

Chapter 27

“Tibs, You’re back!” Sto exclaimed, startling Tibs. He’d been pacing among the nervous Runners, waiting for Fedora and her team to finish their run. “Where’s the rest of your team? I can’t see them. I have something to show you!”

He checked where he was and confirmed he was out of Sto’s range. What had been Sto’s range? Like the Runners, Sto was growing in strength, and beyond adding floors as the mark of graduating to the next rank, how far his senses stretched, was growing.

Tibs looked around. There were a lot of Omegas, another group had been brought in the day before, and while they all looked older than him, there were so scared he didn’t think they had spent much time surviving the streets on their own.

“I’m not going in today,” he whispered, but not softly enough to keep an older boy to eye him, then step away, as if Tibs was scarier than the dungeon.

“Oh. Hurry up. I can’t wait for you to see.”

Tibs didn’t reply, stepping further away. He’d have to be more careful if he didn’t want Sto to realize why he was there.

A few minutes later, her team exited. Again, the group was whole and Tibs smiled. It looked like she’d was part of a good one. They handed over their equipment, then ignored the merchant’s stalls that had been set up since the bazaar had left. Instead of getting shops, some of them had set up stalls. Less of an investment, Darran told him, but also a riskier situation, since they had nowhere to secure their inventory.

And few of the Runners seemed interested in dealing with them. The Omegas hardly had coins, and the more experienced ones knew the merchants of Merchant Row better. Maybe this was one of those things about losing coins now, in the hopes of making more later. Another thing Darran had told him merchants did sometimes. Tibs didn’t see how not having anyone buy from them now would lead to more buying later, but he wasn’t a merchant.

“How did it go?” Tibs asked Fedora as he fell in step with her. The others were used to him tagging along on their return now.

“Hard,” she answered, tired. “I want a longer weapon too now. I hate how close those things can get.”

“I told you to stay behind,” the fighter said, then looked at Tibs. “I can deal with those rats and bunnies easy.” He had an element now: earth.

“I was able to handle them,” she replied. “I am still here, aren’t I? I won’t be one of those rogues that just looks for traps, then sits on her ass and lets the others do the rest of the work.”

“I’m just saying that you don’t have to—” the fighter closed his mouth at the glare Fedora gave him.

“I have no idea how you survived your first runs without anyone to give you proper training,” she told Tibs.

“The dungeon was weaker then. It’s sort of our fault it’s so hard for you now. Those

who died fed him, and those who survived forced him to grow stronger.”

“You’d think the guild would work harder at training us then,” the sorceress said. “The only thing I’m getting is, ‘let the others get in and take the hits while you point and fire’, and stuff about molding the energy so...” she shook her head. “It’s sorcerer stuff. Probably doesn’t mean anything to you.”

“I think it’s clear the guild doesn’t care about us beyond throwing us into that thing,” the archer said. “At least with Tibs’s friend I’m able to hit what I aim at most of the time.”

“Can I get some of that help?” the sorceress asked.

“I’m sure Carina will be happy to help you,” the fighters replied before Tibs could say he’d check. “They’ve all been really great at training us.”

Tibs exchanged a look with Fedora and tried not to smile. They were only good at it compared to the guild. They didn’t have anywhere near the teacher’s knowledge, but at least Tibs and his friends wanted the Omegas to survive.

“This is my turn,” the archer said, nodding to the sign with the bow and arrow. She squeezed Fedora’s arm. “I’ll see you afterward.”

“I might as well head to my training grounds too,” the other fighter said, “before one of them comes looking for me.” She rubbed her arm. “They aren’t gentle if they need to drag you there.”

“We meet up at the Tankard for food afterward,” their team leader said. “We have to celebrate.”

“The Tipped Tankard?” Tibs asked Fedora as they walked toward the rogue’s training grounds.

“Rog and the owner’s daughter have a thing. She’s been giving him discounts.”

Tibs nodded. “Do you want to train tonight? We can work on the roofs again.”

She shuddered. “All I do is fall.”

“But you don’t fall as often. You’ll get better and soon they’re going to feel better than walking the alleys.” He couldn’t wait for that to be true of him, too. Running the roofs using water to ensure he didn’t kill himself when corruption acted up didn’t bring the same excitement.

“Mister Light Fingers,” the rogue at the entrance to the field greeted him with a smile. “We don’t often get the pleasure of your company.”

“You’re still not getting it,” he replied curtly. Helping put out the fire hadn’t helped him go back to being just another of the runners, even if Don and Jenna had helped. Don was spending his time walking Merchant Row accepting thanks, while Jenna was like Tibs, but more successful in returning to anonymity.

