

Stepping up-5

“You’re all here,” the man standing on one of the steps leading to the dungeon’s door so he was high enough even the people at the back could see him. “Because you think you can survive the dungeon.” The man wore a tarnished and dented metal armor, and today he wasn’t wearing the sword at his hip he often wore while walking around the town. “My name is Harry. I’m in charge of maintaining order.” He scanned the crowd, his glowing eyes becoming brighter. “Get on my bad side, and you’re going to find out why I’m called Hard Knuckles.”

“Get on with it, Knuckles,” Jackal grumbled, and Tibs looked at him. The fighter fidgeted. They were there, with Mez, Carina, Khumdar, in a crowd that reminded Tibs of that first day, both in its size and because many of the people standing around were dressed in almost rags and looked around confused; as if they didn’t understand why they were there. More than one looked at the pockets around them and physically held themselves back from picking them.

“Those of who you’ve survived from the start will notice a difference from the last time you came back from a vacation,” Harry continued, “with the dungeon having been injured, we decided to bring in some of society’s rejects to help it regain its strength. Those of you here instead of on a chopping block, you’re going to have the chance to salvage what you’ve called your life until now. Shut up!” Harry yelled as someone raised their voice. “I don’t care. I don’t care if you didn’t belong in that cell. I don’t care if someone was going to pay whatever fine your city charges for you to get out. You were in a cell when the guild asked the kingdoms for volunteers, now you’re here. If you survive your runs, the next time the dungeon graduates you can take a trip to your city, if you know what it is, and demand an explanation from them. You’re going to be in a better position to do that then than you are now.”

Protests erupted, and Harry crossed his arms over his chest.

“That reminds me of my arrival,” Mez said. He wasn’t in his armor, but he still wore the clothing Tibs associated with nobles. Too clean. Too colorful. Too expensive. In contrast to how perfectly dressed he was, his face was a mess of bruises. The talk with Tandy hadn’t gone as well as the archer had expected. And as he’d returned, bruised and limping, Carina had rushed out. She’d returned a few hours later and had screamed at Mez for what he’d done to her friend, and while she hadn’t touched the archer, or used her essence. When she’d walked away, he’d looked like someone had taken the whip to his back.

“Do they really need all of them to feed the dungeon?” Carina asked Tibs, and he waited for Sto to comment. They were close enough he should hear them, and usually, questions about him asked of Tibs would have him answer so Tibs could repeat it.

Tibs shrugged. “I don’t think so. If he was too weak, he wouldn’t have opened the door.”

“Is the dungeon not...” Khumdar trailed off and looked around. He looked to be in better shape than Mez, but only because his injuries were covered up by his black robes. The cleric hadn’t told them what he had been up to while Sto healed, and Tibs kept himself from

asking. Khumdar would tell them when he was ready.

Tibs lowered his voice, not that anyone was paying attention to them, now that Harry was talking again, going on about how the mornings would be for the new recruits and how that would work. "He's probably busy with something else and not paying attention to this."

Khumdar nodded.

"For the rest of you," Harry said, "the veterans of the dungeon, those who have paid to be here. The process is the same as before. The order the teams will go in will be posted on the board. Only full teams will be allowed in. For those who have paid, you're free to rearrange your teams as you like between runs. For the veterans, you only get to replace members who have died, but you get to pick among the new recruits if one of them meets your exacting requirements."

"What does that 'ex' word mean?" Tibs asked Jackal, who opened his mouth to answer before closing it.

He narrowed his eyes at the shorter rogue. "Why do you think I know what it means?" Tibs smiled innocently.

"It means the requirements are difficult to meet," Carina answered.

Jackal pointed to the sorceress. "She's the one who knows all that, not me."

Carina snorted and Tibs kept looking at the fighter, smiling.

"I believe," Khumdar said, "that is one secret that is no longer worth hiding."

"I'm not hiding anything!" Jackal yelled, then shrunk in on himself as he realized his exclamation came while Harry was silent and people turned to look at him, including the guard leader, who glared, his eyes brighter. "You did this on purpose," Jackal growled in the cleric's direction.

"The training grounds will be on the east side of the town. The recruits will have priority use of them, but if anyone else feels like they need more training, the trainers will avail themselves to you also."

