

Stepping up-13

A new group of conscripts stepped off the platform, looking confused and scared. Tibs was surprised. This was the third group to arrive since Sto had reopened his doors. They were led toward the clearing, where Tibs expected they would get the speech about their lack of worth as anything other than dungeon food.

A man broke from the crowd and ran past the guards, only to be brought down by a large gray dog jumping on his back. Serba joined it, petted its head, and grabbed the man by the collar, dragging him back to the group and shoving him among the others.

Tibs wondered why they were here. The guild had brought more when Sto reopened because they believe he needed more food, but there had been a lot of them on that first day. They couldn't be needing more already.

Tibs looked around as he walked to the inn, searching for the other conscripts, and saw fewer than he expected. When he'd started, they were crowding the street; there were so many of them.

He had to remind himself that back then, the town was only made of tents and didn't have a dozen streets. Maybe he couldn't see them because the town was large enough they could lose themselves in it now. If nothing else, the perimeter was much larger.

The inn was busy, as it usually was. Instead of heading to his table, he looked at the people seated there. Two tables had nobles at them. Kroseph's father didn't prevent them from sitting, but he didn't give them the deference nobles seem to request of everyone, so his inn wasn't popular with that crowd.

The others were Runners, most dressed in worn and scuffed armor or good and functional clothing they'd either found in the dungeon or had bought with their loot. Among them, a few were still in rags, so there were conscripts left.

A table had seven of them, and Tibs recognized one. He headed for them. One noticed him, the oldest of the group. He was tall and lean. He could be a fighter or an archer, but Tibs couldn't be sure. He seemed familiar, but wasn't the one Tibs recognized. By the time he reached the table, they were all aware of him, and most did their best not to look in his direction, hunching in on themselves.

On, a muscular boy with awe on his face stood. "You're Light Fingers!" Tibs groaned. "Guys, that's Light Fingers."

"My name is Tibs," he introduced himself.

"You're the ones who opened up the second floor!" the boy said in excitement. "He used to be like us."

"I still am," Tibs said, which caused the other to look at him, look him over and look away. The girl he recognized smirked. And mumbled something Tibs couldn't make out. He ignored what had to be an insult.

"Is it true that you discovered the door?" the boy asked. He had to be a fighter.

"I don't know. We can't talk about what we do in the dungeon, so it's possible someone else found it before I did."

The boy frowned. "I heard that you did that, and you killed the floor boss by yourself."

"No, I didn't. It was me and my entire team." Now he understood the looks. If someone was telling stories about him being some bard song hero, of course, they'd be wondering what he wanted with them.

"What do you want?" the talk one demanded.

"I wanted to see how you were doing."

The rogue he recognized snorted.

"I'm glad to see you're still alive," he told her, and her eyes went wide.

"You know him?" the boy asked her in amazement. She shook her head vehemently.

"We met," Tibs said, "on your first day here."

Now it was the tall one's turn to snort. "And did you 'save her life too'?" he said in a mocking tone.

Tibs studied him. His rags had been of better quality at one time. Not something from the dungeon, Tibs thought, and not noble clothing either, but better than what conscripts usually arrived in. Which meant he wasn't a conscript? That and the tone made Tibs remember an incident.

"You were part of the team mine ran into when we exited the dungeon, before he was attacked."

The guy straightened and puffed his chest out. "Yeah, and you stole our kills."

"I seem to remember your team not faring well when we arrived."

"We'd have been fine," he snapped.

Tibs nodded. "I'm glad to see you're alive. I thought you were going back home after that."

The man deflated only long enough to notice the suspicious look the other gave him, then straightened. "You thought wrong. I'm not allowed to leave."

Tibs didn't call him out on the lie. "Then I apologize." He caught Kroseph's attention and motioned to the table. The server nodded. "Let me buy you a tankard." He pulled an unused chair from the table next to theirs and sat. "How are you finding the dungeon?"

He didn't ask how they were enjoying it. His time as an Omega was still fresh enough to remember the despair, the constant loss of friends. It wasn't until Jackal that he'd started seeing the dungeon as a challenge to overcome, not just something to live through.

"We're alive," the rogue said in an accusatory tone.

"It's harder." The tall one said, sitting down. Tibs thought he remembered him being an archer.

"The dungeon grew since then," Tibs said.

"It's not that," the man said, but closed his mouth as Kroseph delivered the tankard. The server gave Tibs an approving nod before leaving.