The young man chuckled and offered the crystal to Fedora, who took it with a roll of the eyes, then paused as she went to hand it back. It was glowing.

“Looks like it’s time for you to go see the guild leader,” the man said.

“What? Why?” she asked.

“It’s okay,” Tibs said soothingly. “It means you’re ready to choose your element.”

Her breathing calmed. “Couldn’t you have told me that was what this was for?” she demanded of the man. “I thought this was some useless game you all played with us.” She

looked at Tibs. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

He shrugged. “I’d forgotten about that.”

“Since you’re here,” the young man said. “Do you want to escort her to the guild?”

“Oh, and now you’re going to get him to do your job?” Fedora said. “You’re taking me.”

Tibs Smiled and shrugged when the man looked at him for support.

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“I took air!” she exclaimed the next day, running into the inn and to Tibs’s table.

“Now, I don’t have to worry about falling off the roofs anymore.”

“I wouldn’t go throwing myself off them just yet,” Jackal said. “It’s going to be a while until you can do anything significant.”

“I can make wind,” she protested. And pointed at Jackal, causing his long hair to blow around a little.

“Very impressive,” the fighter replied. “That’s almost as much wind as I can make.”

“Jackal,” Carina warned as the fighter stood.

“It’s easy for him,” Kroseph said as he placed bowls of porridge on the table. “He’s full of hot air. Congratulation, Fedora.” He patted Jackal’s shoulder, pushing him down to his seat before heading back to the kitchen.

“So we’re going to the roofs tonight?” she asked Tibs.

“Once you’ve had some training with your essence, we’ll do it.”

She looked disappointed, but nodded.

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Tibs couldn’t wait for the roofs to be his again. He’d tried it once the sun set, and his arm had cramped as he’d reached for the edge and he’d slipped off. The pool of water he created kept him from breaking anything, but he’d headed back to his room instead of trying again.

It was having to rely on his element that was taking the fun out of it. It was one thing to use water to make longer jumps, level the roofs when he needed to catch up to a thief, but not being able to run the roofs without it was... discouraging.

Unfortunately, sleep didn’t come. Tibs could usually sleep anytime he wanted, but this night, he couldn’t stop thinking about the roofs, about the corruption in his essence. Fedora’s excitement at every little thing she learned how to do with her essence. He couldn’t remember joy when using his essence. It had always been a struggle then, and so much the key to his survival, he had no time for enjoyment.

When he stepped out of the room, dressed in loose black clothing, it had been with the plan to go to the corruption pool, get in and finally have that audience and end it one way or another. Instead, he’d headed in the opposite direction. Sticking to the dark alleys.

He spent some time looking for Serba’s dogs again. No one of them had been seen since the one had been killed. Even Serba hadn’t been around. If Tibs could think of a good enough reason, other than he was worried about her, he’d ask Harry. Without one, the guard leader wouldn’t even see him.

Then he headed for the clearing by Sto. Maybe they’d talk, maybe he’d sit in silent

company. Or, Tibs realized as he saw the illuminated booths in the distance, he could see if there was anything the merchants had left there they wouldn't miss. Doing that while making sure the guards at the door didn't notice him in the lanterns' light would be fun.

But not as fun, Tibs thought, as a form detached itself from a shadowed section of a booth. If there was also a guard there who had seen him approach.

"And a good evening to you, Light Fingers," Cross called as a greeting. Not sounding the alarm loud, just the making sure he heard her, and had to acknowledge she was there.

"Hi," he replied once he was close enough to do so in a normal tone.

"And what's bringing you out here one this fine middle of the night?" she asked, far too jovially for Tibs's liking. "Were you thinking of visiting these fine merchant's stall, by any chance?"

He could be jovial at night, he was a rogue, it was his time. She was a guard. She should be annoyed at being here when she should be sleeping.

"No," he replied, distracted from his annoyance by the faintly glowing cube in her hand.

"Really? You are here and don't plan on doing anything?"

"They only have stuff for Omegas," he protested. "I don't need any of that anymore. Why would do anything?"

"For exactly that reason," she replied, then lobbed the cube at him. "Here, this is more interesting."

"Stealing's not allowed," he said, catching it. Each face of the cube was divided into nine squares etched with symbols. "What is this?"

"Since when do rules stop your type?"

He narrowed his eyes at her. "My type?"

"Rogues, thieves, miscreants, you know. Your type." She smiled, and Tibs had trouble being angry at her. There was a lot of Jackal's kind of ribbing in her words.

"I don't steal from the town," he replied.

