

Stepping up-66

Tibs stopped as he and his friends stepped into the clearing, well outside of where Sto could talk to him. This might be the first time he wasn't sure he wanted to go in, and it had nothing to do with the creatures he'd have to fight.

"Tibs?" Jackal asked, and the others stopped too.

He'd been a jerk to the dungeon. Sto wasn't human. He didn't think like them. He'd thought he was doing something nice at the same time as having fun. Tibs felt justified in walking out, but he should have come by before now when he was forced to do it. How would Sto react?

He stepped forward. He couldn't deny his friends their chance at the run. Maybe Sto simply wouldn't talk to him, and that would put his team on the same footing as the others.

The problem was, Tibs wanted to talk. He had no idea what to say. In part, he wanted to make it up for the silence, but he also felt Sto needed to be the one to apologize. He was the one who'd hurt him, that the dungeon understand it or not.

And that was the worse of it. This lack of understanding. Carina had told Jackal to give Kroseph leeway on account of one being Street and the other a city folk. Now Tibs got a sense that wasn't easy to do. He didn't want to give Sto leeway. He just wanted him to already know he'd done something wrong.

The cleric stopped Tibs, and he realized they were at the entrance. This one was an older man, which surprised him. He thought only Omegas and Rhos got dungeon healing duties. The man studied Tibs, frowning.

Tibs had suffused his body when he'd woken. It helped him feel more alert for the rest of the day. As if it repaired whatever his short sleep damaged. Carina didn't know if that was a thing, but having less sleep caused problems, so Tibs figured that was how it worked.

Could the man see that?

"Is there a problem?" the woman guard asked. There was no anger or annoyance in her tone. This batch of guards didn't seem to care as much about who everyone in the town was, and Tibs thought that was an improvement.

The cleric shook his head. "No, no problem, just..." He trailed off and stepped back to the side. Tibs felt the man's eyes on him as he entered the dungeon.

"Are we going directly to the third floor?" Mez asked.

As the silence stretched, Tibs looked up. His friends were glancing at him, and it annoyed him. They didn't need him to decide for them. He wasn't the leader. He fixed his gaze on Jackal when the fighter glanced at him.

"Tibs—"

"Maybe we should go to the third floor," Carina said. "Get this out of the way." She placed a hand on the doorway and it shimmered, then showed the second floor. She stepped through before anyone replied, and she had the one to the third floor open by the time Tibs stepped through.

"Why does this feel more ominous than the last time?" Mez asked.

Again his friends glanced at Tibs. “What?” he demanded.

“You’re quiet,” Jackal replied.

“I believe the word you want to use is brooding,” Khumdar said.

“I’m not—” Tibs closed his mouth. “Sto isn’t saying anything, so what do you want me to talk about?” The following silence felt heavy and Tibs had to stop himself from calling out to the dungeon. Sto really should be the one to say something first.

“Which passages are we taking?”

“Same as last time,” Jackal said, after waiting a few seconds for Tibs. “If we’re ‘dealing with it’, as Carina said, that’s the way to go. Tibs?” he indicated the floor and Tibs stepped in the lead.

He considered sending out a wave of essence and using that to tell him where the traps were. The saturation was only of his essence, so he could still use water to feel out the walls, floor, and ceiling. But it felt... wrong to rush through this time. Ganny would appreciate watching him beat her traps the same way the other teams did.

At least that’s what he told himself.

“Tibs,” Jackal said as he crouched and studied the floor.

“Let him do this as he wants,” Carina replied.

The floor was tiled, each an identical square a little more than his foot on the sides. Finding a trigger was simply a matter of testing them to find which had wiggle room. This was much like the first-floor trap room in the early days, before Sto had perfected it.

That Ganny had gone back to that here simply told him the triggers weren’t the only way she intended to trick them. Or rather, not the only way she could overwhelm him with possibilities.

He counted the tiles. Each row was two and four tiles wide. They’d narrow further in, but not for a while. That was a lot of tiles to check for them to move forward. He considered coating the floor with water and icing that. With how vast his reserve was, he could probably reach where the battle with—he stopped thinking about that. He also didn’t coat the floor.

The first row had three triggers. None for the next two, then four, the next three didn’t have any, then five. Slowly they reached the first intersection, and Tibs turned into the narrower corridor they’d used the last time.

“Wasn’t there a third branch?” Jackal asked, and Tibs looked around. They had one going to the left and one to the right, with a flat expanse between them.

“Yeah,” Mez said. “Right there.” He pointed to the expanse and Tibs moved to study it. He first looked, then sensed, starting with earth since stone was what the wall was made of, and he felt it. The wall was woven earth. It was complex, but that was all it used. Tibs sensed, and it was still going where his range ended. Maybe he could undo it, but it would be costly and there might not be anything there.

And this was the dungeon, so there was another way. Easier, but trickier. And because this was Ganny’s floor, Tibs had an idea what it was. He looked back to the corridor they’d walked through, all the triggers he’d made sure they didn’t step on, and smiled.

Ganny was quite clever.

“Is that the ‘we need to worry’ smile?” Mez asked.

