

Stepping up-59

Tibs walked up to the mountain, away from the closed door. Even if there was no one guarding it, or no one anywhere along the plain between the town and the mountain. Harry didn't have enough guards right now to watch the work taking place around the remains of Sebastian's house and the dungeon. And with recuperating from defending the town, the Runners weren't interested in 'guarding' anything.

Not that Sto needed the protection. He had been nearly impenetrable before Bardik used corruption to break through the door, and Sto had incorporated that element in his walls to make it even harder to do.

Tibs sat and leaned against the rock. Giving Jackal and Carina the slip had been harder than it should have been. He was a rogue, after all, and they weren't. But they knew him, so they had people watching his usual escape routes. Another problem was that he knew vanishing like this would cause them to worry, and while channeling water as he always did now, even causing them simple worry irked him.

He hadn't expected dealing with how water affected him when he channeled the essence to be this exhausting. He always needed to be on his guard not to give in to this need to comfort and protect, regardless of the long-term consequences.

He could let go of the element, not worry about being affected, but Carina and Jackal had reminded him that now that his eyes changed color with every element he channeled, he would give himself away the moment he trained with his teacher, and if he couldn't control how he behaved, he, and the guild, would realize there was more to Tibs's new status than something having aged enough for his eyes to turn blue.

"I see your trip was successful," Sto said, and Tibs smiled.

"Yeah. I take it the work's all done?"

"Yes, Ganny's finally happy with the third floor. Where is everyone? There's usually guards at the door, and people milling about."

"They're busy with fixing the town; Sebastian tried to take it over while the Runners were away. We only defeated him recently. He escaped."

"Oh. Does that mean there's going to be less Runner to explore the third floor?" Sto asked, sounding worried.

"Yes, Sto," Tibs replied in annoyance, "Runners died defending the town, so there's going to be less of us."

"What did I say?"

Tibs sighed and shook his head. "I'm just tired." He'd forgotten Sto wasn't human. He didn't see things the way they did. His concern was that there would be people exploring him, testing themselves on his traps and creatures, and yes, dying in the process. He experienced little of what took place outside of him, so the town didn't mean as much.

"Then I hope you'll rest before your run. Do you know when that's going to be?"

"Once you open your door, the guild will get things started. I won't know until then." Grinding sounded, it was loud and the stone against his back vibrated. He craned his neck,

but he couldn't see the door from where he sat. "Is that the door?"

"Yes, since no one's here, I want to make sure the guild knows I'm ready. I so can't wait for Runners to come in."

Tibs chuckled at Sto's excitement.

"Err, Tibs?" he hesitated. "Can I ask a favor?"

"Of course."

"Don't ask the other teams for information on the third floor. I want you to experience it without information. It's going to be worth it, I promise."

Tibs closed his eyes as thinking about the information sharing brought thoughts of Pyan and Geoff. Of the people he'd lost. Tandy was the only survivor of that team. He had no idea who she was going to team with once she was recalled.

"I won't," he answered. Was there anyone left to get the information sharing going again? With Sto knowing they did it, was there a point?

"Good. You are going to have so much fun!"

That didn't bode well.

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"Tibs!" the merchant called as he approached the table.

"Darran, how are you doing?" Jackal replied. The others nodded their greetings. Mez and Khumdar had returned that morning, recalled now that the dungeon was ready, and they were enjoying their first meal as a team again.

"I am well, I thank you. My shop suffered minimal damage due to how you protected Merchant Row, and I will be fully restocked before the first run, so please come by for supplies. I will give you a special discount on account of how you lead the defense of the town."

"Didn't Don do that?" Mez asked.

Jackal smiled. "We're happy to let him think that. Makes our lives easier."

"But we of Merchant Row know who the true heroes of Kragle Rock are."

"Please don't start telling people," Tibs pleaded. "I like not having the guild constantly looked at me for helping with the town."

"Ah yes, helping the town," Darran said, and Tibs got a bad feeling. "Jackal, do you mind if I borrow Tibs? I need to discuss something with him on behalf of all merchants."

"Whatever's going on," the fighter said, "Tibs didn't have anything to do with it."

Darran nodded. "This isn't about assigning blame, I promise."

Tibs stood. "I'll talk, and I'll do what I can to help."

"Tibs," Carina warned, "remember there are more important things than helping."

"Darran wouldn't have come to us if it wasn't important. Do you want to talk at another table, or elsewhere?"

The merchant looked around uncomfortably. "Without wanting to insult our hosts, I'd prefer a tavern. This is something I'd like to ensure doesn't get back to any of the Runners until we're reached an agreement."

Tibs nodded and followed Darran. They finally entered the Drunk Sow. A tavern near

the worker's neighborhood. The merchant got them each a tankard, then they sat.

"There's been a rash of robbery," Darran stated. "Nothing too valuable's been taken from any of the shops, mostly supplies for runs, but if they continue, it's going to hurt our ability and willingness to provide for the Runners. We are supposed to have a mutually beneficial relationship, you Runners and us merchants. Having some in your group consider us fair game endangers that relationship."

"Have you told Harry?" Tibs asked.

