for the ratling camp.”

“If they survive this run, you’ll get to watch them do it next time.”

“But.”

“Now, Sto.”

Tibs wondered what the coming scolding would be about.

“The dungeon’s going to be busy for a while,” Tibs announced.

“Meaning?” Carina replied.

Tibs looked at Jackal. “Pleading with him for more loot isn’t going to do anything.”

“Has it ever?” Mez asked.

“I don’t plead,” Jackal said. “I ask.”

“You may wish to work on the tone you use if that is the case,” Khumdar said, using the end of his staff to shift the rubble, still searching. “I do believe there has been an edge of pleading to the previous times.”

“I don’t—you know what, I’m not falling for this. Unless you’ve found something else, we have a village to clear and chests to open.” He rubbed his hands. “Loot.”

The changes to the villages were small. The number of tents around each campfire was no longer the same, ranging from three to seven. They were also less uniformly set, feeling more like groups of people had put them up, rather than one person putting them down.

Had the ratlings put the tents up themselves, or was Sto being more random?

Clearing it went as it did the previous times. He and Carina took the edges and moved inward while Jackal, Khumdar, and Mez headed for the center, killing any they encountered and getting the bulk of the attention.

Mez had the only major injury in a broken arm. After Tibs explained the way the corruption in his essence made Jackal sick after he healed him. The archer told Tibs to do it anyway, since the cleric would heal him once they left.

Tibs didn’t know if that would work, since the clerics hadn’t been able to heal the corruption out of him, but did as Mez asked.

“That was fun,” Sto grumbled as they separated to look for the chests.

“What did Ganny want?”

“To complain that I’m ‘breaking the rule again’.”

“Don’t think I didn’t see you change the list of drops from the grouped whippers,” she scolded.

Sto sighed. “Of course I made changes. I’m also making adjustments. Why is this time different from the others?”

“Because it just happened to be what Tibs received.”

“It’s random,” Sto replied in exasperation.

“Is it?” She asked.

Had it been? Tibs knew Sto could affect what dropped. He couldn’t while they were in the room, but he could set things up ahead of time. He’d arranged for Mez to get his bow after Tibs suggested it on a previous run.

“She’s impossible,” Sto grumbled.

“I take it she left.” Tibs didn’t know what Ganymede was. She seemed to act as Sto’s guardian and assistant. She knew more than he did, and she reminded him of all the rules the dungeon had to follow. There had been a hint that she could leave, but didn’t because Sto couldn’t be left unattended.

“Yeah, she’s gone back to work on the third floor.”

“So, did you?”

“Did I what?” Sto demanded, a hint of anger in his voice.

“Affect the loot.”

“No,” the dungeon replied in an offended tone. “Why did the others make it sound like you needed more amulets?”

“For each of my essences. My reserves are small, so I can use amulets as extra reserves, sort of like sorcerers do.”

“Why aren’t you filling the other than?”

He ran a finger over them in his pouch. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to keep them. We need to buy them from the guild and after not having runs and traveling, I’m low on coins. It’ll depend on the loot we find and if the others need something from it.”

“Oh. I thought you got to keep the loot.”

Tibs shook his head, opening a chest. A set of leather boots was in it. Normal ones, if well made. “Everything in here is the property of the guild.”

Sto snorted. “It’s my loot. I make it. I say who gets it. And I say you get it.”

Tibs smiled. “The guild isn’t going to believe me if I tell them that. And if they somehow believe me.” He thought of Harry and how he knew when someone lied to him. “Then I’m going to have to explain how it is you can talk to me. Neither one of us wants that.”

“So you could really use the pouch of hiding.”

Tibs shrugged. “Yeah, but you said it was too costly to make.”

“You did save my life.”

“Will Ganny let you make it?”

“She can’t stop me,” Sto replied angrily, then sighed. “But she can yell at me. And be angry.” He sighed again. “I don’t like making her angry.”

Tibs rejoined the others and placed the boots with the rest. Nothing enchanted this time. A normal bow, boots, well-made clothing, a short sword. Tibs picked that up. It was heavy. He used the earth essence to strengthen his arm, and it became easier to wield.

“Planning on switching weapons?” Mez asked, chuckling.

“Yes. I’m not good enough at throwing my knives, and I’m getting tired of how close those rats get to me before I can kill them.”

