

## Stepping up-31

“I don’t know,” Carina said, eying Khumdar, “that sounds dangerous.”

The cleric raised an eyebrow.

“Khumdar did it,” Tibs said. He’d just explained his plan for the Dark Night to the rest of his team.

“But he’s a cleric,” she countered. “They go through training to—” She stopped and looked annoyed.

Khumdar smiled.

“Except he didn’t train to be a cleric,” Mez pointed out. “He just did the same thing clerics do.” He paused and frowned. “How did you find out how clerics get their audience? I didn’t think it was something they talked about.”

“They don’t,” the cleric answered.

Carina rubbed her face, then let out a breath. “I don’t question that Tibs can get an audience. My problem is that clerics spend a year leading up to their audience getting used to going without food. You only have twenty-three days. That isn’t enough time to work up to it, and you have other things to do in the meantime. Not eating and meditating isn’t the same thing as doing that while carrying on with your regular days.”

“Why the training?” Jackal asked. “The point is for Tibs to feel like he’s dying. Getting used to it isn’t going to help that.”

“He isn’t going to feel like he’s dying,” Carina said. “He *is* going to be dying. Going hungry is a shock to the system, without getting it used to functioning with less and less food. He could cause himself problem before the audience happens, and he isn’t going to suddenly be better after the audience. I don’t think you understand the number of clerics who don’t exit the dungeon after their audience. Not all of them die before the audience.”

Jackal nodded. “That’s a fair point, but I think you’re forgetting one detail.”

“And it is?” she asked when the fighter didn’t immediately say it.

“Tibs is used to going hungry.”

“Don’t be silly,” she replied. “I’ve seen him eat.”

“And you never wondered why he ate like it was his last meal?”

Tibs frowned. He didn’t eat that much anymore, did he? He remembered his early days here, when even the slop the food tent served tasted, to him, like something a noble would eat.

Carina looked at Tibs, expression turning to surprise.

Tibs shrugged. “Food isn’t as common on the Street as it is here.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“What for?” he asked, surprised.

“You shouldn’t have...” she trailed off.

“Maybe not,” Khumdar said, “but he did. And it makes him well suited for this method.”

“Only he isn’t a cleric,” she replied. “The meditation, the hunger, they’re about

preparing him for a life of devotion, to give himself over to Purity. Which isn't what he'd trying to do."

"Indeed, he will have an audience with Darkness."

She glared at the cleric. "That isn't what I mean, and you know it."

"Does that mean Tibs can use this method to get an audience with Light and the other elements?" Mez asked.

"After Light and Darkness, there's only Purity left," Tibs said. "That's what Water told me."

"Yeah, but does that mean you can't get the other elements?" the archer asked.

"Seems to me it would make sense to get as many of them as you can, since each audience lets you feel another element."

Tibs hadn't thought about that.

"Let's focus on the current problem before we start adding more to Tibs's schedule," Carina said. "We know when the Dark Night is, but how do we manage it with Light? I've never heard of something like a bright day."

"Knuckles would know," Jackal said.

"Harry's going to ask why I want to know," Tibs said. "I won't be able to lie to him."

Jackal nodded. "You can't trust him to keep that to himself."

"Can the dungeon help?" Mez asked. "Like it did with the fire."

"We have not seen it do anything with light," Khumdar said. "It may not be able to."

"He has all the elements," Tibs said, thinking back on what Sto had said. "It's just that unless he sees us use them, or someone with the element dies, he doesn't know how to use them. If he absorbs something with the weave on it, it probably helps him figure it out too." His concern was with how Fire said he'd broken a rule. The only difference between that audience and the others had been that it took place in the dungeon. But purity clerics had theirs in a dungeon, too. He wished Water had explained how this worked.

"Then maybe Tibs should prepare for the dungeon to do light the next time we do in," Mez said.

"I definitely don't like that," Carina said. "We need Tibs at his best if we're going to make a run. Not dying of hunger."

"He can tell the dungeon what he needs," Jackal said. "I'm sure it'll be happy to accommodate him again."

Again.

Why did that bother Tibs? Why did everything he'd heard since their last run make him so uneasy?

"Tibs?" Carina called.

He looked at her.

"I asked how you wanted to do this? I don't like the risks, but it's your decision. You're the one taking them."

Tibs nodded. "I think it's worth it. I can't think of another way to get an audience with Darkness. As for Light..." He'd almost died with Fire, while with Corruption he'd walked out of the pool uninjured. Was that the consequences of breaking the rule? How much

danger would Light put him in?

“I think.” Tibs stopped. He didn’t know what Light could do. See lies was one thing, and Harry and made it so he couldn’t be seen. There had been that noble he’d thrown out of town. He’d done something to her with light, but Tibs didn’t know what.

He couldn’t remember if any of the Runners had had light at their element, and considering how few were left, if one of them had it, Tibs would know.

“I think it’s worth asking the dungeon during our next run,” He said. If Light ended up hurting him like fire had, Sto could keep a Brute nearby for Tibs to heal himself with.

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Tibs forced his hand to stop shaking and his stomach to stop complaining. He couldn’t remember hunger being that difficult to control after only four days. He’d gone much longer back on his street with barely eating anything.

