

Stepping up-33

“You seem rather unimpressed by what happened,” Carina told Khumdar, as they sat on their bed.

The cleric sat on his, back against the wall. “I realized that if I were always impressed by Tibs and the things he is capable of, I would never stop. It seemed more productive to simply accept that so long as I am Tibs friend, such things will happen.

Jackal chuckled.

“I wish I knew how to do that,” Mez said. “So, exactly what happened? Who’s Sto, and that other name you used.”

“Ganny,” Carina said.

“Ganymede,” Tibs said. “That her full name. Sto is the dungeon. Stone Mountain Crevice. Sto for short.”

“That is a mouth full,” Jackal said.

“Okay, you are joking, right? That isn’t a name,” Mez said.

“It’s the name he picked.” Tibs rested his head against the wall. “I get the sense he isn’t all that much older than we are, when it comes to dungeons. He got to pick his name, so he went with something he thought would be interesting.”

“So there are two of them?” Carina asked.

“There’s only one dungeon,” Tibs answered. “She’s there to help. Like I said, I think he’s young, and she was sent to help him learn how to do dungeon things. But he’s the one who does everything. The dungeon is him. If he doesn’t want to do what she says, there isn’t much she can do about it.”

“Sent by whom?”

Tibs shrugged. “I don’t know. She regularly refers to a nebulous ‘them’ when she feels Sto is going too far.” He tapped his bracers. “Mez’s bow. I think your staff too, Khumdar, although Sto denied doing it on purpose. But I don’t think they who sent her.”

“The robes?” the cleric asked.

Tibs shook his head. “He says that was random, and I’m inclined to believe him.”

“Alright,” Jackal said, tone firm, “As interesting as this is. Does it mean anything for us and our runs?”

“I wish I could speak to this Ganymede,” Carina said. “She must know so much about dungeons if she’s there to help.”

Tibs smiled. “Maybe not as much as you think.”

“Still, she—”

“Let’s focus,” Jackal said, and was stared at. He ignored them. “Does knowing what Tibs told us, change anything. I get the sense the dungeon’s going to go back to normal, right?”

“I don’t know,” Tibs said. “He treated us the same, it’s with everyone else he became murderous. I think he’s coming to his senses, but like Ganny, I can’t force him to do anything.”

“And if he decides to continue killing everyone,” Mez said, “that is going to include us.”

Tibs ran a hand over the bracers. “I don’t know if he’ll be able to bring himself to do that. He’s grown attached to me.”

“You did save his life,” Jackal said.

“You are the only person he can talk with,” Carina added.

Tibs shrugged. “We should get a sense of what he decided by the time our next run happens.” He looked at his friends. “If nothing changed, I’m not going in.”

“If you’re not going in,” Jackal said, “it means we aren’t either.”

“We can get a different rogue,” Mez offered.

“We can only replace a team member if someone dies,” Khumdar said. “I will not be the one attempting to kill Tibs. Will you?”

Tibs looked at Jackal instead.

“Don’t look at me,” the fighter replied.

“You’re the one who’ll miss the loot and fighting if I keep you from going in.”

“I’m not killing you. Abyss, you’d think I’m unreasonable or something.”

Tibs chuckled.

“Then it is settled,” Khumdar said. “We hope that by our next run, the dungeon has come to its senses.”

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By the end of the following day, Tibs knew Sto had decided to be reasonable. While the Runners couldn’t talk about what they’d experienced, everyone still around had survived the murderous version of the dungeon, so the awe and confusion at the comparatively easier version was difficult to mask.

“There you are, Mister Light fingers,” Cross said, approaching their table. Carina and Mez were eating with him and looked at her curiously. They were enjoying the first of the new meat drops. The guild hadn’t seen them as important, so the runners could keep them, and as most runners ate at the inn, it was the first place they came to sell it, and Kroseph’s father had been happy to pay coppers for them, depending on the size. They all seem to be good quality meat, according to Kroseph.

“Carina, Mez, that’s Cross, she’s the one who gave me the cylinder puzzle.”