“Will the teachers train you?” Carina asked, and Tibs shrugged. He could find someone else to train him if they wouldn’t.

“Is this a good quality sword?” he asked.

“Not really,” Sto answered, as Jackal shrugged.

“I don’t know much about swords.” The fighter closed his fists. “Those are what I

use.”

Tibs nodded. “Those mean the rats would get even closer to me.” He shuddered, putting the sword back with the rest.

“Is the dungeon back?” Jackal asked. Tibs nodded, and the fighter looked up, indicating the loot items. “What’s the big idea, an entire village of ratling and we get junk?”

“That isn’t junk,” Sto replied, offended.

“He’s just pleading for better stuff,” Tibs replied.

“I am not pleading,” Jackal said.

“There’s definitely some whining in there,” Carina said, chuckling. “That makes it pleading.”

“Don’t you want better stuff?” Jackal asked.

“Of course I do, but it’s all worth something. I can use the money to buy what I need if I don’t find it in the loot.”

“What do you need?” Tibs asked, relaying Sto’s question before wondering why the dungeon was interested.

Carina fingered the cut in her robe. “I’m going to have to look into a better one. This isn’t going to hold up against stronger monsters. I’m going to ask Darran if he can get me something like what you had, Khumdar. The armored robes.”

The cleric nodded, putting the items in Jackal’s backpack. “He should manage to get you a set. I purchased mine from a store in Virdan, but I have seen them in more stores who cater to sorcerers.”

“Those were sorcerer’s robes?” Mez asked.

“Of course. Cleric’s robes only come in white.”

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The bunnyling room was the same as the last time, down to the twitching nose poking out of one of the swiveling stones on the floor where they were hiding.

“Okay,” Jackal said. “Last time we made the mistake of underestimating them. Little fluffing stone things that shouldn’t be able to hurt anything. Let’s not do that this time.”

Tibs sensed the bunnylings moving under the floor. Running from one cover stone to the other. The fundamental problem for him and Carina was that the room was bare of anything to use as cover. Stealth was impossible, which turned him into a simple fighter and made it difficult for her to take the time to focus on the stronger spells, since they took longer to prepare. Unlike the ratlings, the bunnylings seemed to know the threat she represented and targeted her accordingly.

She touched her amulet and didn’t look happy.

“I will protect Carina,” Khumdar said, slowly spinning his staff before him. Whatever else he had done while away from Kraggle Rock, Khumdar had become proficient in using it.

“Mez stay close to them,” Jackal said. “You and Carina are more effective at range. Tibs and me will do our best to keep them busy.”

Tibs nodded and drew his knives. He sensed over a dozen moving, but the room was large enough he couldn’t sense all of it and he hadn’t kept track of the numbers the last time.

He and Jackal stepped into the room together, and the head poking out of the floor stilled. Tibs readied himself while Jackal kept walking. It's screeched and every bunnyling under the floor far from a cover stone ran for one and jumped out.

They were smaller than the ratlings. Humanoid stone bunnies with thick legs and scrawny arms with long claws. What made them dangerous was how weak they seemed. It was easy to underestimate them after defeating the ratlings. But they were fast and strong, and, on top of that, they were coordinated. Four headed for Jackal, while three for Tibs, and the rest spread around.

Tibs coated his body in a thin layer of ice for extra armor. He remembered the ease with which those claws had sliced through his leather armor. He threw a knife at one as he dodged another and was thrown off balance as claws dug into his armor. He slashed as he rolled back to his feet and the bunnylings stepped away from him, circling.

That was another thing that made them tougher. They didn't attack mindlessly. They weaved in and out, making it difficult to keep track of one specific bunnyling. They came at him together, and Tibs coated his knife in fire, turning at the last moment to slash at the already injured bunny. The action cost him, as another dug their claws in his side, but the one Tibs slashed broke into pieces, and Tibs was able to cut another of his attacker as he dropped under the jumper.

Not this time.

He got back to his feet and shifted his essence to stop the bleeding. It did nothing for the pain.

The bunnylings circled him, one on each side. Tibs moved with them, making sure neither ended at his back. It let him take in the fights. Jackal had six now, but looked like he was handling them. Rubble was strewn around him, so he'd already killed a few. Mez was firing arrows after arrows, but the bunnylings were dodging them and moving in such a way that the archer almost hit Khumdar a few times as the cleric struck those who came close to him with his staff which was trailing darkness as it moved.