Darran shook his head. "After how the guards harassed us, we are reluctant to turn to them again."

"They worked for Sebastian. They've been caught, killed, or chased out of town."

"Have they? The guild promised us protection when we settled our shops here. That was in part why it was expensive, but being protected by adventurers does have benefits, but the guild replaced them within a few months with ordinary guards, corrupt guards at that. Guards who the new guard leader brought in himself. That man is still in charge. That man did nothing to protect the town when we were attacked. The guild ignored our complaints, wouldn't even talk to us after the initial ones. We paid for protection we never got. I'm reluctant to turn to them again."

Tibs nodded. Would explaining how Harry had been fooled help? Would that explain the guild not protecting the town? "Why are you telling me this?" he asked.

"We discussed it. Jackal spearheaded the protection of the Merchant Row and the town, but even before that, you were arranging to protect us from the corrupt guards. We, all merchants, want to restart that arrangement, but make it official. We want to hire you to provide security for Merchant Row."

Tibs tightened his mouth on the ready agreement. Of course, he wanted to help keep them safe. But was that him, or water? Was it the wise thing to do for him, the Runners, or the town?

It would put him against Harry. Who had been willing to let the town be destroyed by Sebastian rather than stop his brother. Okay, he couldn't trust Harry to have the best interest of the town in mind. The guild was what he cared about.

Could he trust the Runners to do it? It would depend on what was in it for them. That would be the hard part, Tibs figured, because if he did this, wanted it to help every Runner, especially the new ones. Those who didn't know what they were getting thrown into. Could he convince any of the Runners to sacrifice what they could get out of this for others? Selflessness wasn't what they were known for.

Could Tibs do this? He wanted to, but what did he know about protecting people?

He knew to get qualified people to help. Jackal, Quigly, Maybe Don? He shuddered at the thought of bringing the sorcerer into this, but the man was smart. As a last resort, if he couldn't find anyone else.

"I'm willing to do it," He finally answered, "but it depends on being able to find people to do this with. I don't think I can get all the Runners to agree. Helping people only happens when it's immediately worthwhile for many of them, and I'm not sure they'll be interested."

“I understand,” Darran said. “But there is money in it for all of you.”

“First rule is going to be no one talks about the coins with the other Runners.”

Darran smiled. “Planning on keeping most for yourself?”

Tibs glared at the man. He couldn’t know him that poorly.

The merchant raised a hand. “No talking money with the other Runners.”

“You have to be certain none of the merchants will take Harry’s protection. We can’t be split.”

“Of that, you don’t have to worry. The few who weren’t certain only had to be reminded of what happened to those who sought those corrupt guards’ protection to agree not to speak with the new guards.”

Tibs nodded. “This isn’t me saying yes, but I’ll see what I can arrange and we can talk again afterward.”

Darran smiled. “Just knowing you are willing to take it on makes me feel safer.”

“You realize you’re asking a rogue to look after the safety of valuables.”

Darran shook his head. “I’m not asking a rogue, Tibs. I’m asking you.”

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At the table were Jackal, Carina, Quigly, an archer names Samuel, a sorcerer names Josaca, and another rogue who only answered to Sticks. Tibs knew Samuel, as he was one original. Carina had suggested Josaca, and Quigly had brought in Sticks after Tibs ran the idea by the three of them.

“Let me get this straight,” Stick said. He was thin. So much so that on first seeing him, Carina had asked if he was sick. Sticks had rolled his eyes. “You want us to take on the guards, the guild-backed guards, and give our pay to those good-for-nothing Omegas?”

“We’re not taking on the guards,” Tibs replied.

Sticks scoffed. “Keep telling yourself that until Knuckles throws you in a cell, with us along for helping you.”

“Knuckles isn’t going to do that,” Jackal said.

“I’m with Sticks,” Josaca replied. “The guild has an interest in making sure they are in control.”

“Of the dungeon,” Jackal said. “I think they’ve demonstrated how little they care about the town with how they responded to my father’s attacks.”

“Barricading themselves into their guild building with all the magical protection,” Quigly replied. “Unless the merchants are going to withhold the taxes, they have to pay the guild. I don’t think we have to worry about it.”

Everyone looked at Tibs. “I don’t know. I didn’t ask Darran that.”

“You should have,” Josaca replied.

“Joss, lay off him,” Carina snapped. “Tibs’s done enough already.”

The sorceress rolled her eyes. “He got himself in over his head. He just said he didn’t think to ask—”

“He asked us to help.” Carina glared at the other sorceress. “Would you have?”

“Of course I’d have asked you.”

Carina motioned to the others, and Josaca's expression darkened.

"Tibs isn't smart the way you and I are, or the way Jackal and Quigly and Sticks are, but he's smart enough to ask everyone for help. And he didn't say he was doing this; he said he'd see if he could. That's what we're trying to work out. All of us. What is your objection to using the funds to help the Omegas, Sticks?"

"Isn't it obvious? I'm going to be doing the work, not them. Why should they benefit?"

"So they survive," Tibs said.

"What do I care if a bunch of good-for-nothings feed the dungeon?" the rogue replied.

