

## Stepping up-69

The man with the golden eyes had an... oddness to him. It was the best way Tibs could describe it. When he looked at Tibs, he seemed to be looking further away, as if he saw... something different. Sensing the strength of the man's essence, Tibs guessed him to be Epsilon, which meant that while he looked to be no older than Khumdar, he could be a lot older. Tibs hadn't worked out how it happened, but he'd at least figured that out. The stronger someone was in their element, the less they were affected by the passage of time.

Tibs wondered how long he'd look like a kid, and if that was a good or bad thing.

"Free transportation?" the man asked distractedly. "For people you want."

"Not free," Jackal corrected. "We'll owe you favors. And not for coming and going, just to send them away and maybe pass the word they aren't to be allowed back. You know I'm good for it."

"The extent of your influence hasn't been the same since your father tried to take over this town," the man said, still sort of looking at Tibs.

"So I'll have to work harder, I'm still good for it."

"Are you?" the man asked, then raised a hand to silence Jackal as the fighter opened his mouth.

"I don't know what you'll ask," Tibs replied, "so I don't know how hard it'll be to do. But Jackal is going to help me with it, so I'm sure we'll make it happen."

The man's smile was small. "I appreciate honesty over false promises, no matter how well-meant they are. One owed favor per person you have me send away. Where should they go?"

"Can you send them back where they came from?" Tibs asked.

"Doubtful. We don't keep track of those things here, and to send a request for the information from the scribes who do would cause delays and complications I don't think you want."

"They probably come from Ardiel," Jackal said. "It's where my father's based out of."

Jackal's home then. "If you don't know where they came from, send them wherever they want to go, so long as it's not going to make it more difficult for you."

The man nodded, turned, and disappeared partially through the step in a shimmer of colors.

Tibs leaned back in the chair and relaxed. He'd had no idea this would have been so stressful. But part of him had been afraid Harry would appear in the middle of the discussion and throw him in a cell. Tibs didn't know if this broke any rules, but Harry wouldn't like it.

"Congratulation on your first successful deal," Jackal said, grinning. "No, there was the one with the merchants, then bringing in the conscripts. You're turning out to be an expert at this."

"The others weren't this stressful."

Jackal nodded. "Working with someone you don't know causes stress. But Yarton is a

good sort, and we did save his group from my father, so he didn't press as hard as he could have."

"So long as this is the worse I have to deal with. This isn't going to be too bad."

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Quigly pushed the Runner to the center of the room. They were in the warehouse Tibs was using to train himself in controlling how the elements affected him, so the walls were cut, scratched, rotted and all that was left of the initial furniture was the debris piled in a corner. He sighed.

The Runner was young, one of the rogues recently graduated to Upsilon, with their help. Tibs hadn't worked with any of them directly. As much as he wanted to help train them, he was too busy with his own training and running things.

Not to mention fighting with his letters and the ever-growing numbers.

Any time he told Jackal to take over things, the fighter laughed to the point he fell to the floor.

With the rogue, Quigly, and Tibs, were a handful of other Runners, and a merchant. The woman who the rogue had stolen from. The first time this had happened since Tibs took over protecting them. Jackal said he should be happy it had taken someone this long to break the rules.

Tibs was just annoyed it had happened at all.

"Why?" he asked.

"What d'ya mean, why?" the rogue asked. "It's what I do. I'm a rogue." Whoever he'd gotten to weave the magic that let the Runners understand each other had done a poor job. If the sorcerer who could do this didn't demand so much coins, Tibs would pay to have every Runner they trained to speak properly.

"You don't have to steal."

"Ya kidding?" He was older than Tibs, as was everyone in the room, but the contempt was only of this Runner's face.

"Mind your—" Quigly started, hand going up.

"Don't," Tibs ordered. "I'm not going to have someone hit just because he doesn't know me."

"I know ya," the man said. "Ya the Hero of the Dungeon," he said, mockingly. "Like ya could save anything."

"He saved the town," Quigly stated.

"Don did that," the Runner replied. "He helped."

"I'm still in charge of protecting the merchants," Tibs said. "And you've been told they're off-limit. We need them for our supplies, just like they need us to bring them the loot the guild doesn't take from us. If we don't work together, it's just going to cause problems, and that's going to make each run tougher."

The Runner snorted. "Ah don't need you or this. I can do the run on my own."

