

## Stepping up-23

“Yes!” Sto exclaimed as Tibs and his team walked up the steps. “Now you’re back. Oh, this is new,” added, less enthusiastically.

The cleric by the entrance looked them over, asked if one of them needed healing. He looked bored.

Inside the dungeon, Tibs scanned the walls; there had been something.

“So,” Sto said. “Corruption?”

Tibs looked over his shoulder. “I need to get the other four, and this let me get rid of the corruption that was causing me problems.”

“Aren’t you worried? You saw the damage it caused.”

Tibs searched for a way to explain how the element wasn’t the same as how people made use of it, but stopped as he felt the essence in the wall. “Are you trying to distract me?”

“No, why?”

“You put something in the hall, and your question almost made me forget I wanted to check it.”

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to; you haven’t missed it yet. I’ll be quiet.”

His friends froze.

“I thought the hall was supposed to be safe,” Mez said.

“You want us to stay behind?” Jackal asked.

“I don’t think it’s dangerous,” Tibs answered. “It was there when we exited. Carina, did anyone mention something in the entrance hall?” With the sorcerers the most likely to know their letters, the papers documenting what they experienced in the dungeon were circulating between them. They’d even figured out ways to write the information down so guards who knew their letters couldn’t understand it.

“Because,” Carina had said when Tibs had asked why the guards didn’t just take the papers, anyway. “Everyone knows that sorcerers have code so others can’t steal their research.” She’d grinned. “We are a very secretive bunch, when you utterly ignore the universities.”

“No,” she answered. “There’s been no information about anything in the hall.”

Tibs turned to face his friends. “Can’t any of you sense it?”

“I will need more information as to what this ‘it’ is,” Khumdar said, “so I can know what to search for.”

“Don’t look at me,” Jackal said, as Tibs looked each of them over. “You know that until it hits me. I don’t know anything.” He grinned.

“But you can all sense your essence around you. You should be able to sense what’s part of the bundle.” He couldn’t identify all of them, as usual, but the five he had were there, and he expected they all were. Everything that interacted with Runners had to include every essence, or at least all those Sto knew the Runners had.

Jackal closed his eyes and his entire face creased in concentration.

Khumdar got a far-away look, and Carina tilted her head. Mez just looked at Tibs.

“Got nothing,” Jackal said.

“Then you aren’t doing it right,” Carina replied. “There’s stone all around us, and that’s earth.”

“Yeah, I got that,” the fighter replied. “It’s everywhere. That’s all I got.”

The other shook their heads.

“You haven’t been taught about etching and weaving yet, have you?” Tibs asked, figuring he now understood a reason he might sense this and not them.

Carina chuckled. “I’m not even close to that yet. I’ve asked about enchanting, and my teacher said I need to learn patience first.”

“I have not even heard the terms,” Mez said.

Khumdar shrugged. “Even if there was a teacher for me out there, clerics do not learn to enchant. That is the sorcerer’s purview, even among purity.”

“I thought purity only had clerics,” Mez said.

“No, they cover every class,” Carina replied, “but they only train in the purity dungeon.”

Tibs left them to the conversation and headed for what he sensed in the wall. It was in the shape of a doorway. Maybe Sto had hidden a room here to test how observant people were? The bundle of essence had the sense of a trigger to it, rather than the locks on Sebastian’s house. It was in the simplicity of it. The essences didn’t interact with one another.

He picked water and noticed there was a void that matched it. So he pushed the thread there. The section of the wall shimmered, and Tibs stepped back. When it stopped, he was looking at the bridge going over the pool of water on the second level.

“It was Mez’s idea,” Sto said proudly. “It took me a while to work it out. Connection to locations isn’t particularly easy.”

“And who explained the calculations behind it?” Ganny said.

Tibs smiled and whispered. “Hi, Ganny.”

“Hello Tibs,” she answered.

“You did,” Sto said. “I never claimed I’d done everything.”

“You just like to conveniently forget to mention my contributions.”

