

Stepping up-12

Tibs looked up from his plate as Mez dropped in his chair. The archer was dressed in red and gray clothes that accentuated his sickly complexion.

“Someone should have stayed in bed this morning,” Jackal said.

Mez grumbled something unflattering in return.

“I meant Tibs.”

Tibs looked at the grinning fighter. “What?”

Jackal pointed to the plate before Tibs. “You haven’t eaten anything, which means you’re courting one of Kro’s brother’s anger, so you haven’t slept long enough.”

Tibs looked at the plate, with the scrambled eggs, the ham, sausages, roasted vegetables. He picked at it. Contemplating what Water told him to do was killing his appetite.

“Are you feeling better?” Carina asked Mez.

“The fever broke last night.” Mez forced a smile. “Which is how I am out of bed.”

“I’m sorry,” Tibs whispered.

“You’re not responsible,” Mez replied. “I mean, you warned me. And we wouldn’t have been able to finish the run if you hadn’t healed me. It was a worthwhile trade-off.” He thanked the server who brought his plate and tankard. Breakfast was too busy a time for Kroseph to be able to always be the one who served them. “Why aren’t you eating? You’re usually the one with the biggest appetite.”

Tibs shrugged. He wasn’t sure how to tell them, or if he should. How would they react to him having corruption as an element? Jackal hadn’t been thinking when he’d suggested. With the others watching him, Tibs forced himself to eat.

“I’m fine, I didn’t sleep well, that’s all.”

Khumdar looked at him in that way Tibs had learned meant he knew Tibs was holding something back. Having someone who could tell he was keeping secrets was almost as annoying as someone who could outright tell he was lying. At least the cleric kept his word and didn’t pry. With the town still growing, Tibs expected Khumdar would never run out of other people’s secrets, so his were safe.

Not that this would remain a secret. Once Tibs had the essence, he’d have to tell them and deal with the consequences. He just didn’t want to see their disapproval beforehand, or worse, have Jackal offer to help.

* * * * *

The sounds and commotion pulled Tibs out of the room. Looking out the window, all he’d been able to make out was a mass of people heading to the east side of the town. He’d been there, practicing his letters to avoid thinking of what he had to do.

He pushed through the people, eliciting curses, until he was at the front and could see the wagons approaching. People rejoiced, and Tibs looked around. A lot of the merchants were there, some arguing with the guards who were holding the town limit. They weren’t letting anyone through to ensure none of the Runners here by force could escape.

Tibs didn't understand the excitement. What could be on those wagons that engendered these reactions? He tried to think of something that would excite him like the others. At one time, unguarded food would. Now, it would be a high window with a challenging wall. A lock he hadn't picked before. Unguarded coins would make him wary, not excited.

What could merchants want this badly?

A woman on horseback reached the town limit first and spoke with one of the guards. Tibs was surprised not to see Harry here. This seemed major enough he'd supervise. Instead, it was one of the men who answered to the guard leader directly. He and the woman conversed, then pointed to an area, and he ordered guards, who vanished and returned a few minutes later and began adding spike in the ground, delineating an expansion to what was considered the town.

Unable to figure out why, and the wagons still being too far to investigate, Tibs turned back. With everyone here, he could use the time to deal with something else.

* * * * *

He knocked on the door and looked around warily. The last time he'd been here, his annoyance at the special treatment he and his team had received had propelled him. Now, and with the corridors nearly deserted, he was unsure if he should be here.

"Enter," Tirania called, and Tibs opened the door.

She smiled at him. "Mister Light Fingers, this is a surprise. I'd expected you to be watching the caravan, planning how you'd liberate them of their valuables."

"No," he stated, his mood darkening, "not you." She raised an eyebrow. "My name's Tibs. I don't know why everyone's calling me that."

Her smile broadened. "You're somewhat famous, Tibs. And you do have a renown for picking locks and pockets."

He narrowed his eyes. "I've never been caught." Denying he did it wouldn't do any good. Tirania was a rogue, like him. She knew what they got up to.

"Ah, but not getting caught doesn't mean people don't know you're doing it."

"Shouldn't Harry be asking me then?"

She chuckled. "If Harry questioned every rogue about pocking pockets, there would be no one left to run the dungeon. How can I help you?"

Tibs bit his lower lip, unsure how to proceed now that his reason for being here was addressed directly. "Jackal's Lambda."