Once his hand steadied, he looked down at the window. Closed, but no magic protecting it. He lowered himself, let go of the roof and caught the windowsill, then pulled himself until he had an elbow on it. He locked it in place with earth and felt inside using air for the latch. Top of the window. Water between the panes let him undo it, then pushed it open and pulled himself inside.

He sat under the window, panting.

This had been harder than usual. He hadn’t believed Carina about working while hungry being harder, he’d done that all his life. But either eating well since becoming a Runner had made him soft, or there was something else at play.

He looked about the room. He made out the form of a bed, dresser, wardrobe. No one in it. The noble who lived here only had a few servants, and they didn’t sleep in his home. One man, living in a house with space for a large family.

Just like a noble to take what other could make better use of.

He stood. His target wasn’t in this room. Taking from an unoccupied room was like taking from an abandoned house, meaningless.

He cracked the door opened and listened. Conversation from down the hall, where the noble had his office. Tibs had expected him to be sleeping. Conversation meant more than one person. If not the office, then the man’s bedroom. There would be coins there, too. Nobles always kept coins within reach. It was as if, for as much of them as they had, they couldn’t bear not to have them close by at all times.

He stepped to the next door without noise due to his shoes and when the door creaked as he pushed it open, the conversation didn’t pause.

This bedroom had a larger bed, a dresser and wardrobe, as well as clothing strewn everywhere. Tibs felt for pockets on the pants and shirts, and for coins in them. Nobles had fancier clothing, which meant they didn’t need a coin pouch.

Not finding any coins, he turned to the dresser and searched through the garment there. He found a fancy knife at the bottom, but that would be missed, and he didn’t need another knife. He moved to the bed and found another knife under the pillow.

Someone worried for his life.

His hand felt the pouch between the mattress and the bed frame as the motion of

shadows from the window and he froze. When he didn't move again, he carefully peeked over the bed. Leaning against the frame of the now open window was the silhouette of someone. When that person silently waved at Tibs, he knew how it was.

While watching them, Tibs opened the pouch and took a coin from it. He wasn't going to let them distract him from what he'd set to do.

They made a 'give me' motion and Tibs considered it. They weren't after his coin. Tibs could faintly hear the voices through the wall, so they'd hear him if he spoke.

He motioned to the window. They could talk outside.

The thief shook their head. And made the motion again.

Or not.

Tibs shook his head. If they weren't willing to talk, he wasn't willing to give the eye back to them. He motioned to the window again. He had what they wanted. It wasn't like they had a choice.

The thief grabbed a vase off the dresser and looked at Tibs.

So maybe they had choices.

They made the motion again, returning to the window.

Tibs shook his head. He could be out before anyone reacted to the noise.

They threw the vase against the wall closest to the voices and fell back out the window as Tibs ran for it. They grabbed the bottom of it and slammed it closed as they fell. That noise was almost louder than the crashing vase.

Cursing silently, Tibs grabbed to open it when he heard the approaching steps. Far too close.

He jumped to the corner behind the door as it opened and used air to make steps to climb until he was in the corner where the walls and ceiling met.

The man in a pale yellow dress shirt and pants ran to the window, lamp in hand. He opened it and looked outside. He closed it and latched it. He went to the dresser where the vase had been and opened the drawer where Tibs found the knife. The man took it and relaxed.

Tibs was surprised at the reaction. It was just a knife, even if it was pretty, but he had to focus on staying in his dark corner as his arm shook. He had earth coursing through them, but it didn't seem to help as much as before. He wished for the man to hurry to leave since he'd checked in on his precious knife, but the man looked around, going to where the pieces of the vase were.

He opened the drawer on the small bedside table and looked in, before closing it. He raised the lamp and looked around the room.

Tibs cursed. He didn't believe he'd gotten here before the thief had taken something and now he was double checking everything. Tibs ground his teeth to keep from crying out as the ache in his arms and legs turned into pain. He needed to get the man to leave.

The lamp was something fancy, an oil reservoir with glass surrounding the flame to protect it from errand breeze, but the top was open. The wick was wide, so it would take more than a breeze to snuff it, and the man might feel that, but Tibs was running out of time.

He sent air into the opening, and made it a small whirlwind inside the lamp, causing

the flame to increase in brightness and the man to stare at it before going out and bathing the room in comfortable darkness.

Instead of leaving, the man placed the lamp on the dresser and removed the glass cover. Tibs cursed as the man took a fire starter from a pocket. He ground his teeth and disrupted the fire as the man struck the sides, and the sparks died before they reached the wick.

The man struck it again, and again, and Tibs's vision swam from strain. How long was he doing to try to light it with a clearly defective fire starter? Tibs started considering his alternative. He didn't cover his face because he trusted his ability to be unseen, but now, if he fell, he'd have to run out the bedroom and there was enough light coming in from the open door the man would catch sight of his head. It wouldn't take many details for Harry to come asking.

They were too close to the run for him to spend time in a cell, and Tibs didn't think his status as the dungeon's savior was going to keep Harry from throwing him in there.

The man put the starter on the dresser and headed for the door. He paused, looked back, then left and closed it.

Tibs stifled a scream as he let himself down and silently fell on his back. As much as he wanted to remain there to rest, he pushed himself to his feet. The man would be back.

Tibs unlatched the window, climbed out, then down. He staggered away from the house. He needed to eat.