Tibs threw himself to the side, his slash missing the bunnyling that jumped at him, but claws dug into his leg and when he stood, Tibs nearly fell as the essence wrap he put around the injury shattered as corruption pooled in it. A bunnyling used the opportunity to dig its claws into Tibs' shoulder, but before it could bite down, he had his knife into its head and it crumbled before him, revealing the third bunnyling running at him.

Tibs didn't think. He reached into it and pulled its essence out, and the bunnyling shattered into pieces as it impacted with him. Tibs cursed as he fell back. He wasn't supposed to do that.

He pushed himself to his feet. Khumdar was keeping the bunnylings away from Mez and Carina, who were slowly whittling them away. Jackal was still fighting six or seven of them, but one was moving away, eyes fixed on the fighter.

"Jackal!" Tibs yelled, pointing to the bunnyling, but the fighter was too busy to respond. They were keeping him occupied while the other prepared for its attack.

Tibs pulled water essence to him as he made the 'x' with his knife, then stabbed its center and the essence was ripped out nearly faster than he could replenish it. He dropped to

a knee as the water attack flew, and as the bunnyling shattered from the impact, Tibs dropped on all four. He should have pulled from the amulet.

He raised his head as he caught his breath and tried to scramble away from the running bunny. His body locked-up in fear. Where had it come from? Behind it he saw the closing floor tile, the answer not helping him in the slightest.

It exploded and Tibs covered his face to keep the hot stones from burning him.

He forced himself to his feet. Checking the essence wrap on his leg before putting weight on it.

“Jackal,” Carina yelled, stepping toward the fighter and his opponents now that the bunnylings that had been attacking her and Mez had been dealt with, “Shove one away way from you.”

The fighter kicked one, and with a gesture, the sorceress sent wind blades to cut it apart. Jackal kicked another, and this time Mez exploded it with a flame arrow. Jackal punched the head off another as Khumdar joined him. By the time Tibs joined them, all the bunnylings were rubble.

“Are there any more?” Jackal asked, holding his side. Tibs sensed and walked around the room until he’d covered it all.

“They’re all dead.”

“Thank the abyss,” Jackal said, dropping to his knees. “I don’t want to ever have to fight those things again.”

“He’s going to be disappointed,” Sto commented. “I’m glad you survived, Tibs.”

“Thanks. Sorry about draining one of them. I just reacted.”

“Don’t worry about it. You haven’t had a lot of chances to practice I’m guessing.”

Tibs nodded, but was still surprised at how unbothered Sto was. The last time, he’d sounded like he’d have no choice but to take action if Tibs did it again.

“Do you need me to heal you?” Tibs asked Jackal.

“No,” the fighter replied harshly. “Sorry, but I’m going to pass. I can deal with this, and I’d rather not get that fever again.”

“But the cleric will heal us when we leave,” Mez said, sounding worried. “Right?”

“And if that clears the corruption that came with Tibs’s healing, I’ll let him do it on the next run, but they haven’t been able to fully heal it out of him.” Jackal smiled at the fearful archer. “Don’t worry, if you get the fever, I’ll take good care of you.”

“I warned you,” Tibs said when Mez looked at him.

“I thought...” he trailed off and swallowed. “Are we continuing?”

“We are searching this room,” Jackal ordered. “We’re not leaving without the loot.”

Tibs looked around. “That means looking into the warren.”

“You said they’re all dead, right?” Carina asked.

Tibs nodded, toeing the closest tile. He still didn’t look forward to going in there.

The warren was a series of dark connected tunnels which Tibs lit but keeping a flame over his hand. They were small enough he needed to bend down, so he expected the others would be crouched or, in the case of Khumdar, the tallest of them, on all four.

Instead of chests, Tibs found small bags, each containing coins and gems. He had three when he exited and looked around for the others. Carina was seated with Mez, holding a vial with a greenish liquid in it.

“What is it?” Tibs asked.

“I think it’s one of the healing potions they used at the training ground.”

“It’s a healing potion,” Sto said.