"Like any of them can teach us anything anymore," Jackal said.

"You're forgetting they're higher ranked than any of us," Mez said. "They might have acted like this was the last place in the world they wanted to be, but they will have things to teach us if we ask."

"And the guild's going to charge you for it," Tibs replied.

"It might still be worth—" Mez closed his mouth at the glare Tibs gave him. The archer was his friend, but Tibs didn't like the way he was taking for granted that coin wasn't something all of them had. He preferred the Mez of before. The one who didn't act like a noble. Who claimed being a noble was about helping others. Tibs wasn't seeing any of that in his friend right now.

Harry yelled something, and the crowd dispersed, starting with the recruits, who ran as if they'd been threatened with the chopping block. Tibs watched them, looked for... he didn't know what. Someone familiar? Someone from his street, who might tell him the name of their city? As if anyone from his street would know that.

A girl was left behind, a little older than he was, but looking young as she fought not to cry. Her clothing was better than what Tibs had arrived in, but not by much. She hugged

herself, looking around.

“Tibs,” Jackal called as he walked toward her.

“Leave him,” Carina answered for him.

Tibs stepped into her line of sight and stopped out of reach. “Hi.”

She startled and quickly wiped at her eyes, stepping back. “Don’t try anything,” she warned.

Tibs fought the smile and reminded himself of his own misplaced bravado in those early days. “It’s going to be okay, I’m Tibs.”

She glared at him. “You think I care what you think it’s going to be, Tibs?” she said, pronouncing his name with derision.

“I was where you are when the dungeon first opened. I was going to have my hand cut off, but I was brought here instead.”

She moved her hands behind her back. “Well, good for you. I’m not a crook.”

“No, you’re a Runner now.”

“I’m not doing this. My parents are going to come get me.”

Tibs shook his head. “You won’t see them until the dungeon closes his doors to graduate. We get to travel then.” Then Tibs realized that unlike with him, the transport platform was open to anyone from outside the town who could afford it. “Actually, if they can afford to pay to come here, you might see them before that, but—”

Her face fell, and she looked about to cry again.

“It’s going to be okay,” Tibs repeated. “The dungeon’s hard but fair. If you train and pay attention and work with your team, you’ll get through it. You’ll get stronger and eventually, you’ll graduate too.” He smiled and raised his hand, coating it with water and moving it over, finishing with making a spike and icing it. “Graduating comes with some nice bonus.” He melted and reabsorbed it.

She stopped backing up. “I thought the eyes were supposed to show who could do magic. That’s what the stories say.”

Tibs sighed. “I’m too young, or at least that what my teacher says. I’m the youngest Runner to have survived until graduation to Upsilon, You’re Omega right now.”

“And when I graduate, I’ll be able to do that?” she indicated his hand.

“If you chose water as your element. There are a lot of others to pick from.” He noticed the guards approaching. “But you should go to the training grounds, they don’t like it when you just wander around.” He pointed in the direction the other recruits had gone into. “There’s going to be signs showing which one is your group. Just follow the ones with the hand in the pouch.”

“I’m not a crook,” she bristled.

Tibs smiled. “You’re a rogue, that’s something to be proud of.” He turned and headed back to the town.

“I’m Fedora,” she called.

“I’m glad to have met you, Fedora. Good luck.”

* * * * *

“How did you score the first place?” Don demanded, getting into Tibs’s space. Tibs

had to step back to keep the corruption sorcerer from touching him. He knew better than to let him do that. While the man wasn't responsible for what was coursing through Tibs's essence, it was still a constant reminder of the damage corruption could do. That and the pool of it at one end of Merchant Row.

"How about getting out of our way, Don?" Jackal said as Tibs backed into him.

"You," the sorcerer snarled. "It's because Hard Knuckles is your family. No wonder you tried so hard to make us think he hated you. That way you were able to hide how he fixed things for you."

Jackal sighed. "Don, Tibs says you're smart. How about you stop saying stupid things? Knuckles wouldn't get me a tankard of water if I was on fire."

"He'd put you out," Carina said. "Harry wouldn't let one of the Runners burn to death and not be around to feed the dungeon, even you."

