

Stepping up-41

“Absolutely not!” the Runner exclaimed. He was one of the survivors of Sto’s ‘rampage’. Tibs only knew him by sight. The arrivals once the dungeon reopened had resented the Runners already there, and the few Tibs had gotten to know hadn’t survived. “I’m not putting my team at risk for a bunch of merchants.”

Tibs had gathered as many as the team leaders as he’d been able to, which had included all the original teams that had survived, one a few from the reopening, most of the most recent groups of conscripts, although they seemed mainly amused at the young people arguing, and a surprisingly large number of leaders from the noble teams, considering Tibs hadn’t invited them.

“I’m with Learbel,” Johanson said, leaning against the wall of the inn. Kroseph’s father had let him use it for the evening, and the servers were bringing tankards of ale and taking the empty ones away. “I’m not sure getting in the way of what’s happening is a good idea. I get you feel the need to help, Tibs, but why would the rest of us make an enemy of who’s going to end up running this town?”

“The guild runs the town,” Tibs pointed out, and she smirked. So they didn’t actively run anything; they still needed it to be a calm place for the Runners to live in. At least Tibs repeated that to himself anytime he got frustrated at Harry’s lack of action against Sebastian who, the guard leader snapped at Tibs anytime he brought it up, hadn’t broken any of his precious rules.

“Aren’t our lives hard enough already?” a girl asked. Tibs had noticed her entering, she forgot she was there, the way she faded into the background. He’d be impressed, but she was an archer, not a rogue. “For all we know, we’ll be dead by the next run. Why add to that?” She looked around as if she wanted someone to pick up her comment and continue in her place. Tibs wondered how she’d made it to team leader.

Instead of someone helping her, she got Rorgar, who snorted. “Yeah, why don’t you go back to your room and let the adults handle this?”

She glared at the fighter and Tibs saw a hint of the fierceness that had to have helped make her team leader. The conscripts snicker as a group and it didn’t diminish when Rorgar glared at them. The nobles watched the interaction silently, which did more to worry Tibs than the derision.

Finally, the fighter nodded to Tibs. “I’m in. Been around enough rackets to know I’m the one who’s going to end up paying for the merchant’s troubles.” He looked at the nobles. “The dungeon’s not making me rich enough I can afford not to care.”

One team, it was a start.

“My team’s in,” Don said, and Tibs stared at the sorcerer. “Loosen your belt,” he said with a roll of the eyes. “I was already working on a way to stop the harassment the merchants have been suffering. Your meeting just came before I started sending word out.”

Tibs didn’t comment, but the disbelief was not kept quiet by the others.

Two teams... probably. If Don tried to take over, this would be more problems than help.

“I,” one of the conscripts started, then stopped, looking the room over. She sat on the edge of a table and crossed her arms over her chest. “I could be convinced to help.”

Rogue. Tibs decided to be generous and not go with thief. She ran the dungeon, after all.

“I don’t have coins to pay you,” Tibs said.

“That’s not what I hear,” she replied. “Word is you’re tight with the people in charge of this place, for now anyway. I’m sure you can convince them our help with worth at least silver, and probably gold.”

“Don’t include me in your racket, Embun,” another of the conscript said, “this is about stopping a protection racket, not switching to a different one.”

“It wouldn’t be the merchant paying for this one,” she replied, “but the assholes who got us in this mess.”

“You got yourself in this mess,” another woman commented. “They just took advantage of the situation we were all in.”

“I’m not complaining,” a man said. “This is better than the mine I was stuck working. But I don’t see why I should be putting my neck on the line for some coin grabbers. Merchants aren’t here to make my life easier, just lighten my purse.”

“If I may.” A tall and thin man in a sorcerer’s robe made of a thin fabric that should be too flimsy for a run, but was woven through with essence. Tibs fought the urge to tell him to leave. He couldn’t see what a noble had to add to their meeting. It wasn’t like they cared about how much merchants charged. “I understand that what is happening may be somewhat beyond your comprehension. After all, you are criminals, no matter how you may be helping all of us by feeding the dungeon, this town and it, are an ecosystem. One that corruption, no matter how inevitable it may seem, will not help.”

“Oh, that’s rich,” the rogue, Embun, sneered. “You talking of how corruption doesn’t help when what you nobles do is corrupt everything you touch.”

