

## Stepping up-25

“How did you make out?” Jackal asked Tibs as he joined them, carrying a sword in one hand, and the bracers in his other. The sword had been in the only other chest Tibs had come across. It was enchanted with a single essence he couldn’t identify, but he suspected it was metal. He also had a dozen more silvers from the ratlings he’d killed.

“I,” he hesitated, “I made out okay. How about you?” There were a few bodies around Jackal, Mez, and Khumdar, but there had to have been more. The cleric leaned on his staff.

“Close to three golds worth in silver from the bodies,” Jackal said, smiling.

“Carina isn’t back?” Tibs looked at the tents. He saw no indications of fighting. He looked Khumdar over. “Do you need me to heal you?”

The cleric smiled. “I will be all right. Despite the training I have done, I forget that actual fighting takes more out of me.”

Carina stepped out from among the tents, carrying a staff over of shoulder, with armor pieces attached to them.

“Good haul,” Jackal called, smiling.

“Why are there so many armor parts?” she demanded. “Why can’t you all just wear robes? They’re a lot easier to carry.”

“Jackal could manage with robe now,” Mez said, “being stone means he doesn’t need armor anymore.”

“I always need armor,” the fighter said.

“Take your pick,” Carina replied, dumping the staff and armor on the ground before them. An epaulet and a pair of boots were metal. “This stuff’s heavy.”

The staff was identical to Khumdar’s, except for the essence woven into it. This one was fire. The armor also had essence woven into them. He couldn’t guess what, since unlike the sword, he could think of a variety of uses for essence on them.

“I also found this.” Tibs handed the bracers to Jackal, who looked them over.

“Off one of the ratlings? Yours are in better condition.”

“It worked!” Sto exclaimed.

“What worked?” Tibs asked, and Jackal raised an eyebrow. “It’s got amulets in it for essence. I expected you to be able to sense them when you hold the bracers. Like with the pouch.”

“They’re attuned to you,” Sto said.

“What does attuned mean?”

“Well...” Sto trailed off. “It means only you can use them.”

“It means that the essence in the item is set to only be able to respond to you,” Carina answered. “It’s something about how everyone has a specific ‘weave’ within them. A combination of your essence, your life force, your thought patterns.” He frowned. “It’s more complicated than that, but it’s all I remember from what I read.” She took one bracer.

“Like that,” Sto said.

“So you know what makes me...” Tibs looked for the right word. “Me?” he settled

on.

Jackal smiled and Carina glared him silent before he could say whatever had just crossed his mind.

“Well...” now Sto hesitated. “Not the way Carina described it. I figured out how to make a weave in such a way that it’s... imprints if the best way I can describe it. On the first person to touch them. A noble had a sword that was like that and Ganny helped me work out how it was made.”

“I should be able to sense something,” Carina said, frowning.

“If it’s like the pouch,” Tibs said, “Bardik said that it takes a specific mindset, along with essence to understand what it is. Do you want to try it?” He asked Khumdar, figuring the cleric was the one with the best chance of sensing it. To Tibs’s surprise, he shook his head.

“No one’s going to know this is enchanted,” Mez mused. “That makes it powerful just with that.” He looked at the others. “Am I the only one who feels it’s too powerful?”

“The dungeon has a soft spot for Tibs,” Jackal said. “Going all the way back to when we started.”

“I do not,” Sto stated.

Tibs smiled. “He made me these because I saved his life. It can store eight different essences.”

Carina whistled. “How much?”

Tibs shrugged. “More than my current amulet in each.” He tried to work out a sense of how much more. “Three times? I don’t know how to measure it.”

Carina nodded. “I guess we’d have to run tests to figure out exactly how much they contain. I’ll try to get books on how to do that.”

“I’m not reading them,” Tibs replied, and she smiled.

“It’s for me.” She handed it back to him. “But eight reserves means the dungeon knows what you’re doing.”

Tibs nodded. “He heard me talk about it when we entered.”

“Put them on,” Jackal said. “If the dungeon went to this extent to reward you, no need to tempt the guild with them.”

Tibs nodded and replaced the bracers.

“Should we bring the old ones?” Khumdar asked.

“No point,” Jackal replied. “It might make them suspicious since they look worn. Why would we bother overloading ourselves with worn stuff when the dungeon provides us with so much brand new ones?”

Tibs closed his eyes and got used to the sense of having so much essence within reach. He chuckled.

“Oh-oh,” Jackal said, grinning. “I think someone’s getting drunk on all that power.”

Tibs rolled his eyes. “I don’t know what to do with all it.”

“You use it,” Jackal stated.

“How? I tried a few things with air, and I can harden myself with earth, but I never even tried anything with fire before because of how little I had. I have no idea if I even want

to try something with corruption.”

At that, the other nodded. With only Don as a reference for what corruption could do, Tibs didn't want to even think of what emulating him would cause.

“Alright, let's pack up and move on,” Jackal said. “We have bunny people to kill.”

“Bunnylings,” Tibs corrected and Jackal rolled his eyes.

“Maybe we should wear the armor,” Mez commented as he tried to fit the piece into Khumdar's pack.

“We'd have to leave our pieces behind,” Jackals answered, “so you'd either have to buy those from the guild or new armor. And the guild might not give you a choice. If you scoff it, they might consider you bought it.”

“Then we need to come up with a different system, maybe ropes.”

“We can cut the tent's canvas into that,” Carina offered.

They spent half an hour tying the armor to the packs, Jackal complaining the entire time.

“It's a good thing stealth isn't needed in the rest of the dungeon,” Tibs commented at the clanging sound the pieces made as they walked to the bunnying room.

“We can wrap them in canvas,” Carina said, stopping and looking back.

“Next time,” Jackals said, keeping her from returning to the ratling village. “Like Tibs said, no need for stealth from this point forward.”

“You realize you've just given the dungeon ideas, right?” Mez commented, which made Sto chuckle.

“I doubt we're the first ones to mention it,” Tibs replied, looking over the empty room. “This feels so wrong. There should be tents.” He focused on the essence moving under the floor, then focused only on the earth essence in an attempt to work out the layout of the tunnels. His range wasn't wide enough.

He frowned.

He'd frozen the entire pool, which had been around the length of this room. If he'd done that, he should be able to extend his sense to encompass this one. Except he'd had an amulet's worth of water essence and... he smiled. He now had more earth essence at his disposal.

He placed a hand on the floor and pushed earth essence into it. He whistled as the warren complex lit up.

“What is it?” Carina asked.

“I can see the warren. It's more than just going from one trap door to the other. It goes up and under. We missed doors when we looked into them the previous times. There are other rooms.”

“Any loot in them?” Jackal asked.

“I can't sense that. Just the shape of the warren. If we take the time to explore it, there might be. There should be, really. It's the equivalent of the ratling village.”

“Do we fit in those tunnels?” Mez asked.

“I do,” Tibs replied without thinking about it, then. “I might be the only one. If fighting's involved, the rest of you would have to be on your knees and bent over.”

“Didn’t all the bunnies come out the last times?” Mez asked.

“Yes,” Tibs answered, “but he’s listening in, he might change things.”

“I can’t if you step in the room,” Sto replied.

“Which starts the fight,” Tibs said. Then decided they had more to gain with preventing Sto from altering how the room worked than continuing to gather information. He stepped in and pulled his knives.

Time to put his extended water reserves to the test.