Tibs studied him. He didn't think Don had put him up to this. The two of them had an uneasy alliance. He was the Hero of Kragle Rock, the one the guild liked and pointed to when speaking of what Runners could become under their teaching. Don loved being the

center of attention, even if he often complained of the pressure his teacher put on him to show that corruption was one of the good elements.

It meant that other than Harry and Alistair, the guild was forgetting about Tibs's existence.

"If you could do this without our help?" Tibs asked. "Why did you accept it?"

The Runner beamed. "Ah never turn my back on something that's given to me."

Tibs shook his head. "It wasn't a gift. There is a price for the help we give. That's the rules."

"How am mah to practice?" the Runner demanded. "Ah don't wanna just pick pockets. I want stuff!"

"Then you buy it," Tibs said. "The dungeon gives you plenty." The Runner rolled his eyes. "Have you started the second floor?" a shake of the head. "Then you'll see he gives plenty there. As for training. Break into a noble's house."

"Ya crazy? They beat ya if they catch ya."

Tibs looked at Quigly, who nodded.

"We've had to tap the few clerics who are willing to heal outside of the runs."

"You should have told me."

The fighter shrugged. "You've been busy."

"I'm never too busy to know about problems the Runners have. Maybe this wouldn't have happened if I'd been told." Not that he knew what he would have done about it, or would do about this now. How could he have the newer Runners train up to the point they could handle noble houses and not get caught?

He looked at the Runner again. "Alright. The training is a different problem. You still broke rules you've been told about. So you need to be punished."

"Ah gave it back," the Runner complained, then gave Quigly a side glare.

"Then I don't have to worry about getting you to pay for what you took, but you still need to pay something. I'm not handing you of Harry because that's going to mean you and your team miss your run." What could he do, though? It wasn't like he had cells of his own to use. Or that he thought they did any good. He'd seen plenty of people on his Street and here return from cells only to go back to what got them in, only working harder at not getting caught. Not that many from his Street ever returned from the cells.

Incentive to not get caught was good, but he wanted the townsfolk to trust the Runners, now worry about them.

He looked at the merchant. She was well dressed in a dress of light purple and blue fabric. Without the context, he'd think she was one of the poorer nobles. Which meant she was a successful merchant.

"What's your name?" he asked, then blushed. "I'm sorry, I haven't had time to get to know all the merchants beyond walking in the shops when they first open." Or used to. When was the last time he walked through Merchant Row? Or the shops setting up at the periphery of what people were now calling the Platform Market. He had to find a way to make more time.

Was time an element?

“My name is Roseylia of the Stone Carvers,” her voice had a severity to it that reminded Tibs of some teachers, but her expression was kind. “I own Carver’s shop, on Merchant Row. I sell statuettes.”

Small statues? That’s what the Runner took? Why? Not the problem he needed to address. Her tone and expression gave him an idea.

“Do you need help in your shop?”

She chuckled. “There’s always a need for that. People come here for the excitement of the dungeon, not the tediousness of working in the shops.”

Tibs nodded. “Then an extra set of hand for…” he considered. This was the Runner’s first time at breaking the rules… no at being caught breaking them. No other merchants had reported anything missing, but would they? He needed to make sure they knew he took their protection seriously, even from the Runners. But he couldn’t be so harsh that the Runners would band against him.

He rubbed his temple. He was starting to understand why Jackal laughed at him when he offered him to do this job.

“Two weeks,” he said. “For half the day, except if his team has a run. He’ll get that day and the day after off.”

She looked at the Runner, who stared at Tibs in disbelief.

“Ya can’t do that,” he stated.

“Your alternative is Harry’s cell, and your team pays for what you did along with you. I’ll also arrange for you to get supervised training when you aren’t working at the shop. That way, when you break into a noble’s home to continue practicing, you won’t have to worry about getting caught.”

“I’ll pay you a copper a day for the work,” Roseylia offered, and the Runner looked at her suspiciously.

“Why d’ya do that? He said Ah’m being punished.”

“The work will be arduous enough to qualify, but I think you’ll be less likely to try to steal from me while you’re doing it if you get something out of it.”

“Eighteen coppers.”

She nodded.

“Make it a statue of the rearing horse instead, and we gotta deal. The small ones, with the black hooves.”

She raised an eyebrow. “That’s a rather specific request.”

The Runner shrugged. “That was the one I was after, but ya caught me before ah reached it. The rest was just… they were there.”

She nodded. “All right. After two weeks of work for me, you get one of the small statues of Stident Rearing.”