She didn't react to that statement, and Tibs realized she might not know who Jackal was.

"He's my team's leader."

She still didn't react, and Tibs hesitated again.

"Tibs, you need to say what brought you here," she said, slightly irritated. "I have things to do while no one's around to bother me."

He nodded. Of course, the guild leader had to have a lot of work to do. "Harry said that a team can only have one Lambda member, but the dungeon's been pushing us hard. We're going to have more than one soon." He looked at her expectantly.

“Then you’ll have to replace one of them with someone who is still Rho or Upsilon.”

“But I don’t want to change my team, they’re my team.”

“That’s how things are done, Tibs. We can’t have a team so more powerful than the dungeon that it can’t gain anything out of it.”

Tibs wanted to tell her it didn’t matter, Sto still fed just by them going through it, and he’d adapt to their increased strength, but he couldn’t explain how he knew that. How he knew things no one else did. His ability to speak with the dungeon made things difficult at times.

“What if we don’t do runs until the dungeon graduates?” He asks.

She rubbed her temple. “That isn’t how things are done, Tibs.” She sighed and reached into a drawer, taking out the communication gem she’d shown him months ago.

“Alistair,” she said, looking at it, “I believe it’s time you return. Your student is in need of answers and I am not the place for him to get them.”

Tibs watched it, sensed the essences packed into it. They were so tight he had trouble making out even the essences he could identify: earth, air, water, and fire. They were there, along with many others, at least one of which would be mind, he realized.

“I wouldn’t think about taking it,” she said, smiling.

Tibs shook his head. “I’m not,” he lied, “I was trying to work out how it works.” He sensed the weave of essence through the room. He couldn’t tell what most did, but some had the feel of triggers, even if he couldn’t tell what the essence used was. There would have to be a lot of them since with so many rogues who had an element, it would be difficult to ensure any one element couldn’t be manipulated and undo the security.

She looked at the gem and hummed. “I think about who I was to talk with,” she said. “And they hear me.”

Tibs startled. She hadn’t moved her mouth, and other than her voice coming from all around him, it had sounded exactly like her. Just like when she’d used it with him and Alistair when they were training that first time.

“Why doesn’t everyone have one? Wouldn’t it make it easier to talk?”

She chuckled. “Why would I want to make it easier to talk? It’s already difficult enough to keep you lot from talking about the dungeon when you’re not supposed to. And you couldn’t afford this. Even the guild can barely afford it. Only the newest dungeons get one because of how quickly things change. By the time it graduates to Zeta, I expect I’ll have to contend with messages sent by courier again.”

Tibs nodded. “Why is it so expensive?”

She rubbed her temple. “You can ask your teacher, Tibs. Now, is there anything else I can help you with? That no one else can,” she added as Tibs opened his mouth.

He closed it. Asking why they didn’t put one with the dungeon for it to be added to the loot rotation might not be a good idea, considering what he was thinking of doing.

“Thank you for answering my questions.” Tibs left her office. He paused outside, sensing the essence on and around the door. The weave was tight and complex. He had no idea how he’d get through it. There were no windows, so that was out. And he hadn’t been able to figure out the layout of the guild building. Anytime he came in and counted his steps,

he ended up with different numbers.

At first, he thought it was because he miscounted, but now, he thought it was another security measure. Some of the weave throughout the building could alter its dimensions, or maybe make him think they changed. Knowing mind was an element increased the ways a rogue could be tricked.

He needed to get Sto something with mind as an essence, if only so he could try to convince him to make him something that would let Tibs find out the kind of security the building had.

* * * * *

Tibs walked through the stalls, finally understanding part of what the excitement had been about. The extended area had been turned into a marketplace. The wagons were stations outside of it, and tents and wooden stalls had been built, and now all sorts of items were for sale. It didn't explain the merchant's excitement, since these competed with them. But Tibs enjoyed himself too much to let that bother him.

He paid a copper for a steaming drink that tasted spicy and sweet. Another copper got him a small loaf of bread that was almost as good as the ones he got from the baker in town, but this was filled with a savory meaty paste.

He made back the coppers from pockets. He didn't consider the caravan's merchants, their helpers, or guards, to be part of his town, so they were fair game, sticking to his rule of only taking a copper each time.