“Lent,” the fighter corrected. Extending her hand. “Unless you aren’t done with it still?”

Tibs gave it to her, and she studied it before putting it away and unhooking a cloth pouch and handing that Tibs.

“You’re the fighter that’s been going around beating up the others,” Mez said and Carina looked at him curiously. “What’s the point of all the metal you have attached to your armor?”

“Making it heavier,” Cross answered, watching Tibs empty the bag next to his plate. “Giving me something to parry and block swords with. Making my punch and kicks hit harder.” She smiled at him. “You interested in giving it a try?”

Mez shook his head. “I’m an archer. My survival depends on making sure no one gets

close enough to me so they can use their fists.”

Tibs looked at the pieces of wood that spilled out. “I don’t fix broken... whatever this is.”

“It isn’t broken,” Cross said. “It’s a different kind of puzzle. You have to reassemble it. It’s cube when it’s put together.”

Tibs took a piece and looked it over. As long as his palm was wide, a finger thick, with a square notch in it. He laid the pieces side by side. All the same length and thickness, but the notches weren’t all in the same place and one was without any.

“What’s the point of something like that?” Carina asked, a mix of bafflement and curiosity in her voice. Tibs looked at her. Out of anyone he knew, he’d expected her to appreciate puzzles.

Cross chuckled. “Keeps the fingers busy, the mind sharp.”

“But it doesn’t do anything,” she said.

“It’s fun,” Tibs said. “I like figuring it out. It’s like working out the lock of a door, or a trigger on a trap.”

Carina nodded and addressed Cross. “So you think yourself a rogue and a fighter?”

Cross laughed. “I live the lock and traps to the people like you who go in dungeons. I’m a caravan guard. That means walking for month between cities with nothing happening. These keep me occupied. That and the other guards who think that I’m putting on air with all the metal on my leathers. I get to beat them up for coppers. That’s good practice too.”

“Then why are you still here?” Mez asked. “The caravan left a while ago.”

“I needed a break. They’ll be back, or another will. Caravans always need guards. In the meantime, I get to guard the merchants’ wares. Seems they need it. The guards here aren’t doing a great job of protecting them.”

Tibs looked up from the pieces he’d been trying to assemble. “They aren’t?”

“They can’t be. Stuff has been going missing for weeks now and they haven’t caught the thieves. I figured it’s some of the Runners. They’re the one who would be so much better than guards.”

Tibs shook his head. “We know better than to cause trouble to the merchant we do business with.”

“You know better,” Mez said. “I doubt everyone thinks like you.”

He stared at the archer. It wasn’t the first time someone had mentioned Runners could be part of the problem. “But, this is our town. Why would any of them want to cause trouble? It’s just going to hurt all of us. If the merchants don’t have wares to sell, they don’t have the coins to buy our loot, we don’t get coins to spend on our gear from them.”

Carina and Mez stared at him.

“What?” Tibs asked.

“Where on your street did you get to learn about the ebb and flow of goods?” Carina asked.

“Here,” Tibs said. “All I had to do was watch the merchant, and ask Darran. It’s pretty easy to figure out.”

Cross chuckled. “Well, even some merchants don’t understand that like you do.”

“And not all Runners are attached to the town,” Mez said. “A lot of them, in fact, just see this as another cell, so they don’t care about the trouble they’re causing. Harry’s the biggest deterrent, but if the guards are slacking off, I have no problem seeing a lot of the Runners who’ve survived this long think they can take what they want and not get caught.”

Tibs thought about that. How would the guards get away without doing their jobs? Harry was fair, but hard. If he caught anyone not working as hard as they should, he would punish them.

He filed this as something to look into when he had the time.

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Tibs watched the men and women being escorted off the platform and had a bad feeling. They all wore a hard, vicious expression.

“I think the dungeon might have planted the sword in its own foot,” Jackal said. “Do dungeons have feet? Anyway, those aren’t from cells. The kings went to their prisons for this batch of conscript.”

“And you think it’s because of what Sto did?” It had only been a few days since Sto had become reasonable again. Tomorrow the schedule for the next runs would go up, so the arrival of conscript wasn’t unexpected.

