

Stepping up-26

A flick of the knife sent a ball of water at the bunnyling, knocking it off its feet before it could jump. Tibs dodged another, flicking another ball of water, but at the floor where it would land, icing it and turning to throw his air knife. The bunnyling jumped to avoid it, but Tibs flicked a finger, and the knife responded to the essence he'd added to it, suddenly changing direction and embedding itself in the bunnyling's chest.

He grinned as he concentrated on calling the knife back, then was sliding on the ground, pain exploding in his shoulder. He wrapped his fist with fire and punched the bunnyling off him. A quick look as he got to his feet showed him his team fighting, with Jackal and Khumdar in the middle of it and Carina keeping bunnylings afloat for Mez to shoot at.

He needed to learn how to do that.

He wrapped his shoulder in his essence and tightened it. Wincing at the sharp pain, but Tibs was ready for the bunnyling running in his direction, armed with a short sword. He coated his arm with earth and blocked the strike, slashing with his knife in return, then kicking away. An arrow exploded the bunnyling and Tibs nodded a thank you to Mez before running toward his knife, sliding over ice as he grabbed it and turning to throw it at a bunnyling heading for Khumdar's back and hitting it.

Tibs stared. He's hit it. He'd actually—

He was sliding back. "Focus!" Jackal yelled, releasing him and planting a fist in the bunnyling who'd landed where Tibs had been standing. "On the monsters," he added as an afterthought.

Tibs stood, aimed an open palm at a bunnyling in the middle of a jump, and formed the whirlwind pattern Carina had used. The result wasn't as impressive, but the bunnyling crashed in a heap, instead of on its feet.

He redid the whirlwind, narrowing it, keeping the bunnyling from advancing toward him, until Tibs thought to add water essence to create ice shrapnel and ended up disrupting his air attack instead. The bunnyling careened at him, his running out of control, and Tibs jumped out of the way. He pulled a knife, threw it at the back, and cursed as the adjustment he attempted didn't work. He'd taken the wrong knife.

Khumdar's staff slammed at the back of the bunnyling as it turned and it went down, head rolling away.

Tibs turned, searching for another attacker, a small whirlwind in his hand in preparation, but the only sound was his team's breathing, each looking around, ready to attack.

"Tibs?" Jackal called. "Do you sense anymore?"

Tibs released the air essence and focused on his essence. His team; Khumdar had a break in his forearm. The others had minor injuries. No creatures under them. He did a slow circuit around the room to cover it all, then. "We're good."

"That we are," Jackal said with a grin, his skin regaining a normal color.

Tibs felt his reserves. The fight had barely cost him a fraction of what he had access

to from his bracers.

“You got distracted,” Carina said.

Tibs grins and made a whirlwind in one hand, and a flame in the other. “I have a lot to distract me now.”

She chuckled and shook her head. “A fight isn’t the time to experiment.”

He shrugged, snuffing both out. “I just got the bracers. This was the best time to—”

“No, it wasn’t,” she said. “You lost that whirlwind, why?”

He frowned. He hadn’t realized she’d seen that. She’d probably felt it. “I tried to add water, but instead of creating ice shards, it broke apart.” He looked at her expectantly.

She shook her head. “I’m nowhere close to working with multiple essences. You’ll probably figure that stuff before I do, but don’t try it in the middle of a fight. Getting yourself killed to appease your curiosity isn’t going to help you.”

“Tibs,” Jackal called. “You do the warrens, we’ll go through the remains.”

He sighed. “You need to get yourself smaller so I don’t have to do that by myself.”

“I don’t think earth lets me do that,” the fighter replied, smiling. He slammed a foot down on a warren door, breaking it.

“I could have lifted it,” Tibs said as he moved the broken pieces out of his way.

“But this looks cooler.”

“Not particularly,” Sto commented, and Tibs chuckled.

“What?” Jackal asked.

“The dungeon doesn’t agree.”

“Well, until it comes down here and fights me, I think I’m the better authority on what looks cool.”

Tibs froze as Sto let out a thoughtful hum. “Oh, you now have him thinking.”