“No,” Carina replied. “It’s the ‘Tibs has figured something out’ one.”

“I don’t have different smiles,” he said.

“You definitely have a ‘I’m going to enjoy this a lot more than you do’ one,” Jackal replied.

“So what is it?” Mez asked before Tibs could protest.

“The triggers I had us avoid. They’re not all traps to kill us. Remember how that first one you stepped on didn’t seem to do anything last time?” He pointed to the closed-off wall. “I think it opened this.”

“So we have to activate all the triggered to find all the passages?” Carina asked.

“That seems excessively dangerous,” Khumdar said.

“There’s going to be a pattern,” Tibs said and stepped back the way they came, only for Jackal to place a hand on his shoulder.

“Next time. Right now we’re going that way.”

“But maybe there’s a room we missed. There could be loot.”

“We’ll get it next time.”

“Maybe the way isn’t going to be open and I need to figure it out—”

“Tibs, I didn’t step on any other triggers after that one.” Jackal held his shoulders and lowered his voice. “It’s going to be okay. I’m sure Sto isn’t going to have—isn’t going to do that again.”

Tibs bit his lower lip. He’d be more confident about it if Sto would talk to him. Say something. He nodded and went back to the tunnel, and relatively quickly, they were where Sto had brought her out. Where Jackal had fought what they thought was a golem, only it was

They waited in silence.

Nothing broke that silence.

“Are we in the right place?” Carina asked.

“Yeah,” Jackal replied. “Tibs?”

Tibs stepped forward until the bend and looked around. Nothing waited to surprise them. He shook his head as he returned.

“Okay, is anyone else getting creeped out?” Mez asked,

“Tibs, what’s going on?” Carina asked.

How was he supposed to know? He nearly snapped. That wasn’t what she meant. He was the only one who could find out.

He let out a breath. “Sto.”

Silence.

“Sto,” he demanded. “Come on,” he said, getting angry. “Don’t be a child here. Talk to me.”

“I think you’re the one who should be saying something,” Ganny replied.

“What are you talking about?” He demanded and immediately regretted it, but instead of apologizing for the tone, he continued. “He’s the one who started it when he brought—”

Fuck, it was getting hard to breathe. Was Sto doing something to the air?

“But you’re the one who walked out, Tibs,” she replied, her tone gentle. Why couldn’t she be angry at him? He didn’t want to be the angry one. “You stayed away.”

“I’m here now,” snapped.

“Because it’s your run. You didn’t even—”

“I’m sorry, okay?” he yelled. “I’m sorry I just left. I’m sorry I didn’t come to talk. It hurt too much. Then I didn’t know how you’d react and I was worried you wouldn’t want to talk to me, and then I was angry again because I didn’t want this to be my fault, and...” he trailed off, the words getting lost in how he felt.

“I’m sorry I hurt you,” Sto said softly, and Tibs found he breathed easier. “I thought you would—”

Tibs tried to say something.

Sto sighed. “I don’t understand people very well.”

“I know. I should have given you leeway because you’re a dungeon, not a human. But seeing—seeing Pyan again, it hurt so much. People aren’t like your creatures, Sto. They don’t exist to just do one thing. We have lives outside of you. We have connections with the other people around us. And then they die and that connection is broken. It stays with us. The pain diminishes over time, but it never goes entirely away.” He thought of Mama and the occasions when he missed her so much. “Seeing her reminded me of what I lost. It reminds us of what we lost. She was a good friend. Someone I wish hadn’t died... but after Geoff, I guess I should have expected it.” He looked over his shoulder at Jackal. “That’s why I’ll never have a special someone. No one will ever feel that kind of pain because I died.”

“Are we good?” Mez asked in the following silence. “I mean, is the dungeon—fuck, this is so weird. I don’t think we’re supposed to have conversations with a dungeon, but only having one side of it really feels weird.”

“I don’t know how to go from here, Tibs,” Sto said. “If making one of the other Runners is going to hurt you each time...”

There were plenty of Runners Sto could use that Tibs wouldn’t care about, but what about Carina and Jackal? They had had more friends than he had among those who’d died. What about Mez, who’d lost entire teams to the dungeon? Or Khumdar? He had to have had friends who’d died too.

“He doesn’t know what to do if he can’t create more of the Runners,” Tibs told them.

“Can’t he just have more creatures?” Mez asked. “Those worked out fine until now.”

“I haven’t cracked how to improve them beyond what they are,” Sto replied. “And we’ve seen how little of a challenge they’re proving to be for you. Using people as creatures is... I don’t know how to explain it. Their bodies are made for this. They move easier. they’re...”

“Yes?” Tibs asked when the silence stretched.

“I don’t want to hurt you again Tibs.”

“Okay, just say it.”

“They’re more fun. I can talk when I use one. And it’s easier to move. To fight. I didn’t realize how lumbering the Brutes are; even the streamlined one I used to fight Jackal.

I really think I could win against him if I'm using a person." He paused. "But not if it means causing you pain."

Tibs chuckled. The idea Sto didn't want to inflict pain when he lived to test them to the point they'd die was so much the dungeon it could be funny.

He explained things to the others.

