

Stepping up-61

“I think,” Sto said, “that I need to find a way to keep anyone as strong as Jackal off this floor.”

Jackal moved rubble with a foot, bent down, and picked up the silver coin. The fighter had turned to stone as he walked toward the five Whippers and ignored the rats biting at his ankles and legs. When a whip hit him, Jackal caught it and pulled the Whipper off its feet. With a few punches and kicks, there was only broken stone left of it. The other four went as easily, then stepping on the rats took care of that.

A dozen coppers, four silvers, and one amulet. The guild gave them twenty for it. Was that a fair haul for Jackal barely being challenged? Tibs didn't know. The silvers took care of their lodging and repairs of their equipment. The other rooms would give enough for food and upgrading some things. The rest Tibs accumulated so he could pay as much of his debt to the guild as possible when the time came.

Jackal's disappointment was no more than him always wanting more, although Tibs knew it for the act it was now. Because of his element. Jackal no longer needed armor, and that was the largest expense. What the fighter did with his coins Tibs didn't know, but he had to have a lot at this point.

Once Jackal was satisfied he'd found all the coins he motioned them to the next room, the Ratling encampment.

“How do we want to do this?” Mez asked. “Tibs on one side, Carina on the other, and us distracting everyone? They never seem to learn, so it'll still work.”

“Do you mind if I try something?” Tibs asked. The only things that could burn in the room were the tents, and as hot as he suspected he could make his fire, the cavern's wall would survive it. His main worry was not letting his anger surface. He wasn't angry right now, but when Channeling fire, it took little for his emotions to get out of control.

“Sure,” Jackal said. “What do you have in mind?”

“Something to impress Sto,” Tibs replied. He looked at his friends. “You should step back. It's about to get really hot in here.”

He coated his hand with fire essence and it ignited.

“Tibs, are you sure this is a good idea?” Carina asked.

“I'm not angry,” he said, smiling. In fact, he felt really good. His smile broadened and he faced the cavern.

“That not—”

The rest of her words disappeared under the eruption of fire in the cavern as Tibs send more and more essence into it. This was raw essence, raw fire. No finesse to it. No explosion on contact. Only heat and flames, and he loved it.

He laughed with joy.

He felt the new fires, the tents burning. He made out the screams of the Ratlings and it sounded wonderful. He poured more essence. There couldn't be enough. This was so fun. Now it was their time to suffer. Their time to feel the fear they'd inflicted on him.

His laughter no longer contained joy. Now they would know what it was like to be at someone else's mercy. To stifle a scream as you woke from a nightmare so your friends wouldn't worry. Wouldn't think you were weak.

Tibs wasn't weak.

Someone screamed his name, but he ignored it.

He would never be weak again. He had power. He had strength. No one would ever die around him except for those who threatened his friends, his family, his team. He would burn this mountain down if—

Stars erupted around him along with pain at the back of his head. He spun, ready to incinerate his attacker, and frowned as a smoking Jackal looked at him. The surprise lessened his glee, and he noticed the others, in the other room, surrounded by darkness. He looked around. The walls in the hall were glowing from the heat.

With a curse, he pulled the essence back into himself, all of it.

"That is it," Jackal said, just as the wall on their left cracked.

"Ganny!" Sto yelled.

"I saw," she replied.

Tibs swallowed. Had he cracked Sto's wall?

Jackal looked away from the crack. "I don't care what the situation is, Tibs. No fire, ever."

Tibs nodded. He looked at his friends approaching, looking at him warily. "But I wasn't angry." He'd been having fun. Although... his emotions had turned dark at the end.

Carina hugged herself as she shivered. "You were something, Tibs."

"Out of control," Mez said.

"I disagree," Khumdar said. "Tibs was most certainly in control of the fire, the question is what was he trying to do."

"Punish them," he answered weakly.

"For what?" Jackal asked. His clothing had burned off, but the armor underneath has somehow survived, getting only signed. There was earth essence woven through it. That hadn't been there when they entered the dungeon.

"Hurting me, scaring me." He recalled some of what it's thought as he pushed more and more essence. "For making you think I was weak."

"We don't think that, Tibs."

"Don't you?" He asked, fearfully. "I couldn't do anything, and now I hurt you, I could have killed you if Jackal hadn't stopped me, again." What had happened?

"I believe it is safe to assume that fire isn't only about anger," the cleric said. "He raises any of your emotions."

"And I don't think they're limited to one at a time. You sounded happy, then your laughter turned really scary. That's when we had to start backing off."

