

Stepping up-64

Tibs kept busy.

He practiced swordplay with Quigly, helped the Omega rogues they'd selected with their trap and lock skills. Under supervision, he got used to keeping the effects of purity under control. The trouble with it came from how much sense working hard made, even when he didn't channel it. Only it was taken to such an extreme that Tibs wouldn't consider taking a tankard of ale if he didn't have to work for it.

A lot of his time was taken with learning his letters and getting better with the numbers. Anytime a merchant needed him to do something about the protection, or a theft that had happened, it reached him writing. And he needed to keep count of the coins they were paid for it and that they spent for the Omega's equipment and repairs. The only people he trusted to handle it, were his friends, and Jackal had looked terrified at the idea, Mez had simply declined, Khumdar was busy with projects of his own, and Carina had smiled and said she'd help by teaching him how to handle all of it by himself.

Some days, Tibs hated his friends.

But it kept him busy over the following weeks, so he didn't have to think about Sto. He didn't have the time to be tempted to go talk with him. Explain why what he'd done hurt so much. To soothe the pain Tibs inflicted by not talking with him.

He sensed Harry approach the inn, and Tibs assembled the papers on his table into distinct piles before putting them away in the satchel Darran had provided him for them. The papers were provided by the other merchants since they never needed them back when they set requests. Rubbing the charcoal off the page left them darkened, but not so much he couldn't read what he carefully wrote.

The guard didn't look happy as he stepped before the table as looked at the charcoal dust on it. "This needs to stop, Tibs."

"Why?" He didn't bother denying anything. There was no point with a man who knew when he was lying.

"Because you aren't in charge of protecting this town. I am."

"You can't be in charge of protecting something you're willing to be let destroyed, Harry." He's intended to stay calm, but his anger build and he decided he was entitled to be angry. If the man had done his job, Tibs wouldn't have had to take over.

"You don't understand," Harry said. "Protecting the guild's assets isn't as simple as deciding one is better than the other. There are consequences that have to be kept in mind."

Harry wasn't lying and that annoyed Tibs. He doubted he was anywhere near the guard skill when it came to seeing people lie, but he had enough practice with it to notice the way someone radiated light anytime they said something not true. He didn't have to channel light to see it; it was simply something he could do since his audience, like corruption not hurting him anymore.

"Then you should be happy I'm taking care of the town, Harry. It's one less consequence for you to worry about."

Harry planted his hands on the table. "This isn't how it works, Tibs. You're Runner.

You do what the guild tells you. And I am telling you to stop this.”

“I’m a rogue,” Tibs replied with a smile. “Doing what I’m told isn’t all that interesting.”

Harry ground his teeth. “This will not make you friends among the guild.”

“I don’t need the kind of friends who will let me, my friend, and my town be killed, Harry. And if I stop, the merchants will get someone else to take over, because they’re another group who don’t trust you or the guild anymore. Something about how they were promised protection when they paid to buy the plot of land their shops on. Yet, they were left to fend for themselves when Sebastian tried to take over the town.”

“I will throw all of you in a cell, Tibs,” Harry threatened, and Tibs smiled.

“Do it. Throw every Runner protecting the town in the cells, see who’s left to do the runs for the guild. I doubt there’s enough noble teams to satisfy the dungeon. What happens if a dungeon doesn’t eat? Does he become harder so more people die? Can the guild convince people to pay for the privilege of only feeding the dungeon? Will anyone want to come when the merchants tell them what the guild’s protection is worth? Can you silence them?”

Harry sighed. “You are playing a dangerous game Tibs.”

“I’m not playing a game, Harry. I’m making sure this town survives without you.”

“This town can’t survive without the guild, Tibs.”

“Then you can go somewhere else. Go bother another dungeon.”

The guard stared at Tibs. “You think you can tell the guild where to go?”

“I think you know what to do to get rid of me,” Tibs replied. “I’m not going anywhere otherwise. Since you don’t have as many responsibilities, with me handling the town, maybe you can find out what Sebastian’s up to. Jackal tells me he’s still a threat to us.”

The pained expression didn’t last long before being covered up by anger. Had Harry tried and not found out anything? Had he been prevented from trying? Did he know something was coming?

Harry straightened. “Don’t complain I didn’t try to help you, Tibs, when all this comes tumbling around you.”

“Tell Tirania that the next time she wants to threaten my town, she can come do it herself.”

Harry shook his head sadly. “This is why you need to stop this, Tibs. This wasn’t a threat. I am doing what I can to help you.”

“You should have tried earlier, Harry. I might believe you now if you had.”

Harry hadn’t lied, but Tibs didn’t have to care about that. A second person he’d hurt in only a few weeks, but at least, this one he wouldn’t have to smooth things over with.