“It’s not convenient, it’s just forgetting.”

“Is that the second floor?” Mez asked.

“The dungeon says it was your idea?”

“I never talked with it,” the archer replied defensively.

“It hears everything we say,” Carina said, reaching for the opening. “You mentioned this would be easier if there was a way to go directly to the second level after our first run. Maybe it was the second.”

“Should you be touching this?” Khumdar asked. “It could be dangerous.”

“It isn’t,” Sto said.

“The calculations all line-up,” Ganny added, although Tibs heard a slight hesitation. It

served as a reminder that Sto and Ganny, like him and his team, were learning as they went.

“I had a BB go through,” Sto said, “nothing happened to it.”

“There is nothing to touch,” Carina answered the cleric.

“That’s pretty neat,” Jackal said. “I guess we can come out a lot faster this way. How about we keep going? We don’t want to spend the whole run watching this.”

“Why don’t we go through it?” Tibs asked. He wanted to see what it would be like to cross all that space in one step.

“Yes, that way we can start the second floor faster,” Mez said.

“But there’s loot to collect on this floor,” Jackal countered.

“It’s not like there’s a lot of it,” Carina said, studying the edges.

“Yes, I would prefer going directly to the more rewarding tests,” Khumdar said.

“Loot,” Jackal repeated, pointing to the trap room.

“Only a handful of silver,” Carina said.

“Loot!”

Tibs sighed. This could go on for a while.

“Tibs!” Jackal and Carina called at the same time as he stepped through the opening. He felt an odd tingle, then he was on the other side, and his friends’ worried calls were distorted.

“Are you okay?” Carina said, her voice lower than usual.

“I’m fine,” he answered, and they all looked at one another. “Can you hear me?”

“We can,” Jackal said, chuckling, “but you sound like a morning songbird.” His voice was higher, vibrating.

“I don’t know what those sound like.”

“You need to stop sleeping through the mornings,” the fighter said, “your voice is really hi, and it has a song-like quality to it. It’s funny. But now you can come back so we can do this floor.”

“Or you can come through and we can start with the second floor.”

“Loot, Tibs, loot!”

Tibs grinned. “Just a few silver’s worths.”

“How can you say no to loot? You’re a rogue.”

“I have enough coins to get anything I want.”

The fighter looked at him in horror. “You can never have enough coins.”

Tibs moved to the side as he noticed motion behind Jackal, Mez and Khumdar were at his back, pushing. Pretty hard by the strain he could see.

Jackal looked over his shoulder as if only noticing they were there. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to get you to go through,” Mez said through gritted teeth.

“I’m a Lambda Earth Fighter. I’m not moving until I decide to.”

“Then be reasonable and step through,” Carina said. “I’ll give the few silver clearing the first floor would have gotten you.”

Jackal stared at her, then stepped forward. By the time Mez and Khumdar crashed to

the floor, the fighter was on Tibs's side. "That felt weird." He turned. "Well, what are you all waiting for? We have a floor to clear."

Mez glared murder at Jackal as he stood, then looked at the opening, uncertainty on his face. While he hesitated, Carina and Khumdar stepped through.

"It has to be made using void essence," she murmured. "It's some variation on the transportation platform. I wonder why this isn't how those work?"

"I really wish you could get me one of those," Sto said. "A lot of Runners talk about it."

It reminded Tibs of something, and he took the puzzle cylinder out of his pouch. "Mez, you need to come through." Tibs passed his hand through the doorway and placed it on the ground. "He can't take this until you're out of the room."

"Actually," Sto said, "I can absorb items when you're a dozen paces away."

"Then why can't you make changes to a room from the same distance?" Tibs looked at the archer. When the man didn't move, he grabbed his arm and gently pulled. Mez resisted for a moment, then stepped through.

"A room's more complex. I can't change only part of it. It's in the way I make them." The cylinder melted into the floor. "I really wish you'd been able to get me that cube."

"Cross wasn't willing to lend it to me."