He nearly got in trouble once, when his fingers cramped as he was about to slip them into the pocket, but the crowd had been tight, and the jostling he'd been using as the distraction also kept his target from realizing what had pulled at the fabric when Tibs's fingers locked and they caught as he pulled his hand away.

He cursed. He'd forgotten about the corruption by then. It was like it did it on purpose, giving him days of peace, then acting up at the most inconvenient time.

"Darran?" Tibs asked, seeing the burly, fabric-wrapped form of the merchant haggling at a stall setting hardened leather. The man glanced at him, smiled, and went back to haggling. By the time he was done, neither merchants looked happy, but they'd agreed on something. Tibs couldn't decide what that had been.

"Tibs, what is my favorite customer doing walking among all these competing ruffians?" Darran asked, smiling.

"What are you doing here?" Tibs replied, making his tone accusatory. "Don't you have all the things you need?"

The man laughed. "Oh, Tibs, your youth is so refreshing. Of course, I don't have everything I need. Where do you think I get what I sell?"

"From other cities."

"So you are not so naïve," Darran said, putting an arm over Tibs's shoulder and guiding him through the stalls. "It always surprises me the number of people who think the things in my story just appear there conjured out of essence."

Tibs shook his head. "I've watched the transport platform, some of the crates were delivered to your shop."

Darran nodded. “And I do get some that way, but it’s expensive. A caravan like this is a much more affordable method of getting supplies.”

Tibs looked around at the stalls and caught, out of the corner of his eye, Darran’s hand pull out of a passing pocket with a coin that was pale enough to be silver or electrum. He sometimes forgot the merchant was also a thief.

“If they bring supplies for you and the other merchants, why are they selling things here? Isn’t all this for them?”

“This is a way they can make more money,” the merchant answered. “They know what we ordered, so they can take a chance on selling something no one else sells here. If it’s popular, they can make an arrangement with a shop and they have something new to supply, or maybe they’ll keep it for themselves and only sell it when they come back. Good coins can be made that way. Although this caravan is in an unusual situation.”

Darran used the coin, which turned out to be silver, to buy the two of them a tankard of watered ale, then led Tibs through more stalls until they reached one with boxes of candies displayed on the counter.

“This was ordered by Olander, who owned the Caravan Garden,” Darran said somberly.

“Why?” Tibs asks cautiously, not wanting to make light of what had happened to that shop. “It’s no longer here.” He looked at the offered candies and paused on a box with a handful of small misshapen lumps in layers of blues and greens. He read the words on the front, twice to be sure. He didn’t understand why a word with ‘e’ and ‘a’ in it sounded the same as one with ‘ee’. Carina could only explain it as being the result of so many languages coming together, but that wasn’t much of an explanation.

“How much for the Sea Drops?” he asked the woman behind the counter.

“A copper each,” she replied flatly.

Tibs raised an eyebrow. “I can get a full meal for a copper.”

“These are Sea Drops,” she replied, “not a meal. They’re made in only one city, by one—”

“By Chuck.”

She stared at him, mouth opened.

“In MountainSea,” he added, and she closed her mouth. “I’ve had some from him, and what he sells is three times the size of these. So I’ll give you a copper for six of them.”

She snorted. “Do you have any idea how much I had to pay for them? And I was promised a copper for two, by the shop who ordered them. So I’m not taking less than that.”

Tibs shrugged. “Okay.” He turned to walk away. “Considering no one knows what they are, I’ll come back when you’re going to leave and see how many you have left then.”

“Three for a copper,” she said through gritted teeth, “thief.”

Tibs smiled as he handed her four coppers. “It’s rogue, actually. I’m a Runner.” She rolled her eyes as she took the coppers, looked them over suspiciously, then handed him the candies. He counted them with the same level of scrutiny she’d looked over his coins. He offered Darran one once he confirmed the count was right.

“You could have gotten more,” the man said before popping the candy in his mouth.

“You were right when you implied she wouldn’t be able to sell many. These are specialty items.”

“Then I’ll come back before they leave and take the rest. So why did she come if the Caravan Garden isn’t here anymore?” he enjoyed the sweet and salty taste of the candy dissolving on his tongue.

“Because she didn’t know.”

“How couldn’t she know? It’s been months since the shop was destroyed.”

“And that happened after they left the city.”

Tibs frowned. “How far is the city?”

“The closest city is about four months of travel by caravan.”