“How did you make it?” Tibs asked. “I mean, how did you know to make it. You said you have to get one before you can make more, right?”

“I need to get a basic form of it, then I can make changes and see what happens, but yes, a runner brought one in and they died before they could use it.”

They were the first, so this dated back to before. “Who were they?” how had a runner stolen one?

“One of the nobles. They got separated in the ratling camp so no one was there to keep me from absorbing them.”

It surprised Tibs that a noble would have one of the horrible tasting versions, but then he remembered Tirania mentioning the better ones were extremely expensive. Expensive enough, even the nobles had to be happy with the bad ones.

“There’s five vials,” Carina said.

“Once for each of us,” Tibs replied. He wanted to ask Sto if he’d cheated again, but he needed to know if Ganny was around first. But asking about her would tell Carina.

“Should we keep them?” She asked. “We can get good money for them.”

“I don’t think the guild will give us much,” Tibs replied.

“Much what?” Jackal asked, sitting with them. “Is that a healing potion?”

“There’s one for each of us,” Carina replied.

“Drink one,” Jackal said, “you too Tibs, and give me one.”

“Shouldn’t we consider selling them?” Tibs asked.

“Are we allowed to use them?” Carina asked.

Jackal took the one she held and drank it. He made a face, then sighed in relief. “I’m not going to tell the guild those were here. If we don’t bring something out, how are they going to know?”

Carina handed Tibs one, which he drank. It tasted as bad as before, but it didn’t last long.

“If It is not too much trouble,” Khumdar said, straightening once out of the warren, “I will pass on crawling through this the next time.” He placed two backs with the others.

Carina handed him a vial, which he sniffed and moved away from his face. “If you are planning on poisoning me, Carina, you will need to be more subtle.”

Mez took the vial out of the cleric’s hand and drank it in one swallow. Like the others, he made a face, then relaxed.

Khumdar raised an eyebrow and when Carina offered him the last vial, he took it.

“You’ve never had healing potions in your travels?” Jackal asked.

“I have heard of them, but they are prohibitively expensive. Not so much as a Purity

Cleric, but not something a common traveler can afford.”

“Not like you’re exactly common,” Mez commented.

“Thank you. Should we not keep it to hand to the guild, the money will be needed to pay for the amulets.”

“Drink it,” Jackal ordered.

Khumdar eyed him, then drank it and gagged. “This is horrib—” His face brightened. “Alright, this is not so bad, since the taste does not remain. Something better-tasting would still be appreciated.”

“I’ll get right on that,” Sto replied sarcastically.

“Dungeon,” Jackal said. “This is so we’re going to be ready for what’s in the other rooms, isn’t it?”

“I like him,” Sto said. “Very perceptive.”

Tibs tried to stop the snicker, which caused Jackal to look at him. “He said you’re right.”

Jackal stood. “Makes sense. After the beating we get making it this far. It’s the only way it’s going to get us to keep going. I was going to send us back out. We weren’t in any condition to risk it.”

“Not even for whatever loot’s there?” Carina asked innocently.

“It would still be there the next on the next run,” Jackal replied.

Mez let the others move ahead, keeping Tibs back. “Did it heal the corruption?”

Tibs sensed the essence wrap he’d placed around the archer’s broken arm, undoing it since it was healed. He couldn’t sense any corruption there, but he knew it meant nothing.

“I don’t know. The corruption in my essence doesn’t stay there when I heal you. It leeches into your body and I can’t see it once that happens. Just like I can’t see your essence. Just the way it tints the essence coursing through your body, which tells me the kind of essence you have if I can’t see your eyes first.”

“I have your essence in me?”

Tibs nodded. “Everyone does. Even ordinary people, although there it’s so faint I have to focus to sense it.”

“Does theirs have a tint to it?”

“No,” Tibs said, choosing not to mention the two who did. It wasn’t his place, and he had no idea what it meant. “Only runners or adventurers have essences.”

Mez nodded, and they rejoined the others.

A comment from Ganny came back to him, from back when Tibs had asked how Sto had caused him to have an audience with Fire.

The element and intense emotions, Ganny had said, were what she knew of what was required to have an audience.

He’d almost died each time, and Tibs couldn’t think of anything more intense than that. But didn’t that mean having an audience wasn’t limited to runners?

Did the guild know that?

Did anyone else?