Jackal’s grin broadened, and Tibs grumbled as he crouched through the tunnel, using his earth essence to feel for hidden doors. When he found the first one, he wasn’t surprised he missed it the previous time. With the tunnel being uneven, it was unnoticeable and needed a good amount of force to make it swivel. The bunnylings loved their swiveling doors. This tunnel went down to a series of rooms with pallets for bunnylings to sleep on. He found bags with coins, a knife that had fire essence woven through it. Vials of healing potions, cloth with more essence woven in them.

He surfaced, dropped them, and went back to search the warren. At the other level, it was extensive, with almost as many rooms as there had been tents in the ratling’s room.

They had four gold worth of coins and a few silver by the time he was done, the knife, the cloth, which was one large sheet. Eighteen vials of healing potions, one that was bluish instead, this Carina thought was to wash away their exhaustion, but even Jackal wasn’t willing to try it.

They each drank a healing potion and stored the rest.

“Onto the hall?” Mez asked, notching an arrow in his bow.

“I don’t think the dungeon will let you deactivate the traps that way again,” Carina said.

Tibs stepped to the edge of the hall, feeling the trigger lines. He thought they were closer together. He broke one with a hand and spears came out of the wall in rapid succession, but randomly instead of as a wall that moved away.

“Another team figured they could cross the hall by staying between the spears,” Sto said. At the other end, the pedestal still stood, waiting for someone to press it.

“It can’t be that simple,” Carina said. “Tibs?”

He shook his head. “I can’t sense that far.”

Mez shrugged and raised his bow. “Only one way to find out.” He released the arrow, and it hit something they couldn’t see before the pedestal.

“Figured,” Jackal said. “Tibs?”

“Give another a minute,” Mez said, notching another arrow. He fired it at the wall, and it bounced off it, passing behind the pedestal.

“I didn’t think you could do that with an arrow,” Tibs said.

“The angle has to be shallow enough the impact won’t break the shaft.” He notched another arrow. “If this is going to be standard, I’m going to have to invest in hardened arrows.”

“Or Tibs would get metal as an element and do it for you.”

“Metal isn’t an element I need,” Tibs answered.

“Metal is going to make the arrow too heavy,” Mez said. Releasing it. It bounced off the wall and hit whatever was before the pedestal.

“I do not believe metal essence would add any weight to an arrow. Essence does not weigh anything. Carina?”

“I haven’t read about that.”

“However they’re made, hardened arrows are expensive.” This one hit the pedestal on the side and broke. “At least this confirms the obstruction doesn’t go around the pedestal.”

“Getting it right is going to take you a while,” Jackal said.

“It’s going to be faster than me crossing it,” Tibs replied. The way the space between triggers was set up, he’d have little maneuvering room. He would have to think multiple steps ahead to ensure his body was positioned so he could bend as required when he got there.

“You only have five arrows left,” Carina said. “Maybe you should switch to fire arrows?”

Mez shook his head. “I’m worried that a fire arrow will destroy the plate instead of pressing it. That could make it impossible to deactivate the traps.” He released another arrow and again it hit the side of the pedestal, but close enough Tibs thought he’d hit the plate. “A last one, then I’m leaving it to you, Tibs.”

Alistair said that suffusing his body with water would make him more agile, more flexible. It might be the way to make it through the hall. At least make crossing it easier.

With a distant thunk, the trigger lines disappeared.

“Did that work?” Mez asked.

“This isn’t supposed to be an archery contest,” Sto grumbled.

“It did,” Tibs said. “But it’s probably the last time. This isn’t how we’re supposed to

be doing it.”

“The dungeon doesn’t like being outsmarted?” Jackal asked, grinning.

“This isn’t outsmarting me,” Sto huffed as a reply.

“No, he doesn’t,” Tibs translated.

“You think it’s going to make us pay for it by making the boss-room harder?” Carina asked.

Jackal started down the hall. “Of, I certainly hope so.” He rubbed his stony hands together. “I want to have to work for my loot.”

“You really like giving him ideas, don’t you?” Tibs sighed.

“So long as the loot is correspondingly better,” the fighter replied, “I am all for it.”