No, he didn’t want to smooth things over with Harry. He wanted it with Sto. Just, not right now.

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He found the cleric in one of the worker’s barracks, healing a woman whose skin was covered with rashes. He watched and sensed. He had a good enough handle on purity’s influence he felt ready to channel it and figure out how to heal. He wished he could simply

ask her how she went about it, but even if she went out to places no other cleric did and healed without demanding payment, Tibs didn't trust her with his secret.

So he sensed how she moved the essence through the woman's wound, the shape of it, the rate, how she focused the essence in places where the woman's own essence was obstructed. Could she sense that, or did she rely entirely on the position of the rashes to tell her where the blockage was? Was the way she shaped the essence to deal with a rash the same as she would for other kinds of injuries?

"Hello," she greeted him, then looked at the woman on the cot. "You will be fine, but next time, avoid working with lye without the right protection."

The woman's skin wasn't fully healed, but the cleric was nearly entirely drained. Tibs could sense the remnant of injuries around the room. The woman wasn't the first person she'd healed.

She staggered as she stood and Tibs caught her.

"Thank you."

"You look exhausted."

Her smile was strained. "Exhaustion is the price of hard work. It is a price I gladly pay to help these people."

Exhaustion could kill. He only thought it. He had a better sense of the demands purity put on her clerics, and unlike him, they didn't seem to have the ability to fight the influence. Although some—he remembered Hightower—seemed to have found ways around the worse of it.

"Then let me treat you to food and drink as repayment."

"It isn't required."

"I know, but I still want to do it. If you want, you can consider it payment for answering some questions."

"Very well."

The tavern was busy, but a group of workers cleared a small table for the two of them before they could leave to look for another one. They thanked her profusely before moving to stand away.

"I was surprised you were there to help during the fight for the town," Tibs said.

She smiled. "In the initial confusion, I was separated from my group. It made it easier not to hear the order to retreat to the guild house. Then, it was simply not possible for me to do so without endangering myself, so I remained at the inn, and I couldn't simply stand aside and do nothing while there was work to do, that this work involved healing the injured..." she thanked the harried server as she brought each a bowl of stew, bread, and a tankard of ale. "Sometimes, having purity urge us to work is a good way to placate those above us."

Tibs nodded and tasted the stew. It was watery and the meat stringy. For a moment he considered complaining, but stopped himself. He was getting spoiled by the food the inn served. If he wasn't careful, soon he'd be demanding that any place he went to meet his exacting standards, just like nobles did.

"I'm glad you did, but I was surprised because I thought you were going to kill yourself trying to purify the pool of corruption."

She looked up from her bowl in surprise, then studied his face. “You were the boy. The one who spoke with me. The one who is Street.” She smiled. “I found out what that meant.” The smile fell. “I’m sorry you had such a rough life. Hard work is one thing, but to be in a situation where it takes being sent to a dungeon to have a chance at life... I’m glad you are still among us. And your eyes are blue now.”

“I grew into it. Why did you stop?”

“I was forbidden from returning to that place.” She ate a few spoonfuls with clear delight and Tibs considered asking more about that, but it didn’t matter. It was his curiosity sidetracking him.

“What is it like to heal someone? How do you do it?”

She sighed in pleasure as she took a swallow of the watery ale. “To help those in need is a pleasure beyond any. One I don’t get enough chances to feel. As for how, I’m afraid that without purity as your element, that without being its cleric, you wouldn’t understand.” She eyed him with a mix of amusement and suspicion.

He shrugged. “I’m curious about a lot of things. My teacher says it’s a good thing, others...” he smiled. “Don’t always agree.” He raised his hand and filled his palm with water. “All I have to do for this is gather essence. Even creating a flow of water is more about moving the essence than shaping it.” The water raised in his hand, and he held the blade-shape by will. “This is simply about holding the essence. Preventing it from dispersing.”

He noticed the silence and looked around. The workers were watching them with a mix of curiosity and apprehension.

“Adventurers are something most of them only hear of in stories. Magic isn’t something any of them expected to ever see this close.”

“But the town’s full of Runners.”

She smiled. “How many of them come into these parts? Or when they do, show what they can do?”

Tibs looked around at the faces. Was he creating a Street, a place where those were thought of as less simply for being there? What could he do to make sure that didn’t happen here? The server who’d brought their meal stood, staring at the water.

“Am I breaking a rule?” he asked. The first thing he could do was make sure he followed the rules.

“I—” she looked worried.

“There ain’t no rules,” a man said. “Just never see water do that before.” Tibs couldn’t identify the speaker.

“Ask the owner,” Tibs told the server. “If they say I have to stop, I will.”

She nodded and stepped away.