"Because each one who survives due to our help," Quigly said, "is someone willing to share the burden once they're able to. Our biggest problem right now is numbers. If Harry objects to what we're doing, we can't prevent him from shutting us down. How final that is will depend on how generous the guild is. The more Runners survive, the larger our numbers get. I don't think we'll ever have enough people to take on the guild, but we should be able to make them reconsider them using a preemptive attack."

"And do you really need the coins," Jackal said, "with the dungeon providing loot?"

"Of course I need coins," Sticks replied. "You know how much the guild is asking for the training they're forcing on us? I'm not going to be a slave to them for the rest of my life."

Josaca and Quigly exchanged a look.

"I'll give you the details later," Carina told them.

"What the merchants will be paying us isn't going to make a difference for paying that," Tibs said. He didn't know how much the merchants were planning on offering, but once split among everyone taking part, it would be nothing compared to all the gold they'll owe.

"It will be if we make sure we charge enough," Stick said with a grin. "After all, if they don't pay us, who's going to keep them safe from all the bad people in this town?"

"Sticks," Quigly warned as Tibs stood, water pouring over his hand and shaping into a jagged blade.

"I will," he said through gritted teeth. The sword crackled as it iced over, the jaggedness becoming sharp. "This is my town. I'm not going to let anyone hurt it again. If you're here hoping to coerce the merchant into ruining themselves for you, I'm going to stop you." He looked around. "This is about helping the people in the town. Not making your pouch heave with coins. Get that in your head or get out." He fixed his gaze on Sticks again.

The rogue raised his hand defensively. "Hey, I was just joking. Quig told me you were a fun guy to be around, I thought—"

"I never said that," Quigly cut him off hurriedly. "I'm going to back Tibs if you plan on causing problems. You're here because I thought you understood that our future is linked with this town."

"The dungeon," the rogue said.

"The town, Sticks. The dungeon's where we work for our living. The town is where

we live. You saw what it turned into when we were at war. I thought you wanted to avoid another one.”

“Fine, Fine.” Sticks raised his hands. “I’m on board and I’m not going to argue about the money, but I’m the example of what you’re going to be dealing with when it comes to the others. You bunch as the exception. What kind of criminals were you?”

“The kinds determined to survive,” Jackal said. Tibs fought the urge to look at his friend and question the statement. “We’re a lot younger than you. Life was hard, and we did what we had to. Maybe if we hadn’t been thrown here, some of us would have changed their ways. Maybe we’d have turned into you. We can’t know, and it no longer matters. We’re here, in this town, and we’re the people who can ensure the next batch doesn’t have to die needlessly.”

“I was told you were stupid,” Josaca said.

“I am the stupid one,” Jackal replied with a grin. “So maybe you need to pay attention to what these two say.” He motioned to Carina and Tibs.

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Don preened next to the schedule. His name wasn’t on it, because he was going in first, before even the nobles.

Tibs had been surprised to learn the schedule was up, since there hadn’t been a gathering before the dungeon where Harry told the new arrivals how things would be for them.

As the Hero of Kragle Rock, Don had easily rebuilt his team. People had flocked to be on it, and the sorcerer had smiled as he decided who would have that privilege.

“There are more teams,” Carina said.

“Only five among the nobles,” Mez pointed out.

“If there wasn’t a gathering, does that mean there aren’t any new convicts?” Tibs asked.

“Maybe not,” Carina said. “I don’t think using so many convicts is normal. The dungeon nearly died. Then it turned deadlier than expected. Now that everything’s back to normal, we’re probably only getting people paying for the chance to become Runners.”

“Will that affect the plan?” Tibs asked, causing Mez to look at him curiously. Khumdar only had a small smile.

“We’ll have to see,” Jackal replied. “We have two weeks before it’s our turn. Any idea what this third floor is going to be like?”

Tibs shook his head.

“Okay, then we go back to training.”

“Wouldn’t this war we miss count as intensive training?” Khumdar asked.

“You said it,” Jackal said, grinning. “You two missed it, so you need the training.”

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Alistair smiled on seeing him. “Tibs, your eyes are blue,” he said proudly.

Tibs forced the smile. He was uncomfortable facing his teacher. Did he have enough practice at keeping the caring impulse in check to fool him? Would he be able to limit himself to what someone with only one element had for a reserve?

“They changed at the end of the fight for the town.” Carina had suggested it. No one during the battles had paid him much attention, and they’d taken steps to limit who saw his eyes. She also felt that the stress of war caused people to age, so it would work as a justification.

“I heard about what took place,” Alistair said, taking Tibs’s chin and lifting his head to look into his eyes. “Nasty business. I’m glad you came out of it better.”

“Would you have come help?” Tibs asked before he stopped himself.

“Of course. If I’d been called on, I would have come.”

He believed his teacher, but what he wanted to know was if he would have gone against the guild’s orders if it meant staying out of the fight. He knew what Harry had done, and he’d thought the guard leader more determined to protect the town than his teacher, who had no link to it, other than Tibs.

Maybe it was better that he couldn’t ask that question. He could imagine that Alistair would have come to their help.

“Now that you are fulling Rho, we can move on to the good stuff,” Alistair said and guided Tibs toward a training room.