“I beg to differ. I do not go around robbing law-abiding citizenry.” The sorcerer replied, barely masking the contempt. “Unlike you, I have chosen to come here, because I know that putting my life at risk is good for society and the potential benefits are—”

“Yeah, you’re a credit to all nobles out there,” Freya said before letting out a yawn. “I’m sure all your noble buddies pat you on the back any time you open your mouth, but they’re over there,” she pointed to the dozen others men and women on that side of the inn, “and we’re over here, so if you’re looking for us to be impressed, you’re going to have to say more than just how awesome you are.”

The man harrumphed. “What I am looking to establish is that no matter what you think, corruption has no place in the world.”

“That’s a load of shit,” Don said, stepping toward the noble. “Corruption is an element of the world. Not only that; but it’s considered one of the core elements. It’s my element, so if you want to insult it, you’re insulting me. Ask these people, I don’t take kindly to being insulted.”

The noble sighed. “Child, do not presume to—”

Tibs was between Don and the noble before he considered what he was doing, or the

noble's guard, who was by the wall, reacted.

"No, Don."

The sorcerer lowered his gaze on Tibs, and Tibs saw the essence around the hand almost at his face. There was anger there, suspicion. Don's lips formed a tight line, then he spun on his heels.

"You're right," he said through gritted teeth, "they aren't worth my time."

Tibs relaxed. One disaster avoided.

"Thank you, young Light Fingers, it is good to see that—"

Tibs faced the man and glared at him. "I didn't do it for you. Say what you've got to say to we can go on with protecting the town."

The man's narrowing eyes swirled with shades of gray, and Tibs wondered what element he had. He took a slow breath, let it out, and looked the room over. "I, my team, and my guards will help." Disbelief and laughter answered the statement, and the man bristled.

Tibs studied him. Was this some ploy? Did it matter? "That's enough," he told the room. "We need all the help we can get."

The door opened and everyone turned to glare at the late arrival.

"Way to make a girl feel welcome," Cross replied, closing the door. "You could have invited me, you know. I didn't have to find out about this when I started asking around about where everyone in charge of a team had vanished to. If your goal was to not be noticed doing this. You have successfully failed at it."

"What are you doing here?" one of the conscripts demanded. A muscular man in a sorcerer's robe, which was fine enough to be something he'd gotten from the dungeon. His element was fire, and it flickered over his hands.

"The first thing I'm doing here is getting something to drink." She looked at the bar. "Mister Fernan, can I trouble you for a tankard of cold ale? Extinguish those," she told the sorcerer, "before you burn down the inn. The way the fire's flickering, you're bound to have some of it drip to the floor and then where will you all be?"

"Cross, why are you here?" Tibs asked.

"Because, I'm paid by the merchants to watch over their stalls by the dungeon, and while those have been left alone, it's not going to last, so helping you falls under what I have to do. But," she continued before Tibs could thank her, "I'm hurt you didn't ask for my help."

"This is a town problem," he replied defensively.

"I'm in town, so I'm going to help." She accepted the tankard. "And with me to speak with the merchant for you, it's going to go a lot easier."

"Until someone pays you more, right?" Embun said. "It is what you sell-swords do."

"Girl, you don't want to get into this with me."

"Enough," Tibs said, moving to stop the rogue.

"Move, kid, before I move you."

"You touch him," a man said, "and I will rip that hand off." Quigly stood. "This is about protecting people. I won't have it turn into a sword measuring contest. I can't speak for my team, but I'm in. And before anyone else comments. Yes, we might be here against our will, but some of us were heading for the noose, others were doing hard labor. For those

of you who managed to not get caught for the worse stuff you've done, remember that a chance at some sort of life is better than the certainty of death or imprisonment. If you missed the speech when we got here. When we get good enough, we will be allowed some level of freedom. We need the dungeon for that, and the merchants are where we'll get our gear from. Like the noble said, this all works together. If we want the best chance, we need to make sure every part goes well."

The following silence was broken by discussion.

"Who's the hunk?" Cross asked Tibs. He looked at her questioningly and she pointed to Quigly. "You know if he's taken?"

"I don't. And if you're going to go make him your special guy, do it when I'm not there."

"A guy doesn't have to be special for me to be interested in him," she said, looking the fighter over appreciatively. "Just good enough for me to drag him—"

"I don't wanna know," Tibs said. What was it with everyone talking about who they wanted around him?

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"Isn't this just exchanging one set of problems for another?" the woman demanded, looking Tibs, Cross, and Darran over. She seemed to include the merchant in the 'set of problems'.

"I'd think that working with the people who benefit from our continues prosperity wouldn't be a problem," Darran said. "Not to mention that I can vouch for Tibs Light Fingers' intention. He has been a loyal customer since he started having the coins to buy from me."