Her smile broadened. "Ah, but we aren't in the town, are we?"

Tibs tried to find a way to talk around what he'd intended to do, then just admitted defeat. "I'm not going to steal anything." He focused on the cube since the stalls were off-limits tonight. The squares on the cube made rings that turned three of them, no matter the position he held it in.

"Don't force the turns," Cross said when he had trouble with one. "Make sure the squares are aligned and it won't resist."

She was right. The rings slid smoothly then. Studying the faces, he counted six different symbols and nine of each. So the point was to fill the faces.

The essence woven through the cube was thin and the weave itself simple. He guessed it was light, because of the glow.

He shook it next to his ear. "What's it in?" whatever it was, was held securely, and small. The cube was the size of his hand, and the mechanism had to take up most of it. Was the way to open it, positioning the symbol into a specific pattern, or filling one face? Or more than one? As simple as the size forced it to be, this was more complex than the

cylinder because he'd either have to know what the pattern was or try every possibility until one worked.

"There's nothing in it," she said, and Tibs told how little he believed her with a look, then proceeded to match the nine symbols to one face. She chuckled. "I mean, it's not a box. It's just a puzzle."

Tibs paused. "What's the point then?" he turned the cube in his hand. "Puzzles are just another kind of locks."

She considered him. "Why did you keep working on it after I told you there was nothing in the cylinder?"

He shrugged. "It's a lock. I wanted to figure it out."

"But why? You weren't getting anything out of it, and I doubt you'll even encounter one with that mechanism again."

Tibs thought about it. "I like figuring out locks."

"And so do I. That's why I picked this up in Kartrage when I came across it. I wanted to work it out. Now I like seeing what patterns I can make with the symbols."

Tibs nodded, getting a sense of how the turns affected the positions of the symbols. He finished the crown on that first face.

"So," she said, tone serious, "why are you here, Tibs?"

"Why are you?" he replied, not looking away from the cube.

"My job. The merchants hired me to keep an eye on their stalls. It's bad for their business if someone from the town decided to come over and just help himself to their possessions."

"I'm just walking because I couldn't sleep." He frowned as the move undid the face as it put the piece he wanted where he'd intended on the middle ring. He didn't have the right order.

"I've never known a th—rogue to just walk at night, even when they can't sleep."

"You know a lot of rogues?" He smiled. There. That was how to get the middle ring pieces in position while bringing what he'd already done back into their proper place.

"Thieves are more the people I know," she said. He glanced at her and she smiled. "I'm a guard. I come across a lot of thieves. I'm even friends with some of them."

"You're not a guard." The last face was difficult because any changes to it required he keep in mind the five others. "That's just your job."

"What do you figure I am?" the question had amusement in it.

"A fighter." He moved one piece into place, then studied how the move had undid everything, then returned them to their previous positions. "You're like Jackal. You like to fight, and being a guard gives you a reason to do that." Another set of moves to put the piece in that same position and he studied that, before undoing it.

"I guess challenging the Runners to fight me did give it away."

"Jackal was the one who beat you." Another one and again positions were altered, but this time, he'd seen the changes coming. He was getting an understanding of the sequence.

"I know. I head his name. And let's be fair here. He didn't so much beat me as trick me into losing."

Tibs shrugged. "You lost, he won. Jackal doesn't care *how* he wins." This time, he picked a different symbol to put in place and predicted how the rest of the cube would change.

"Pit fighters have never been known to fight fair."

Tibs snorted. "The dungeon doesn't fight fair. You should run it. I think you'd be good." He smiled as the pieces ended up where he'd thought. Now it was just a question of figuring out all the sequences that would let him move everything so that once he was done, only the piece he'd intended changed.

"Dungeons aren't for me. I intend to live for a long time."

Tibs paused in mid-turn. He thought about Harry, Tirania, Alistair, Bardik and all the others in the guild he knew were older than they look. "If you survive, you can get an element and that helps you live longer somehow."

"It's that 'if' I'm not comfortable with. I like problems I know I can solve. It's why I like puzzles. It doesn't matter how hard they are. There is a solution. It's just about figuring that out."

"I like opening stuff, seeing what's in them." He turned the cube, spinning the faces. "Working out the locks makes both easier."

"I guess that's why you're the rogue and I'm the fighter."

"Tibs?" Sto called, and he looked up before he could stop himself.

Cross tensed and looked around.

He hadn't thought about where the stalls were. They were well within Sto's range.

"What is it?" she asked, voice soft. The guards at the door hadn't noticed her tension. They wouldn't have reacted even if they had. Unlike Cross, they didn't care to have to work when they'd rather be sleeping.