“It’s been devouring the young Omegas like they were sweet meats. It makes sense the guild asked for a tougher cut this time around.”

“Why are you talking about meat?” Tibs asked, his stomach rumbling.

“Haven’t had breakfast today,” Jackal replied. “I guess I’m sort of hungry.”

“You should try going four days,” Tibs grumbled.

The fighter patted his shoulder. “You’re the one needing the practice. You should have had some of that meat the dungeon’s providing now.”

“I’d just be hungrier.”

“But yeah, the timing of the dungeon going nice again might work against it. These people are not going to go easy. If there’s a batch that’s going to try to destroy it, hoping it’s going to set them free, it’s them.”

“They won’t be able to do it,” Tibs said. “It took Bardik getting concentrated corruption to do it, and Sto has defenses against that now. They don’t have elements, so as rough as they are, they’re still just Omegas.”

Tibs watched them being led toward the field facing the dungeon and was about to follow them when someone appeared on the platform.

The woman was regal, in a white and yellow robe and yellow eyes. An adventurer Tibs thought, only her demeanor was more that of a noble. Back straight, looking around like she was searching for something, but with that slight sneer that said she couldn’t imagine how she’d even thought it could be here.

The other things that stopped him were the number of gems on her and the essence they all radiated. She flicked her hand as she stepped down from the platform and an etching formed before her. Once composed of a multitude of essences, including water, air and earth.

Tibs swallowed. Was she like him?

He sensed her essence and he couldn't identify it. He sensed it as having a yellow color to it and was strong enough she had to be Delta. Whatever her essence was, it wasn't the same as his. So what was she?

She panned around, the disk of etched essences floating over her hand. Minute streams of essences flowing from the gems to it. Feeding it, maintaining it.

Something Darran mentioned early when Tibs met him came back to him. Sorcerer's robes with pockets for them to put ingredients to draw elements from. Carina saying how she wasn't near being able to use multiple essences yet.

The woman was a sorceress.

She panned over him and Jackal, came back to them, and frowned.

"I think you have another admirer," Jackal said.

Tibs rolled his eyes. If she was looking at them, it was the fighter that would attract her attention. Tibs only looked like a kid, and people who didn't know him dismissed him quickly, which was how he liked it now.

She went back to panning and walked away, deeper into the town.

"I guess we aren't that interesting," Jackal said. "Come on, I want to hear what Knuckles has to say to this new batch."

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"You've been given a reprieve you don't deserve," the guard leader said, standing on the wooden platform. "So consider yourself lucky." He didn't look pleased as he looked them over. Tibs headed for the mountain side. He wanted to speak with Sto and this was the best time, with Harry's voice booming and everyone focused on him.

"You've already been assembled into teams of five. You can bitch all you want. Those are your teammates for the runs. They'll be replaced as they die, and we're going to assign the replacements. Learn to live with it."

"Sto?" Tibs said. He wasn't certain where the dungeon's influence started.

"Hi Tibs," the answer was cautious. "I've been treating the others better."

Tibs smiled. "I noticed. Those who had runs were amazed no one dies."

"I'm sorry."

Tibs nodded. "It's..." he found he couldn't say it was okay, because it wasn't. What Sto had done wasn't fair, but it was done and over with. "Can you see any of the new recruits?"

"The first row, Harry's also really bright. I'd love for him to..." Sto fell silent.

Tibs didn't think too hard on what he'd been about to say. "They might be tougher than you expect. They aren't people who've been caught picking pockets or getting into fights at a bar. Those are criminals who've been at it for longer."

"I'm not sensing any element from those in front."

"They'll be more experienced doing what they do. I thought you should know about that."

Sto was silent for a few seconds. "What do you want me to do?"

Tibs looked the crowd over. "I trust your judgment," he finally said. It wasn't his place to dictate how Sto should behave beyond treating them fairly. What that would mean

for this batch, Tibs wasn't sure. At least most of the survivors were Upsilon now, so if he had to increase the difficulty for these people, those who hadn't figured out the shortcut to the second floor would survive the first.