"Carina, I love you like a sister, but do I'm trying to make a point with Don here."

"Make a better one?" Mez said, which earned him a glare from the sorceress. The archer sighed.

"You can't fool me," Don said. "I'm going to bring that up to the guild leader right now." He stormed off.

"Do any of you know what he was talking about?" Khumdar asked, using his staff to support his weight.

"Something about us being first," Jackal said. "He's probably just pissed that he didn't have coins to put in so he could go in before the rest of us. Come on, let's go see how many of the noble teams there are this time around."

The board had come up in the morning, which had given the rest of the previous day for anyone who wanted to pay coins to get in ahead of the other teams. It was another way the guild took their well-earned coins, on top of secretly charging them for the training they received. Tibs had been told that once they reached the rank of Epsilon, they would be free to leave the dungeon and the guild. Only he'd then found out that before they could do that, he'd have to repay what he owed. At three gold for each day of training with his teacher, it would take a long time after he reached that rank before he could be free of the guild, and he suspected they'd find other ways to ensure he had to work for them.

His team no longer gave them coins to adjust their ranking on the boards, and other than Don, no other veteran team did so either, as far as he knew. So if they were first this time, it was just the result of randomness.

Tibs searched for his name among the veteran teams and frowned when he didn't find it, not even under the last name he didn't recognize, which marked it as one of the noble teams. Tibs knew all the veteran teams.

"Okay," Jackal said, "this could be a problem."

Tibs looked at the fighter, who was looking at the board, but at the top of it. Tibs looked there and finally found his name. Ahead of every other team, including the noble ones.

"Tibs did save the dungeon," Khumdar said, "some form of recompense does make sense."

“Sure,” the fighter replied, “but that’s going to get him killed. You think the nobles are going to appreciate having us go in ahead of them?” Jackal looked at them. “Tibs, you have to go talk to the guild and tell them to remove us from that spot. Don’s going to be the least of your troubles otherwise.”

Tibs sighed. “I will after we—”

“I think you should go now,” Carina said, looking around. Nobles were approaching, and they didn’t look happy.

Cursing, Tibs ran off. He’d wanted breakfast before having to deal with problems.

* * * * *

“Am I supposed to care what you want?” a woman’s raised voice came from the open door, making Tibs slow. When he’d been directed to Tirania’s office, he’d expected to find her alone, doing whatever a guild leader did. But by the angry tone, she was with someone, probably Don, since he’d said he’d be complaining.

“I was promised that if I paid, I’d go before those nothings,” a man replied in a clipped tone. Tibs peeked in. Three nobles stood in the office, with Don pushed to the side, glaring at them.

“The system is that whoever pays the highest goes in first,” Tirania replied, her color-shifting eyes flicking in Tibs’s direction before focusing on the noble.

“And you expect me to believe one of those nothings had the gold to match mine?” He wore a gray cloak trimmed in gold and Tibs could see black pant going into black boots and when the man’s hand were visible as he gestured, he wore black gloves.

“Master Kilian, I don’t care what you believe,” Tirania answered. “You placed your bid, and it got you second position. If you aren’t happy, feel free to go home. I’m certain one of these fine people will be happy to take your team’s place.”

The man turned to glare at the woman and the other man on his left. His gaze gliding over Don as if he wasn’t there. He paused, then looked over his shoulder, fixing Tibs with his ash gray eyes, and Tibs stepped back.

“Tibs,” Tirania called, “why don’t you come in?”

Sighing, he stepped into the crowded office.

“He’s the one who stole your spot,” Don said. “He’s a thief.”

“I’m a rogue,” Tibs replied, fixing his gaze on the sorcerer’s sickly purple eyes. He forced himself to maintain the lock until Don looked away. Having an empty stomach might have been a good thing after all.

“And Tibs stole nothing,” Tirania said. “He earned the position.”

“How?” Tibs asked, causing the guild leader to raise an eyebrow. “I didn’t put coins in. My team didn’t put coins in.”

“Tibs,” she said, warning in her tone. “Do you really want to question how you deserve the position in front of these gentle people?”

“The guild is supposed to be fair,” Tibs said, knowing it was nothing like that, but he figured the guild leader wanted to give the impression for the nobles. “I don’t want to be treated special.”