Tibs shook his head. "I thought I heard something."

"What are you holding?" Sto asked. He could see anything that took place within his range, but he couldn't distinguish what they were if they would close to people. Something about life force, or auras, or the power of the mind, or the concentration of their essence. Alistair couldn't give him an answer and neither anyone else he'd asked, because since they couldn't talk to the dungeon, they had no way to know which of their ideas was wrong.

What Tibs hadn't realized until now was that it didn't affect him. Otherwise, Sto wouldn't see what he was holding any better than when it had been in Cross's hands.

"Sneaky types tend to have better ears," she said, not raising her voice. "What did you think you heard?"

"Not every rogue depends on their ears. A lot depend on bodyguards."

"Those aren't the kinds I'm thinking of right now."

"Probably just an animal. There are lots of rats around here," he added, then returned to the cube.

"Tibs," Sto said, "bring that in with you next time."

He paused mid-turn. "Can I keep this? Figuring out the bottom is tougher than the rest."

She took it from him. "Sorry. I don't let this one out of my reach. Night duties tend

to be boring since I rarely get visitors.”

“You have the cylinder.”

She handed that to him. “That I can lend you. Don’t break it.”

“That’s not the same thing.” Sto sounded disappointed.

“Thanks,” Tibs said. He waited. Once he knew where she kept it, he’d know how to—

“You realize I know what you’re waiting on, right?”

“Sorry?” He smiled.

She rolled her eyes. “I’ve been around thieves, Light Fingers. I don’t make a habit of showing them where I put things I care about, even when I like them. And just so you won’t hang around all night. I keep it in my hand. It’s too big to put in my pouch and not have it bulge. The cylinder’s narrow enough it’s not noticeable.”

“So you just hold it?”

“Until I get to my room, where I have a warded chest, Light Fingers. Don’t even think of stealing from me.”

“My name’s Tibs. I don’t like being called Light Fingers, so please stop. The man who gave me the name tried to kill the dungeon.”

“That can be done?”

“So I’m told. Dungeons are alive. My teacher said that there’s be a dungeon that was starved because the Runners were too strong, so the dungeon didn’t get enough to feed himself. That’s why they control the ranks of who’s going in now.”

She looked at the door. “I had no idea there was so much thought put into who went into a dungeon. I just thought they gathered the people they didn’t like and threw them in.”

“At Omega, that what Runners without an element are called, it’s kind of what they do. They just make sure there are some from each class in the groups they send in. It’s once we get an element that they pay attention. I got lucky, but if we’re not careful, it might end up breaking up my team.”

“What?” Sto demanded.

“How so?” Cross asked.

Tibs sighed. Maybe if Sto knew what was going on, he could adjust things, not push them as hard.

“Jackal is Lambda. That’s two levels above the dungeon, who’s Upsilon; he has two floors. Normally the guild won’t let more than one runner be at a higher rank than the dungeon, so we’ve been pushing back our tests, but when I put out the fire, I showed I was stronger, so they forced me to be tested. The guild leader changed the rules so my team wouldn’t be broken, but if one more get’s to Lambda, there’s nothing she can do. They’re worried we’d be too strong for the dungeon and it would put him in danger.”

“You could starve him,” she said.

“But they keep sending so many weak ones,” Sto said. “There’s enough of them that they don’t have to worry about your team.”

Tibs took a few seconds to work out how to give Sto more information without making Cross suspicious. “I don’t think the guild knows how dungeons work.”

“I thought they made the dungeons,” she said.

“They find them. They have a way to know when a new dungeon appears, then they come to guard it and get Runner to feed him.”

“More like control how little I get fed,” Sto grumbled.

“How do you know so much about dungeons?” Cross asked. “I’ve never heard any of that before.”

Tibs grinned. “I ask questions.”

“And you get answers?” She sounded surprised.

“Most of the time. My teacher likes that I’m curious, and the guild leader sometimes answers me.”

She chuckled. “Never thought to do that. Figured if I didn’t learn it by doing it, I didn’t need it.”

“A lot of people don’t ask questions. Even my teacher was surprised that I had questions he never thought about. It seems like a lot of people aren’t interested in knowing a lot.”

“Not everyone needs to know stuff that’s outside what we do. That’s a sorcerer’s job, figuring things out. Maybe you should do that.”

“I’m a rogue,” he replied.

“But you don’t have to be one, right?”

Tibs grinned. “But I like being one. It’s much more fun.” He turned. “I’m going to bed.” During his next run, he’d be able to talk with Sto about his team, and maybe they could work things out.