"I wish we were allowed to talk about it," the man said, eying the tankard.

The boy next to him was already halfway through drinking his. "What?" he asked when the other eyes him. "He got them for us. It'd be disrespectful not to drink it."

The rogue pushed hers away. "I'm not touching this." She looked at Tibs. "You told me we could survive that thing." So she did remember him.

"And here you are."

She was on her feet, anger in her eyes. "Do you have any idea what that thing did to us? It—"

The girl next to her put a hand on her arm. "Tara, you can't talk about it, you know that."

"What are they going to do to me? Throw me in that dungeon?"

"Probably," one man at the table said.

Tibs realized he didn't know what the punishment was to talk about the dungeon outside of it. When he was a conscript, the threat of being thrown in was real. The adventurers who guarded them had no love for them, and the man who led them seemed not to care what they did, but Harry wasn't like that.

"I've been through the dungeon," Tibs said, and they glared at him.

"Sure, with good armor and weapons," someone grumbled in his tankard.

"No, I started as a conscript, just like you. I was caught for having my hand in a pocket. I was going to lose it, but the dungeon opened and I was sent here. I lost a lot of friends." He paused. "Good friends." He could look back on it and be amazed at how quickly he'd become attached to the people on the teams he'd been part of. "But those of us who survived," he motioned to them, "grew stronger, made it further. Eventually, we got strong enough to get an element, and it helped."

Runners still died. That was the reality of being a Runner. Death waited for them. Sto had said he'd miss Tibs when he died, but there had been no promises to keep that from him. Sto was a dungeon, and the dangers were real, otherwise the Runners wouldn't grow.

"Maybe the dungeon was weak enough when you started," a scarred boy said. How was Tibs thinking of them as boys when they looked older than he did? Did surviving the dungeon to be more powerful make him grow older faster, or did he simply feel older because of everyone he lost? "Now it's not giving us any mercy. The only reason I survived my run, is because the rest decided to run through the trap room and got moving before I was ready." He shuddered.

Tibs watched him, wanting to ask for details. He'd figured out that running through that room would be a way to avoid the spears, and Sto could have adjusted that since he'd gone through the room, but the reaction spoke to something else. Had Sto added something?

"Yeah," Tara whispered. "One false step and it's over." She shuddered too. The others had a similar reaction to the statement.

"How far did you make it?" Tibs asked, curious.

"This time around?" the archer said. "Just the boulder room. We lost our sorcerer to the trap room, but I figured four of us could deal with the rats in the boulder room, anyway." He shuddered. "Me and Tara were the only ones to make it out."

"I hate rats," she grumbled, and Tibs smiled at the shared sentiment, then he sobered. Was the boulder room that hard? He and his team were stronger now. But it hadn't seemed

different when they'd crossed it. Even with the ban on talking about it, like the stories about him finding the door to the boss room and his team defeating it, there were stories about each room, with enough details to help the new Runners get through them.

"Look," Tibs said, "I can't tell you anything about the dungeon. But what I can do, is offer my team's help if you want to train. If we don't have the exact skill you're using, talk with one of the other teams. There are enough of us someone will know what you need."

"And you think one of them, is going to want to help us?" Tara demanded, eyes burning with anger.

"I can think of one of them who won't," Tibs replied. He couldn't see Don lowering himself to helping anyone, but Tibs didn't expect anyone to pick corruption as an element, so he wouldn't be needed. "But other than the nobles who chose to be here, we all started where you are. We know how hard it is. And we want you to survive the dungeon. So I can promise you'll find someone who will be willing to help." Tibs would pass the word around too. If the others had forgotten where they'd started from, they could use the reminder. They were all Runners, and it was their job to bend the rules as far as they could to ensure they survived.

He stood. "I hope I get to meet you again."

Tara stood a second later, after a slight hesitation, and he watched her step around the table.

"I'm sorry for how I behaved," she said. "I know you're trying to help us." Before he could say anything, she hugged him.

Tibs hugged her back and felt her fingers make their way in his pockets. He wanted to roll his eyes at how clumsy she was. He felt her pull a coin out.

He leaned in and whispered, "you can keep the coin, but if you try it with anyone else, you might lose your hand." He let go of her as she stared at him, stunned. Clearly, picking pocket wasn't what she'd been caught for.

He nodded to the archer and the others, then went to his table for a meal.