Jackal stepped forward. "Dun—Sto. First off, I don't care who you use, you aren't beating me. I am the best fighter you'll ever meet." He paused and looked at Tibs.

"He's waiting for whatever else you have to say."

"Second," Jackal sounded miffed at not getting a comeback. "I demand payment for the help I'm about to give you."

"Jackal," Carina snapped. "You don't make demands of the dungeon."

The fighter shrugged. "Already have. So?"

"I will... consider it," Sto replied. "Based on the kind of help he offers."

"He'll think about it," Tibs said.

Jackal looked annoyed. "Guess I've got to take what I get. You can have them wearing armor and helmets, so we don't see what they look like. You do have helmets that cover the whole head, right?"

"Face covering?" Sto asked. "No one's come in with those."

"But it should be easy enough to make changes," Ganny said. "And you don't need them to see through the helmet. That can be part of them, so you can have them see through that easily enough."

"They like the idea," Tibs said, and Jackal rubbed his hands together.

"Can I offer an alternative?" Carina asked. "Without payment required." She glared at the fighter.

Sto chuckled. "I'll listen and decide on payment afterward."

"You are going to enjoy pitting them against each other, aren't you?" Ganny said.

"Yes, but this would be more fun if they knew that."

Tibs sighed. "I am getting tired of being stuck in the middle of these."

"The price of being special," Ganny replied.

Tibs wished he had someone to glare at. He sighed again. "Whichever one of you has the better idea wins."

"Then it's easy," Jackal said. "I always win."

"Shall I blast you all the way to the entrance?" Carina asked, and Jackal winced.

"I believe you don't yet possess the level of control over your air that will let you navigate him around the bends between here and there."

She grinned at the cleric. "Jackal's stubborn enough. I think his head can survive a direct like through the rock."

"It's the rest of him that'll need the cleric when he lands outside," Mez said, chuckling.

"I hear a lot of boasting," Jackal commented, "and no actual idea."

Carina stepped forward. "Do you have to make them identical to who they were?"

She smiled as Jackal gave her a worried look.

“What does she mean?” Sto asked, and Tibs replayed.

“I’ve noticed that all your creatures are the same. All the Ratlings and Bunnyling look the same and wear the same thing. The only difference is they’ll use different weapons. It’s the same thing with the golems. You have three variations, but within that, they are identical, except got the one you fought Jackal with. Is that a choice, or a limitation you need to work with?”

“I... I don’t know. I just made them and they worked fine for what I needed them to do. Ganny? Can I change them?”

“I don’t know. I mean, everything here’s part of you, so I don’t see why you wouldn’t be able to, but it never occurred to me to suggest it. Like you said, it all worked fine until now.”

“Can’t you try it now?” Tibs offered.

“This is going to take all my concentration, I expect,” Sto replied. “I’ll get to it once you leave, but Sto, will every team react the way you did if they confront other Runners? Having people as creatures is kind of the thing on this floor. If I can’t do that at all, it’s going to diminish the whole thing.”

Tibs felt sick at the idea others would have to go through what he had, and he wanted to outright tell him not to do it, no matter the result. But Sto was a dungeon, not a person. He needed to test people, have them die. What would the guild do if they thought he wasn’t doing what he should? What did people do with sick animals?

Instead of saying it was okay, he told his team about it.

“What about my reward?” Jackal asked.

“He didn’t pick your idea,” Carina replied.

“He didn’t pick yours, so clearly mine was the better one.”

Sto and Ganny chuckled.

“We can deal with that afterward,” Tibs said. “Should Sto bring the people creatures with the other teams even if they’re dead Runners?”

“Why does he care?” Mez asked, then raised a hand as Tibs opened his mouth to protest. “I understand why what happened with us was a problem. He likes you and hurting you hurt him. But unless he likes someone on another time. Why does he care what they think?”

“It isn’t what they think that worries it, isn’t it?” Khumdar asked.

“Who else would it be...” Mez looked at Tibs. “Oh.”

And Tibs was stuck in the middle again. All of Sto’s protestations when Ganny claimed he was sweet on Tibs were starting to sound false. Tibs sighed as everyone looked at him.

“Alright,” He said. “I don’t like it, but,” he hurried to continue. “You have to do what a dungeon does. It’s what you are. And,” he added because if he only put this on the other teams, it wouldn’t be fair, “if you can’t use either of Jackal’s or Carina’s ideas, you can do it with us too.”

“Are you sure?” Sto asked. “I don’t want to hurt you like that again.”

“You test us. This is just another one. Who knows, maybe I can finally learn to stop caring that way.”

“Don’t say that Tibs,” Jackal ordered.

“Fuck off, Jackal. You don’t know how much caring about all this hurts.” He rubbed his face. “Sorry, you didn’t deserve this. I’m just...”

“You’re you,” Ganny said. “I’m pretty sure that’s part of what makes you so special.”

Tibs rolled his eyes. “So this is resolved. Can we go on with this run?”

“Before you do,” Sto said in a serious tone. “I have to render my verdict as to who gets the reward.”

“Stone Mountain Crevice,” Ganny warned, “Don’t you even think about it.”