"They're not better than the crooks who are swindling us," a man said, his voice rising as he spoke. "Right now they're happy to do it for free, but you see, the moment they've removed the competition, they're going to turn around and demand we pay them if we don't want trouble to fall on us. I came here to escape that kind of stuff. I thought the guild would protect us."

They were in the Long in the Tooth tavern, Old man Walrus's old tavern. He'd been arrested for his part in Bardik's attack on the dungeon. Tibs hadn't gotten the details, only that he'd been an integral link in the chain. His daughter took it over. The old tavern owner vouched that she'd had nothing to do with it, and Harry had questioned her intensively before allowing her to reopen it. She'd been among those the hardest hit by the sabotage, as she wasn't set up to make her own ale yet and couldn't afford to get it shipped in as regularly as she needed now.

"The adventurer's guild only looks out after their own." A man said; a tailor who, for now, hadn't suffered too badly. "If you believed otherwise, it's on you. My question is how adding more guards will help. From what I hear, the man behind all of this has a vault filled with platinum. He just has to pay these questionable folks enough and they'll do his work for him. He doesn't care which criminal he pays. No offense meant Mister Light Fingers to you or your compatriots."

"He's taking offense anyway," Cross said, "because he had to put a lot of work in

convincing the other Runners you lot were worth their help, considering most of what you do is fleece them.”

“Johanna,” a woman said. She had one of the other taverns, and she had avoided all problems by being among the first to pay Sebastian’s protection fee. “Do watch your language. You work for us, not them.”

“I work for whoever I decide I work for, that’s the nice thing about not being indentured to anyone. The only thing it costs me to change who I work for is money. Money you aren’t paying me, by the way, since you haven’t needed my service, so you can keep your opinions to yourself. We’re here to help you. If you don’t want it, then the door’s over there. Of course, you leave now and you won’t be able to report what we decide on in hopes of getting the protection fee reduced.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Tibs said as the protests erupted. Cross had known a lot more about what was going on than Tibs had expected. She was more in touch with what was going on in the town and among the merchants than Jackal, now that Sebastian gave orders for his people to prevent his friend from learning anything. “I don’t care if Sebastian Wells knows what we’re doing. He already knows I’ve been stopping some of the sabotages. The only way this town gets rid of him is if we all help each other against him. That means even those of you paying him right now.”

“I think your status as the dungeon’s savior’s gone to your head, kid.” The gristle old leather worker said. “Do you have any idea what groups like this one do to people get in their way?” He sighed. “I’m with Randolph. I came here hoping a small town like this wouldn’t have these kinds of problems. But they’re here and the only way to survive them is to pay them.”

“It helps that in the process they destroyed Alan’s leather, right?” Darran said. “You’re now the only leatherworker in the town. How long until they start charging you more? You know their kind. You know that greed will make them demand more and more of you until you barely have enough left to survive. Then what? It’s going to be too late to stand up to them.”

“I had nothing to do with what they did to him,” the old man said. “If he’d paid them, he would have been left alone. And you can speak Darran, everyone knows you have the Runners on your side, starting with that one. Thieves cling together.”

“And shouldn’t we merchant cling together as well?” Darran replied. “Are we now all driven by the acquisition of money? Is that not what binds us?” He looked around. “And now, this man, Sebastian Wells, comes into our town and demands we pay him for the simple privileged of doing our trades. I say that we stand with the Runners and oust him.”

Rolls of the eyes and jeers answered him, and as he opened his mouth, Tibs placed a hand on his arm to silence him.

“We’re going to protect you,” he said when the room was quiet. “I’m not here to pick which ones we’ll be protecting. We’re going to protect all of you. This is our town. I’m not going to let that man take it from me.” He turned to the leatherworker. “What’s he going to do that’s worse than what the dungeon does each time I go in? He’s already threatening the people I care about, the people in this town. I won’t stand for that. If you aren’t going to let

us help you, that's fine. That's something you can do, but I'm still going to do it, because this is my town, and I'm going to protect it and everyone in it."

"Kids," someone muttered. "They think they can do anything."

"Well," someone replied, "this one's already proven he's capable of doing something. I'm not going to stand in his way on this."

Slowly, the merchants began agreeing to Tibs's help. Not all of them did, and to his surprise, not all of those who refused paid protection to Sebastian. In the end, of the sixty or so merchants gathered here, forty-seven agreed.

Tibs smiled. The rest could simply complain until Sebastian had been kicked out. They didn't even have to thank him after the fact.