Tibs iced the blade, focusing on keeping it smooth, and it ended with fewer jagged ends, but the gasps from those watching could have been as much fear as surprise. It still looked like a nasty weapon. “Getting it to do that requires that I force the essence into a structure. It’s not complex, more like just interlocking them, but I still can’t get it to be exactly what I want.”

“So a sword to terrify anyone who looks at it wasn’t what you were aiming for?” she asked with a smile.

“It is the least threatening I can manage.”

Her smile vanished. “A sword will always look threatening to someone facing it.”

“Right. That’s not what I meant. I mean I—” her expression did not become understanding. “I guess being a Runner makes me feel differently about what I have to use to survive.”

She nodded. “But helping them understand that you aren’t some all-powerful adventurer, here to rule of them, means you need to remember that this,” she pointed to the ice sword, “is not something they have experience with.”

Tibs nodded and absorbed the essence, causing the sword to melt away to nothing and the people watching to gasp.

“What I do,” she said, “and I am not particularly skilled yet. Is much the same. I link it into a... fabric I suppose is a good analogy, and apply it on the wound.”

“So that’s it?” Tibs asked, trying to figure out how to get her to say more. He’d felt the essence move into the body, reach the woman’s blocked essence. “I thought there would be more. The way some of the clerics act when healing us at the dungeon makes it seem it’s more involved.”

“It can be,” she replied. “There, Runners suffer graver injuries than most people. But with what I did, once I apply the patch on the injury, the essence is drawn in deeper, healing all that is needed, then spreading through the body.”

“That’s why you’re tired. Unlike me, you weren’t able to draw it back into you.”

She nodded, and a man in a grease-covered apron approached, looking nervous. “My Lidi, said you needed to talk to me?”

“I’d just asked her to find out if you had any rules against using essence in your tavern. I was giving...” he hesitated, realizing he hadn’t asked the cleric’s name. “My friend a demonstration to explain how I use essence, and I cause more of a reaction than I expected.”

“Oh no,” the man hurried to say. “I’d never think to keep one of your adventurers from doing anything.”

“I’m a Runner,” Tibs corrected. But that didn’t seem to calm the man. “Has anyone with essence, magic, come here and cause anyone problems?”

“Oh no, not since the new guards came.”

The cleric looked at Tibs inquisitively. She hadn’t been there before Harry. “When I arrived, we were the first Runners to be brought to the dungeon. The guild used adventurers as guards. They’d broken rules, and this was part of their punishment. Most of them didn’t particularly care for it; or care to do a good job. They were sent away after... after the dungeon was attacked.”

She nodded. “I remember that.”

Tibs looked at the man, around at the workers. “Can you do something for me?”

The man looked scared, but nodded.

“Pass the word around to the other businesses in this part of the town. If anyone with magic, or anyone you know is a Runner, causes trouble, have word sent to me. I’m at—”

“Oh, I know who you are. You’re Tibs Light Fingers, you saved the dungeon. You helped Don protect the town. Everyone knows where to find you.”

Tibs stifled the sigh. At least they thought of him as second to Don. He didn’t have to worry about the sorcerer coming after him again. The cleric raised an eyebrow at him. He was going to have to explain what had happened with Sto.

He sighed. Yet someone else who would know of his heroics and fewer chances to just have everyone forget about it.

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“I’m not so sure about that,” Jackal said, as Carina and Kroseph helped him to the bed. The fighter had won that pit fight, but not without paying for it. His leg was broken, with the bone poking out of the calf. How he wasn’t screaming with pain, Tibs wasn’t sure, but it afforded him the perfect opportunity to test his healing.

“I told you this would happen,” Kroseph said, “if you went out and fought again.”

“Isn’t it obvious he’d get hurt in one of those fights?” Carina asked.

“Oh, not that.” Kroseph patted Jackal’s arm. “Him getting hurt is just something I get to use to cuddle him.”

“Kro,” Jackal whined, blushing.

“Oh, you love it.”

“I’m the tough fighter, I’m not even screaming in pain right now, they don’t need to know how much I love it when you cuddle me.”

“No, what I told him was that the next time he was seriously injured, Tibs got to practice on him. And here we are. Afterward, I’ll cuddle you and do all the—”

“Can you not talk about that while I’m focusing?” Tibs asked. “I don’t need to feel like I’m gagging.”

“One day, Tibs,” Jackal said.

“You really want me to screw this up, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t. But—”

“I think this is where the shut up, Jackal,” Kroseph said. “And let Tibs do his thing.”

Tibs had the weave formed. Since he could only look at fabric and ask about how it was made, he couldn’t be sure this was right. He smiled at Jackal. But that was the point of this, wasn’t it? And who better than to practice it on the big, tough fighter. At least he wasn’t going to scream in pain if he got this wrong.

“Tibs,” Jackal said. “I really don’t like that look on your face.”