Don snorted, and everyone ignored him.

“You are not being treated special, Tibs,” she said.

“He has just admitted to not bidding,” the noble replied. “How do you justify him being ahead of me?”

Tirania sighed. “Tibs is the reason there is a dungeon for you to go into. Him and his team were instrumental in stopping the people who came far too close to destroying it. Going in first is their reward for the work they did.”

The nobles looked at Tibs again in disbelief. “You expect me to believe this nothing was part of a team of nothing who was able to stop a group of corrupt adventurers? Do you take me for a fool?”

Don kept watching Tibs while the nobles were looking at Tirania again.

“I don’t care what you believe,” she said. “I’m in charge here, not you. If you want to continue to argue, I can sit here and not care all day long, while I believe you should be using the time to prepare for your run tomorrow, after Tibs’s team had gone through.”

The man leaned on the desk. “Do not take for granted that your position as leader of this little dungeon outpost gives you the power to order me around. I’m not one of the convicts you get shipped in. I am the brothers to—”

“No one I care about,” she cut him off, leaning back in her seat. “And yes, being the leader of this little dungeon outpost does give me the power to order you around. For example, I could tell Harry to throw you onto the transport platform and send you away and forbid you from ever returning. That is within my power. And if your brother, the king of whatever kingdom he rules, wants to make a bid deal of it, I’ll be happy to forbid his knights from training here when the dungeon is strong enough to handle them. That’s the kind of power this little outpost has, Master Kilian. You would do well to remember that.”

The noble stiffened, and the woman next to him covered her mouth in what Tibs thought was an attempt not to laugh.

“Very well,” the noble said, “You have made your point.” He gave a small bow. “I will retire, if you will permit me.”

Tirania nodded, and he turned, stepping toward the open door, but he stopped before Tibs, looking down on him.

“You, little nothing, would do well to watch what you think of yourself. Little nothing saviors will still end up under my boot if they aren’t careful.” He left as Tibs shrugged, followed by the other two nobles.

He’d have to find out what house was that noble’s and visit it in the night.

“Is there anything else you want to add, Don?” Tirania asked, startling the sorcerer who had been glaring at Tibs.

“No,” he replied. “You’ve made your position quite clear.” He too stopped before Tibs. “This isn’t over,” he whispered and left.

Tirania sighed and rubbed her face. “You do realize that you’ve made sure I can’t put you at the top of the list after this, correct?”

“Why is my team at the top?” He asked, stepping forward.

“I told them, it’s your reward for saving the dungeon for us. I’m not blind to what you did, to what it cost you. You don’t limb as badly, but the corruption hasn’t entirely cleared

your body, has it?"

Tibs shook his head. He could ignore it, but the ache was constant.

"I wish I knew what had been special about the corruption they used," she mused. "Unfortunately, the dungeon locked down before we could retrieve any of the bottles inside and those outside were just normal condensed corruption." She studied Tibs. "Why did you do it, Tibs? I know what you told the others. You wanted to protect the town, the dungeon, but Harry knows something he isn't telling me. I'd like you to tell me the truth."

Tibs shrugged. "That's why. I never had a place of my own, like Kraggle Rock is. If the dungeon dies, the town's going to die too. I don't want to lose my home."

She nodded. "Well, I suppose that telling the same story every time means you won't make a mistake in the telling. Still, you did act, whatever the reason, and for that I am grateful. You probably don't realize how important this dungeon is."

"It is?"

She nodded, then pulled a gem from a drawer. It was cloudy with a rose tint to it. "Alistair," she said into it, "this is truly not urgent, but your student is up and about. You might want to consider resuming your duties to him." She put it away.

"Where is he?" Tibs asked, curious where his teacher had gone to.

"I don't know. While not teaching you, his duties are to the guild as a whole, not just me."

"The guild is more than you?"

Tirania laughed. It was a sound that reminded Tibs of crystal gently clinking together. "Ah, the innocence of youth. Yes Tibs, the guild is much more than me. I'm only the leader of this town and this dungeon. Every dungeon had a guild leader, and we all report to a central leader who oversees all our operations. It's—"

Tibs raised a hand to stop it, knowing a headache would result from her continuing. "I don't need to know more. I'm just a kid and Runner. All that's beyond me."