"She's who gave you that?" Carina asked. "I thought she was a fighter."

"Don't use me as an example of what fighters are like," Jackal said.

"I'm not," she replied. "I knew Pyan too, remember."

They fell silent.

"I'm sorry," Sto said in the silence. Tibs nodded. Understanding the danger they all faced didn't make losing a friend easier. But he didn't hold Sto responsible. It was just their lives.

"You can recreate it now, right?" He asked. And on the other side of the doorway, the cylinder reformed.

"It's an interesting mechanism. Rather simple for what it does."

"Makes you wonder why you didn't think of it before, doesn't it?" Ganny asked with a hint of snarkiness in her tone. Had the two of them been in a fight?

"Alright," Jackal said. "Let's get this going. Carina, what's the consensus on crossing the pool?"

Tibs watched the cylinder met away and followed his friends. Extending his sense ahead.

"It's getting complicated," she replied, looking over the papers. "The essence triggers on the bridge are fast enough it's almost impossible not to trigger them, there's now something in the water, so swimming isn't a good choice."

"Still don't know how," Mez said.

"We've seen what happens when Tibs ices the pool over, although no one's recreated it, so there's no telling if that's more difficult now. That leaves the ledge as the easiest, but the breakable sections change from one time to the next so whoever goes first is at risk of falling in the water."

“I nominate Tibs,” Jackal said.

“Just because he’s the rogue?” Carina asked.

“He loves to climb walls, this is basically the same, but with something underfoot, and now that the corruption is out of his system, he won’t cramp up and fall.”

“Carina,” Tibs called, stepping onto the bridge. “How fast do they say the triggers are moving?” He felt the line move up and down.

“Fast enough it’s hard to time the crossing, especially the last one. The opening doesn’t remain wide very long.”

He frowned. “This doesn’t feel that much faster to me.” He waited until it was above him and stepped forward. “Considering we can all sense the line, I think this is the easiest way now.”

Jackal stepped forward and extended his hand close to where the line moved. Tibs knew when his friend felt it, because he moved his hand to follow it.

Tibs canted his head. “Can’t you just feel it?”

The fighter shrugged. “It’s easier this way. I’m with Tibs, this is slow enough I can step through.” He did that to demonstrate.

Carina was looking over the pages. “I don’t understand. I have multiple comments about how the bridge killed a lot of people.”

Tibs frowned. This was usually where Sto comment on the previous Runners. How they’d made mistakes. He looked at the next trigger on the bridge. Sto was silent when he wanted Tibs not to be distracted. Maybe the triggers were variable?

He felt for it, and the sideways motion was comparable to the up-down of the first one. “Let’s use the bridge, but stay alert for changes. Maybe they don’t always go the same speed and we’re just here at the right time.”

He stepped around the trigger and reached the third one. He passed it without difficulties. He stepped off the bridge and turned. Carina was the only one not on it yet. Still looking through the papers.

“Carina, hurry up, you can do that on this side!” he called.

She put them away and started on the bridge as Khumdar stepped off. Tibs fought the urge to go to her and help. She could sense the essence as well as any of his friends.

She ducked under the first, stepped around the second. Started on the third, crouching, then stopped.

“Is something wrong?” Jackals asked, and Tibs’s breath caught.

“Almost mistimed it,” she answered. Her head moved up and down in time with that trigger, and when it was up, she hurried through, jumping right before the sideways one crossed the path. She stood and took the papers out. “Definitely not as fast as they said.”

“Tibs may be right that the speed varies over time,” Khumdar said.

“If that was the case I’d expect someone to have made a note.”

“That’s only if they aren’t keeping secrets,” Jackals said.

She glared at him and shook the papers. “This is research. Nothing gets accomplished if someone on the team hides something.”

Jackal nodded. “And sorcerers always share everything, even with other sorcerers,

right?"

"Yes," Carina said.

"Then make your notes and tell us what to expect in the next room."

"Carnage," she said before taking a sharpened stick of charcoal out.