Tibs stifled the sigh, which earned him a chuckle from Darran. A month was five weeks, a week was nine days. So, two and zero weeks. He set the zero aside, nine twice was one and eight. “One, eight, and zero days.”

Darran nodded. “A hundred and eighty.”

Tibs sighed. “I wish everyone used the same way with numbers and letters.”

“You and a lot of people,” Darran said with a chuckle. “Unfortunately, not enough to make it happen.”

“Why is the city so far?”

“Because dungeons have no common sense. If they did, they’d appear in the middle of a city, that way they’d have all the food they need.”

“I wonder how they decide where they appear?” Tibs would have to ask Sto.

“Universities dedicate entire wings to that question.”

“I still don’t understand why supplies come this way. You said it cost less than with the platform, but now at least one of them is stuck with what they brought because the shop was destroyed while they traveled.”

“And other shops closed in the time the dungeon healed and couldn’t reopen. There’s always a trade-off. You can get something now, without risk, but it’s more expensive, so you have to sell them at a high price and risk not finding people to buy them. Or you go the slow route, have it at a lower cost, which makes it easier to sell them, but you run the risk of the caravan being attacked by bandits. It’s why there are so many guards with it, but even that isn’t always enough. There’s always a trade-off.” Darran smiled. “It’s why thievery is so popular.” He rubbed the gold coin he hadn’t been holding a second before.

Tibs reflexively put a hand over his coin pouch, even if he knew he had no gold in it. It only carried coppers because he knew how easy it was for a hand to slip in a pocket or coin pouch.

“There’s a risk with that too,” Tibs pointed out.

Darran smiled. “True, but nothing a good set of legs can’t help resolve.”

Tibs looked the man up and down and couldn’t imagine him running.

Darran grinned. “Don’t fall in the trap of letting appearances deceive you, Tibs. You should know better.” Tibs nodded, and now wondered how much of the merchant’s bulk was fabric.

* * * * *

Tibs stared at the woman seated at his table, feet on the table, playing with something he couldn't see from this angle. Her boots were mainly what he noticed. They were thick leather, scuffed and dented, but with bands of dark metal held to them with leather strips. A set of gloves on the table had the same arrangement, with the metal on top of the glove and fingers.

The table wasn't his, or his team. Technically, no one could claim tables at the Inn, even if their leader was with a server, who was family with the owner. If a table was available, someone, like this woman, could sit at it, but Runners understood that with so much being out of their control, knowing your table would always be available was comforting.

She looked up, noticed him, looked back at what she held, then looked up again. "You Light Fingers?" she asked, dropping her boots to the floor. They landed with a thud that resonated with their weight. She wore the same thick leather armor over her chest and shoulders, with bands of the same metal strapped to it. Her bare arms were muscular and lightly tanned.

"It's Tibs," he answered with annoyance. Even strangers were calling him that. Her eyes were dark brown, and he sensed her essence, expecting a corresponding color, but was surprised at only sensing the wisp of someone without essence. All that metal had to be heavy.

She nodded and offered her hand. "I'm Cross." She had black hair, straight and cut short.

Tibs looked at the hand, thick and callused. Her knuckles were scarred. "Okay."

She leaned back in the chair and lobbed something at him. "Got something for you."

He caught it, a wooden cylinder the diameter of his fist and twice as long. "Why do you think I'm who you're looking for?" He turned it over in his hand.

"A few things. I'm told that Light Finger's the youngest Runner around, and you look young. Also, he still has normal eyes, in spite of having an element."

"How do you know I have an element?"

She shrugged. "But mainly because you were looking at me like I'd stolen your seat and that friendly server warned me this table was used by the team Light Finger is on."

"Kroseph told you my name is Light Fingers?" Tibs asked, eyes narrowing.

She looked around and pointed at one. "Is that him?"

Tibs looked at the server. He was one of those who'd come back from MountainSea with them when Sto was done healing. He shook his head.

"Then it's not that Kroseph. What do you think?" she nodded to the cylinder.

It wasn't one piece of wood but made of wooden squares the size of the nail on his thumb. It flattened each side, sixteen of them, which were sixteen squares long. Each end was capped by an intricately carved piece of wood. The Row had a slight play, hinting at the possibility of motion. The rings also had play, so movement was possible in the direction too.

He pulled a chair and sat. If everything could move but wasn't, that meant he needed to first unlock it. The question was how. He tested for any of the squares that could be

removed. They were all fixed to the cylinder.