"I won't let you down, I promise. You are going to do the next run, right?"

"I will. I'm going to find out when it is tomorrow. Can I ask a favor?"

"I thought you didn't want me to treat you differently," Sto replied, tone cautious.

"I know, and I've been trying to figure out a way to do this without asking you, but... I need to have an audience with Light, and I can't figure out how to make it happen out here."

"Harry would know."

"And he'd ask why. I can't lie to him. It's one thing light does. He calls it shining on lies."

"And you don't want him to know about everything you can do."

"Yeah, if I tell him the guild will know and... well, you're going to come up in that conversation no matter how I try not to mention you."

"I understand."

"If you don't want to," Tibs said, "I'll understand. I screamed at you for the way you treated me and now I'm—"

"No, I'm going to help you, Tibs. I can make a room and fill it with light, but I'm not sure about the high emotion part of it, though."

"I have that part handled. Thank you. If you need me to do something to pay you back, just say it."

"If you have a way to get me more light essence, I'd appreciate it. This is going to use a lot of my current reserve, and absorbing light from the little of the outside I see is slow."

Tibs couldn't think of anyway, but he owed it to Sto. "I'll see what I can do. Thanks."

"It's not a problem," Sto answered. "It's what friends are for, right?"

Tibs smiled. "Yeah, it is."

He headed back to the assembly just as a man broke from it. He was surprisingly fast for his bulk, dressed in ripped gray clothes that seemed to be the norm for these conscripts. He noticed Tibs and altered his direction to run toward him.

Tibs understood what the man was doing, but he didn't get how he thought going through Tibs would make his escape easier. Guards were detaching from the platform to chase the man, while Harry kept talking.

Tibs stepped out of the way. Harry didn't want him to get involved in guard stuff—although he had asked him to catch the thief—so he figured he should try not to be part of this, but the man turned to keep running his in direction.

Since Tibs didn't have a choice. He readied himself. He bought water to his hand, and when the man was twenty paces away, he flung it at the ground before him, wetting it and then iced it. The man fell on his back the moment a foot landed on it and he slid another ten paces before regaining his footing and getting off the ice.

"They're going to kill you if you run," Tibs told him.

The man's smile was vicious. "Not if I have you protecting me."

"That's not going to happen. I'm just a Runner."

“You can do magic. That means you’re important.”

Tibs snorted. “Not really.”

The man lunged at Tibs, who stepped out of the way, but the man surprised him with his speed again, Twisting, grabbing Tibs’s arm and pulling him down as he fell and then got back to his feet, one arm around Tibs’s chest and a hand closed around his throat.

“Stop right there,” he ordered the guards, “or I’m going to rip out his throat.”

“They aren’t going to listen to you,” Tibs said, as the guards stopped where they were. He eyed them. Harry was going to have words with them once this was over.

The man’s hand tightened on Tibs’s throat and he decided he couldn’t count on the guards. He pushed corruption into the man’s hand. Not the lashing out Don was so fond of, just a trickle. The hand jerked on contact, but the man didn’t seem to realize what was happening.

Tibs guided it through the arm and realized he didn’t know what to do with it. His healing while his essence was corrupted had given people fevers, but he didn’t know how that had happened. If he tried anything now, would he end up making the man so sick he would kill him?

Using what Don did with the fire, Tibs sent a trickle to the lungs to corrupt the air the man breathed.

Immediately, the man began panting, then coughing. When the hand and arms loosened, Tibs turned and pushed him away, pulling the essence back so the man was breathing normally by the time the guards were on him.

“Thanks, Light Fingers,” one of them said.

“That’s not my name,” Tibs replied, then shook his head. Why did he even bother anymore? Strangers knew him by that name. The guards certainly wouldn’t stop.

“You’ve been given a chance at a life,” Tibs told the convict. “You should appreciate that.” He paused and because there was a chance he could make sure one person called him by his name. “My name’s Tibs. If you need help figuring things out. You can usually find me at this inn.”

The man stared at him, confused, before being dragged back to the assembly.