She nodded. "And you are a wise one to recognize that. But to answer your initial question, Tibs, yes, the dungeon is important. Every dungeon is, we need them to train the people we'll need when the time comes."

"The time?" Tibs leaned forward.

Tirania smiled. "I think that if I try to explain that, you'll end up with a headache."

"Oh, okay."

She sighed. "Are you going to squander every reward I give you?"

"I don't want any reward, not if it's going to make the nobles angry at me. You don't know what they can do."

"Harry can keep them in their place."

Tibs snorted. It wasn't like they needed to move to cause Tibs problems. They had so much coin they could pay people to do that for them. Tibs didn't think any of the veteran Runners would take their coins, except for Don and whoever he bullied into being on his team, but the recruits wouldn't know the danger they were in if they broke Harry's rules, or they would be easily convinced by coins that Harry wasn't serious about it.

"I'm just a Runner," he repeated. "I don't want to be treated as anything else."

She nodded. "Alright, then I suggest you rejoin your team and get ready for tomorrow. I can't change the position you're in for this schedule."

She could, Tibs knew, but she was making a point in not doing it. To him, to the nobles, to the other teams. She was in charge, not any of them.

* * * * *

He paused in front of the shop, looking at the wooden board swaying in the breeze. On it was depicted a shield, a knife, and rope. He ran in and nearly tripped over a box, jumping over it at the last moment.

A man wrapped in layers and layers of clothes stood, and Tibs ran at him. "You came back!" He hugged the merchant tightly, and couldn't keep his fingers from slipping under the folds of the cloths

"Of course, I came back," Darran said, stepping away. "How else would I get to see my favorite little rogue?" He gestured with a hand. "Now, hand it back."

Tibs looked at the merchant innocently, trying to determine what he held by the shape of it.

"Come on, I know you took something."

Sighing, Tibs placed a small sheath and handle. He quickly sensed for essence as the merchant placed it back where Tibs had taken it, and it had none, but quite a few other things on Darran's person had essence woven into them.

"How did you know I took it?"

The merchant smiled. "Because I know you, Tibs. These fingers of yours have a mind of their own and any pocket or hidden slit is fair game."

"No," Tibs protested, placing his hands behind his back. "I have the mind. They do what I tell them."

Darran laughed. "Oh, Tibs. You wouldn't be the accomplished picker of pockets you are if that were true. All the best pickpockets end up with items they have no idea how they got because the habit is so ingrained in them it just happens with them thinking. Which reminds me." Darran handed Tibs his knife back and Tibs's hand went to his hip, to the empty sheath.

He put it back where it belonged, and looked around, to distract from the annoyance he felt at not having noticed the merchant taking it. He knew Darran was a rogue, well, a thief, since he wasn't affiliated with the guild, but he hadn't expected him to be this good. After all, he *was* a merchant. They were more conmen than pickpockets.

"This is a larger building."

"Yes, with a larger back room where I can make needed alterations. Which I expect I'll need to make to your armor before you go into the dungeon."

Tibs shook his head. "It's still comfortable."

Darran narrowed his eyes. "Are you eating properly? But boys your age should be growing faster than bamboo." Tibs shrugged. "Still, come see me with it and I'll make sure it fits you properly." He looked around at the boxes and crates. "Well, in a few days once I'm fully set up."

* * * * *

Tibs looked at the lake from the limit of the town. It was almost within reach. He couldn't wait to touch it. He'd touched the ocean, but as amazing as that had been, it wasn't his lake. The place he'd first seen from a roof, the largest body of water he'd seen at the time. The wonder of how it would feel.

"Hey, you!" a man called. "You can't—oh, it's you." The guard slowed and smoothed the green and black shirt he wore over the leather armor.

"Me?" Tibs frowned. He looked around in case anyone else was there. He wasn't worried or afraid of the guard. He had done nothing wrong they could prove, and he wasn't doing anything wrong now.

"You're Tibs, right?"

"Yes," he answered cautiously. There was no way the noble could have found a guard to bribe this quickly. It had only been a few hours since they'd been in Tirania's office.