Statues were named? “So you’re satisfied with this?” Tibs asked her. She nodded. “How about you?” he asked the Runner.

“Me? Why d’ya care?”

“Because if you’re angry about this, all you’re going to do is try to get back at me, and I don’t have the time for that.”

The Runner considered it. "Ah guess it's fair. I'd get worse back home."

"Good, then tomorrow be as Carver's shop when it opens. Someone will meet you there for your training once you're done."

They left, and it was only him and Quigly.

"Training?" the fighter asked.

"Rogues need more than just knowing how to bash each other on the head or hit targets or... waive our hands about?" He rubbed his face. "We need to know locks, traps, pockets, windows, and doors. We need to see details. Roof running's good too."

"If you think hitting someone on the head is all there to being a fighter, I am not teaching you swords play properly."

"It's not play," Tibs replied. He had the memory of bruises to show for that, which reminded him. "What are the clerics helping asking for?"

"Nothing."

Tibs narrowed his eyes at the fighter.

"I swear, one's doing it because Purity demands it, another because he needs the training and he doesn't want to wait for his turn at the door. One uses it as an excuse to get away from 'the old crystals', her words. I think we're getting the rebels of the clerics; if there is such a thing."

So that was one less thing he needed to worry about. Although he wished he knew why the teams weren't getting clerics yet. It should have happened once Sto graduated, but they had yet to be offered. Not that he had any idea how that would happen. Would the teams be forced to break up to accommodate the cleric? Would they even get to pick or would the guild assign them?

"Do you have any idea how we can make breaking into the nobles' houses safer for our rogues?"

"You're asking a fighter about rogue stuff?"

"I'm asking someone older than I am, who's seen more than I have."

"I've seen war, Tibs, not housebreaking. But use that, I'd say that having lookouts, someone to help them escape if needed, would make them safer."

"That sounds a lot like the gangs on my Street," Tibs grumbled.

"If it works, a lot of people will use it. The only other thing I can think of is if you could get the noble in question to agree to be broken into, but who'd ever agree to that?"

Tibs looked at the fighter.

The idea that was forming was such a bad one.

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"I can't believe you talked me into doing this," Mez complained as he led Tibs through streets that were evenly flat, and houses that were taller and colored with vibrancy. The people who noticed them stared as they walk.

Noticed Tibs.

Even dressed in the best set of clothing he owned, he should out as not belonging here. Mez, in his armor emblazoned with red gems and cape, looked as regal as one of them.

Tibs wanted to climb a building and get to the roofs. That was how he preferred being

in this part of his town. Where he wasn't looked at like he didn't belong. Where he wasn't told, with a look, he needed to go back to the Street he'd escaped from.

"Please, be courteous with her, Tibs. I know your experience with nobles isn't great, but she isn't like them."

Tibs wanted to argue. Nobles were nobles. No matter how nice they acted, but this one hadn't done one thing since arriving in his town that marked her as a noble, other than living in the nobles' part of the town. Tibs had told Mez he wouldn't cause her problem unless she caused them, so he'd kept an eye on her every time she went around the town helping with various construction projects.

Well, he had, before he was too busy for it.

Mez knock on the door and a tall woman with long brown hair opened it. She wore a white shirt and pants with red trim and a necklace around her neck made of gold with a sparkling red gem in the center.

"Mezano," she exclaimed, hugging him. "It's such a pleasure to see you again. I hear you've become the accomplished archer. I'm glad."

"Thank you. Your assistance was invaluable."

"I doubt I did much that lead to your understanding Fire."

"You were part of it," Tibs grumbled.

"That's Tibs," Mez said, his tone casual, but glare hard. Tibs would apologize later.

"Tibs Light-Fingers," she said with a smile. "I hear we have you to thank for having a town to return to. Please come in. Andia!" she called. "Please pour four crystals of wine, we have guests."

"I don't think we'll be here long enough to warrant that," Mez objected.

"None sense, Mezano. It isn't often enough I get to enjoy another Runner's company. Now, what brings you both to our home?" She asked, leading them past a sitting room with paintings trimmed in gold and silver on the wall. Further in the house, Tibs heard a woman signing softly as crystals tinkled together.

"I want to get your house broken into," Tibs stated. That should get her to turn them back on the street.

She stopped and stiffened, but when she turned, her expression was quizzical instead of angry or offended. "You want to rob my house." She smiled. "Please tell me more."