"No more fire," Tibs agreed.

"At least not until you have more experience controlling yourself under the other element's influence," Khumdar said.

“Are you going to look at the carnage you caused?” Jackal asked.

“Do I have to?” Tibs answered weakly.

“Yes.” Jackal’s tone was flat. “You need to see what you caused Tibs. I thought seeing the result around the platform would give you a sense of how dangerous you are, but I don’t think it worked. This might be better.”

Tibs glanced at the cracked wall. The wall Sto thought nothing could damage now that he’d woven corruption into it. He turned and looked at the encampment.

The cavern was empty.

The floor was covered with ash and cooling stones. Nothing else. Tibs had reduced everything and everyone in it to ash. He turned and held onto the wall as he threw up. He only mildly registered that it was much colder than the air.

“They weren’t alive,” Sto said, sounding puzzled.

It had been so easy, so fun, then so needed. He hadn’t cared they were creatures. He would have done this to anyone. He’d wanted to do it to Sto.

He wiped his mouth and stepped into the cavern. The smell of ash was thick. There was nothing recognizable in the room. He had no idea how he’d burned stuff on the other side. That was way beyond his reach. Then he remembered the pool and how the ice had propagated to all of it.

The lack of structure made him realize something. “I’m sorry for destroying the loot.”

“If you stick to your promise not to use fire again, I’ll consider it fine,” Jackal said somberly.

“I won’t.” He headed for the exit, forcing himself to look at the destruction.

“Tibs?” Sto called.

“Yeah?” He readied himself to be chastised.

“Consider me impressed.”

Tibs would have preferred being chastised.

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The Bunnyling room became Mez’s show of power. He stepped into the room before any of them could strategize and proceeded to shoot the Bunnylings as they came out of the warrens. Even when it looked like there were too many for him to take out, he kept firing. Some arrows exploded, taking out multiple Bunnylings; others burned through their targets to strike those behind. Most were simply brought down by an arrow through an eye.

When there were none left, the closest one had gotten to Mez was seven paces.

Tibs crawled through the warrens and found three chests. Armor pieces and one staff woven through with an essence Tibs couldn’t identify.

Now they stood in the corridor with the essence maze. Resigned, Tibs stepped forward, but Carina placed a hand on his shoulder. “I think I have this,” she said, then looked to Khumdar. “Unless you’d like to do the honor?”

The cleric smiled. “I do not feel a need to impress anyone with my prowesses.”

The sorceress nodded, then pulled the amulet from under the robe, kissed it, and extended a hand forward. Tibs felt the ribbon of essence stretch away from her and beyond

what he could sense. Her smile dropped away as she focused harder.

“Almost there,” she said through grinding teeth. “Come on.” He took a step forward, then another.

Tibs stepped in front of her and placed a hand on her chest to stop her. “You’re about to break one of the triggers.”

“But I’m almost there,” She hissed, eyes closed.

“If you can’t reach it, it’s fine,” Jackal said.

“I can,” she snapped. “I just have to pull more essence into it.”

“I thought you could do—”

“I’m busy,” She said.

Tibs nodded. Whatever the reason, she was at her limit and she couldn’t draw more of the essence to her. He looked at the amulet. It was the same as she’d first found on this floor, still wrapped in leather strips. The crystal itself looked like any of the others Sto gave out, cloudy, the size of his thumb. Putting them aside, there would be no way to tell which contained what essence without sensing for it. This one was drained. It would take any of the essences now.

Could he?

“Jackal?”

“Oh ho,” Mez said.

“Yes, Tibs?” the fighter answered cautiously.

“I’m about to try something with air. Make sure I don’t fly into the maze.”

“At least it isn’t fire,” Mez commented and Tibs glared at him before looking at the amulet. Jackal took hold of his shoulder and Tibs channeled air.

The maze.

He pulled on the shoulder. “Come on, I can fly through it before anything catches me.”

“Focus Tibs,” Jackal said and nodded to the amulet. “You want to do something here.”

“But refilling Carina’s amulet’s boring.”

“You can fly after,” Jackal said.

Tibs smiled at him. “You promise?”

“I do.”

“What are you going to do?” Khumdar asked.

“Refill it, what else?” Tibs touched the amulet with his finger.

“You cannot refill someone’s amulet.”

Tibs snorted. “Of course I can. It’s just essence and an amulet is made to absorb it.” He pushed the essence in. There was resistance, his essence wasn’t Carina’s, but that was just about wanting it more, and Tibs wanted it badly, so he could fly. Refilling it barely registered into his vast reserve, but he still pulled air from outside and refilled that.