He studied the caps. The carving had to be there to camouflage the mechanism. A strip the width of the squares slip enough to free the side of the cap, and Tibs tried to move the square. When it didn't, he rotated the ring. After a full rotation, none had moved up, but one of them had more play than the others.

He felt her eyes on him and looked up. She was watching him intently. He put the cylinder down as if it burned him. "What's in there?"

She shrugged. "Nothing as far as I know."

"Then why give it to me?"

"I heard you like puzzles."

"From who?" he asked. He couldn't imagine who would think that. He didn't have any and didn't spend time looking for them. The only time he'd opened one, he hadn't even planned on it.

Remembering the crowd that had amassed without him realizing, he wasn't surprised when she gave another shrug. "Just something I heard around town, how Light Finger's good with them." She smiled. "I enjoy them myself, so I thought I'd seek him out, well you out." She nodded to it. "You figure out the system?"

"Tumblers." She raised an eyebrow. "It's a lock. I uncapped the key row, but I have to find the correct arrangement on the rings so it unlocks." The smile she gave him told him he'd gotten it partially right.

"Are you going to try it?"

"Why?"

She grinned. "I want to see you do it. You clearly enjoy it."

Tibs looked around. No one was paying attention to him. Unlike at the shop, people minded their business in the inn. He picked it up and applied pressure to the row as he turned each ring. It took him four circuits before the row clicked up one ring. Instead of trying to open it, he looked for the next step.

Now the opposite cap rotated, and on the fourth turn, the center strip moved, freeing another row. This one took three circuits before the row moved. Now, Tibs tried to open the cylinder. It would be one of the caps, only neither moved. Her chuckle told him he had more to do.

Another strip from the first side moved, and he was back to feeling the squares as he turned the rings for the one that fit this lock. Unlike the box, this was a simple mechanism. Each row was about finding the right square until it unlocked, then locating the next row to work with, using the same system.

When the twelfth row slipped up, the bottom cap dropped off. The free space inside was small, and as Cross had said, empty. Most of the cylinder was taken up by the mechanism.

"That's pretty good," she said.

"Was that about getting me to unlock it because you can't?"

She motioned for a server. "No, I can do it in about half the time it took you. I told you, I heard you like puzzles, so I brought you one." The girl placed a tankard before each of

them. “You earned it.”

He sipped it before putting the cap back on the cylinder. “Are there a lot of them? Puzzles like this?” the first row slipped back into position easily, then he had to find the right alignment on the rings for the next one.

“Depends on your definition of ‘a lot’. This is among the simplest ones. Most of the portable puzzles are on the simple size.”

“So there are larger ones?”

She chuckled. “Oh yeah. Some are the size of people, I heard a story about a castle, in the Ylmiyan low lands that’s reputed to be a puzzle.”

“The entire castle?” Tibs asked, looking away from the cylinder. Like the box, it was all about the feel of it. He didn’t have to look at what he was doing.

“So the story goes. I’ve never been to Ylmiyan, so I can’t tell you if it’s true.”

“Why haven’t you gone?”

“I’ve yet to find a caravan willing to go there.”

“Can’t you use a platform?”

She shook her head. “No platform in Ylmiyan. No dungeons there, so no reason for the guild to invest in one. No one else has been interested in doing it either.”

“If there are no caravans going there, and no platform, how did you hear about it?”

She smiled. “Because some people are stupid enough to be willing to travel without protection. And some are strong enough to survive their stupidity.”

Tibs handed her the locked cylinder.

“That’s actually impressive. I have to look at it to make sure they’re properly aligned when I close it.”

Tibs shrugged.

She stood. “I guess I’ll bring you another one if I come back this way.”

“Isn’t the caravan going to be back?”

“Of course, but I might not be guarding that one.” She shrugged. “It’s boring to always do the same trail. Trouble learns it can’t get away with it and stops trying.”

Tibs chuckled. “If you want trouble, you should stay here. Seems there’s always some happening.”

She looked at him. “Really? And are you causing most of it?”

Tibs looked at her and smiles. “Not as far as anyone knows.”

She grinned, picked up her gloves, and ruffled his hair as she walked back. “I’ll see you later, Light Fingers.”

“It’s Tibs,” he growled at her back, but couldn’t help smiling.