"Then you're fine." The guard indicated the spike in the ground that marked the city limit.

"Do you know how long until the lake is inside the limit?" Tibs asked. "I've been wanting to touch it for a long time."

The guard chuckled, but it didn't sound mocking. "Why don't you go touch it now?"

Tibs indicated the spike. "That's the town limit. I'm not allowed beyond it."

"The other Runners aren't allowed. You're Tibs. You saved the dungeon and the town. Our instructions are that you can go pretty much anywhere you want since you'll come back."

"How do you know I'll come back?" he asked defiantly.

The guard shrugged. "I don't, but those are my instructions." He turned. "And those are all I care about." And walked away.

Tibs looked at the lake, then the spike. It could be a trick, but he had saved the dungeon. Tirania had put his team at the top of the list because of it, implied she would have kept doing it if Tibs hadn't intervened. And if this was a trick, all he needed to do was speak with Harry and the guard leader would know he told the truth when he explained a guard said it was okay.

He stepped over the spike and waited. When nothing happened after a few seconds, he walked to the lake, counting his steps. Five-three. A building and road, and the lake would be in the town. What would they do with it? One of the cities he'd visited while looking for his city had a river cutting it into two and it had been dirty from everyone throwing their garbage in it. He hoped that didn't happen here.

He crouched and touched the water. It was cooler than he'd expected. The air was warm, and even the largest puddle got warm under those conditions. He felt for the essence and there was a lot of water, as he'd expected, some air, earth, and even hints of fire. Where did the fire come from?

He pushed some of his essence in and kept control of it to keep it from flowing away with the currents. His range was much wider now. A result of how dense the essence coursing through his body was, he suspected. He'd thought the density reflected how advanced in their training the adventurers were since Harry and Tirania had the densest

essence and Bardik had been close behind them, but Tibs was now denser than every other Runner, and yet, he could still barely do anything.

It meant he was wrong about what the density represented, or at least his understanding of it was incomplete, which he found easy to believe. The one thing that kept becoming clear the more he learned was that everything was more complex than he first believed.

He pulled his essence back to him and frowned as he pulled his hand out of the lake. And it was still coated with water. Not much, but just like when he'd used it to ice the water pool in the dungeon, somehow, after letting his essence mix with more water essence, it returned with more.

His amulet was full, as was his reserve, so he let it go and it dripped into the lake. Had he done something? He felt the essence in the lake and called some of his reserve to his hand. He calmed his breathing. And focused, feeling the essence. He started shaping the water and immediately his sense of the lake faded until he stopped manipulating his essence.

He cursed.

He put his hand in the water and let his essence flow out, mix with the lake. He tried to feel what happened as the essence moved about, but there was nothing there. His essence moved among the water of the lake and if he shaped it, he could use it to shape the water, turn it into ice, move that about until halfway to the center of the lake, at which point his control became more difficult because of the distance.

He melted it, recalled the essence, and again ended up more than he'd started. Which, as far as Tibs was concerned, should be impossible.

He chuckled. Impossible wasn't the word it had been before he became a Runner.

Then how? How had essence that hadn't been his become his? How had it happened without him feeling it? How was it different and the same at the same time?

A shiver ran down his back.

Essence was and wasn't.

He groaned. It was so simple. How had he not understood that sooner?

He stood and looked at the lake. Expanded his awareness of it. Of the essence there. He turned off his sense of fire, air, and earth. He felt for water in the lake and realized he sensed it all around him. The air, the ground.

There was no "his" and "not-his".

There was only essence. He took hold of the essence in the lake and a quarter of it stilled, turning into a reflection of the sky. He took out his knife. Focused on the essence in the air around him without letting for of the lake. He pulled the essence in the air closer without losing control of the lake.

He pulled from his reserve, sending it to his knife while controlling the lake and refilling his reserve. He couldn't do it quickly, but he could do it. He took his time tracing the 'X' before him, pulling only from his reserve, which he refilled as he pulled on it. If he wanted to match how quickly Alistair had done it, he was going to have to practice, but, He stabbed the center of the 'X' and gasped as his reserve emptied almost faster than he could

refill it.

Then the center of the lake exploded into a geyser that went high enough that when it came down, it doused Tibs in water.