“Thank you,” Carina said, grinning.

Tibs looked at Jackal. “Can I fly now?”

“I don’t—”

“It’s okay,” Carina said.

“Yes!” Tibs pulled out of Jackal’s grip, turned and stepped into the corridor, and stopped. “That’s not fair. Sto! Bring the maze back.”

“I can’t do that,” the dungeon replied. “Once it’s beaten it’s done until the next team comes.”

“But I wanted to fly through it.” He glared at Jackal. “You knew that was going to happen. You’re no fun.” He let go of the air, what was the point if he wasn’t going to get to outfly the spears. He looked at Jackal. “Did you know, she’d be done that fast?”

The fighter raised an eyebrow. “Do I look that smart? I figure I’d hold on to you as long as needed. You were only going to hate me until you let go of the essence.”

“Exactly what just happened, Tibs?” Ganny asked.

“I refilled Carina’s amulet.”

“That I know, but you weren’t acting like yourself. Just like when you used your fire essence.”

Tibs nodded and followed his friends. “When I channel an essence, my reserve turned into that one, but at the same time, I start thinking like the element. Air’s all about having fun. Fire’s...” he trailed off. “Makes my emotions stronger, I guess.”

“And water doesn’t affect you?” Sto asked. “You seemed like yourself with the pool.”

“It does. I’ve just trained myself not to respond to it over the last few weeks. I’m going to do that with the other elements, but it’s going to take time.”

“You aren’t fighting them alone,” Carina told Jackal.

“Just the boss—”

“No,” he stated. “You’ve shown us how great you are. We all had our turn. Now—”

“Khumdar didn’t,” Tibs said.

“As I stated, I do not have a need to impress anyone.”

“You sure?” Mez asked. “Taken all that down with darkness would certainly impress me.”

“Then I fear you will not be impressed. That is something I could not do even if I desired it.”

“Alright,” Jackal said. “Then you guys deal with the—”

“What did I just say?” Carina said.

“I’m not going to take on the boss alone,” Jackal objected. “You’ll be there to deal with the rest.” He looked up. “Dun—Sto, help me out here.”

“What exactly is he expecting from me?” Sto asked.

“Oh, he wants you to say that you want your revenge for how he tricked you last time or something like that.”

Jackal nodded.

“Ah. No, that’s okay. Like Khumdar, I have nothing to prove here.”

“He’s not helping, Jackal.”

“Really? You don’t want a chance to kill me?”

“Oh, I didn’t say that,” Sto replied and Tibs glared at the ceiling.

“What?” Jackal asked.

“I have a bad feeling about the third floor.”

“You can always turn around now,” Ganny said. “If you don’t think you’re ready for my floor.”

“I’m not talking Jackal out of this fight,” Tibs replied. “And I want to see your floor.”

“Now that’s settled,” Carina said. “We clear the rats, Ratlings, bunnies, and Bunnylings, and then deal with the Big Brutes.”

“Fine,” Jackal said. “Tibs?”

“No fire.”

“That too, but stick with water if you can. Air was a reminder they’re all unpredictable in different ways.”

Tibs nodded and formed a sword. He was looking forward to putting to use what Quigly had him practice. Jackal looked at Carina pleadingly, and when she shook her head he motioned them to move in.

As with the other rooms, the moment they stepped into the room, the creatures came to life, rushing them. Tibs jumped over the rats and bunnies slashing as he passed. He wanted real opponents, armed ones. He cut a Ratling, then faced a Bunnyling armed with a spear. He parried its thrust, then slashed. He cut it, but another took its place, the spear catching Tibs on his side and cutting through the armor and his skin.

With a snarl, he pulled his essence to cover the wound, only to realize it was all water. With a quiet curse, he filled the cut and iced it to keep himself from bleeding, then went on the offensive.

This Bunnyling was more skilled, deflecting, and blocking Tibs’s strike, which only made him smile. On the slash down, Tibs elongated his blade so that by the time the spear caught it, he’d sliced through its head.

He cut the two Ratling that tried to sneak up to him, then sent three more flying back with a jet of water. Sheer volume was so easier to handle than a fine jet, he decided. He cut another Ratling, then fought two Bunnylings, taking one down when he made a second sword and impaled it, then cut the other one.

He turned, looking for more, but the fighting was over. With only the three Brutes at the back of the room waiting for them.

“So,” Jackals said. “Do we collect the coins before or after we’ve turned those three into rubble?”