

Stepping up-39

Tibs watched the two thieves break into the store. They were okay at it, choosing a window between two shops, away from the light generated by the torches planted by the side of the street. He added asking Sto about the light stones he used in the entrance. If those could be made to work without the dungeon powering them, lighting the town at night would be easier.

Tibs expected those two were safe from discovery by anyone other than him. Darkness wasn't the impediment it had been only days before. It was more like dusk for him now, with the sun just about to set. Once they were inside, Tibs climbed down from the roof and silently went in after them.

The shop belonged to a tailor. It was new, catering to the nobles and Runners who didn't mind spending their coins on looking good. The window was small enough he couldn't imagine them taking anything out through it, which meant they were probably here to ruin the stock of fabric.

There were two other tailors in the growing town, both catering to the more common folks, but because they'd been the only ones, they also had business with the nobles. They lost that to this tailor and hadn't been happy about it. This would look like it had been ordered by one or both of them if Tibs let it happen.

The shop was two floors, with the ground one divided into three. The storefront with two wooden forms stood showing the work in progress to any who entered, a smaller room where the tailor would take a customer for measurements and fittings. The larger space, at the back, contained the fabrics the tailor used. They were stacked floor to ceiling, with only enough space between them to move. At the back of that were the stairs leading to the second floor where the tailor lived.

Tibs had explored the shop in the first days it opened; like he'd done for every shop in town. Part of his training and simply to see what shops carried. He heard cursing from the storage and smiled. The tailor was thin, the thieves not so much. What Tibs thought of as enough space to move might feel cramped to them.

He saw the back of a thief as he squeezed through the fabrics so tightly packed it didn't move as he pushed. Tibs stepped close and quickly dipped his fingers in the pocket and out, then stepped back with a small tin box in hand.

Away he opened it, but even in the dusk darkness he couldn't make out details, only wriggling. Sensing his essence, it was contained in the tin, so whatever these were, they were alive in a fashion. He closed the tin and pocketed it. Carina would know what they were.

He made his way back to the thief, who was deeper in, cursing and searching his pockets, as well as the tight space let him.

"What?" came a whispered hiss from the other thief, and Tibs climbed the fabric to ensure they didn't notice him against the faint light coming in from the window.

"I can't find the tin she gave me," his victim whispered back. Tibs tried to remember how deep of a sleeper the tailor was, but Tibs had been too quiet to be noticed in his

exploration.

“Did you at least take it before we left?”

“Yes, I know I did. I put it in my pocket, but it’s gone now. And no, there isn’t a hole in it.”

“Then it’s a good thing we each had one, isn’t it? I released the worms from mine, so we should be fine.”

“I thought we needed to release both sets.”

“They would have worked faster, I’m guessing, but it isn’t like she cares how fast they eat through all of this.”

“So we’re done?”

“Unless you feel the need to rest, yes. Back yourself to the window and let’s get out of here.”

Tibs let them go. He’d first intended to follow them back to where they were staying and getting them captured by the guards, but if what they’re set loose in here would eat through the fabrics, he needed to deal with that.

The mention of a ‘she’ caught Tibs by surprise. He’d expected Sebastian to be behind every disruption among the merchants, just like Jackal said. Had this been ordered by one of the two other tailors? They were both men, but one was married, and his wife wasn’t the nicest person. Anytime Tibs heard her speak was to complain about the town and the people living here. What Tibs had gathered she’d only agreed to come because her husband had promised her quick wealth as the town grew. Only it wasn’t happening fast enough for her.

Once alone, Tibs dropped to the floor and walked deeper in. He couldn’t make out anything, but the worms were small. Unless he made more light, he wouldn’t. He concentrated light essence in his hand, and the glow chased the dusk away. He could now make out the fabric’s colors. There was a lot. Enough, he suspected, the tailor could dress everyone Tibs had seen that first time in MountainSea’s marketplace. The first time he’d seen so many colors.

He made it to the stairs, noticing nothing wriggling, so he turned around. He stopped where he thought the thief had stood before returning to Tibs’s victim and sensed around him.

The essence in the tin in his pocket registered first, being so close to him, then the tailor, upstairs, stretched out, being so bright in comparison. He purposely dimmed it, then that in the tin. Spread around what he was searching for would be much fainter.

When he felt it around him, he also felt it under him and was surprised at how many living things lived in the ground. He shortened his range until he only felt the essence close to him, on top of the fabrics, or in the folds.

He hadn’t attempted this since destroying the Whipper in the dungeon and being reprimanded by Sto. He didn’t want to risk the tailor’s life if he made a mistake.

He started by isolating one flicker of essence among the fabrics. Other than how faint it was, it was the same as the essence in his reserve, or what coursed through everyone, even the dogs and cats and rats of the town. If it breathed and moved, it seemed to have it. He absorbed it and if it was like the Whipper, would be dead. It didn’t seem to regain it.

Dead was dead, after all.

He found the next one and did it again. He didn't feel the difference to his reserve, but it too flickered out. He couldn't do this one at a time; it would take all night, and if they lived and ate, they reproduced. He couldn't risk them doing that faster than he could kill them.

He extended his senses again until he felt them all, and that included what was under the ground. He tried to not absorb their essence since they were probably only going about whatever business small creatures in the ground attend to, but as the essence of the worms flickered into him, so did that of the underground creatures.

He felt bad about it, as he retraced his steps to the window. They'd been innocent in this, but better whatever lived under the ground than him accidentally killing someone trying this. He could absorb one individual's essence or that of everything within the range he sensed.

He would have to practice until he could target specific groups within his range.

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"Abyss!" Mez exclaimed, knocking his chair over as he stood and stepped away from the table. "Why did you bring this here? We're eating."

Tibs had just opened the tin to show the content to Carina.

His exclamation barely caused a handful of heads to lift from their meals.

"I need to know what they are," Tibs replied, now noticing the worms were dead.

"Do that in our room, not here." Mez sat again, away from Tibs.

"I don't know what they are," Carina said, poking into them. "I've never seen worms like these." In the full light, they were tiny and light gray.

Jackal motioned for the tin and studied the contents. "Thread Eaters," he said. "They breed among fabric is they aren't stored carefully. Where did you find them?"

"In the pocket of a pair of thieves breaking into tailor Murgandi's shop."

Jackal nodded. "A tin full of those would do it. A few months and his fabrics would be ruined, and they're nearly impossible to get rid of once an infestation starts. They can burrow into the ground and wait there until more fabric is brought. I've heard of whole towns' clothing artisans being decimated by these."

"And thieves were going to unleash that here?" Carina exclaimed.

"They did it at some woman's orders," Tibs said. "I thought it would be Sebastian who did something like this."

"It probably still is," Jackal said. "My father works like the guild leader or Knuckles. He has people working for him who carry out his orders. This woman will be one of his underlings. She probably runs a whole crew of thieves. She might be the one responsible for all the thefts that aren't caused by you." He grinned.

"There's the other roof runner," Tibs said. "I don't think they work for anyone but themselves."

"Have they taken anything now that you have their monocle?" Mez asked.

"Nothing I've heard about, but I was dying of hunger for a while and now I'm focusing on stopping the town's disruption. I'm not sure the nobles can bring in more trouble right

now, so I'll get to stopping them once this is over."

"This isn't your responsibility, Tibs," Mez said. "Let the guards deal with it. Tell their leader."

"The guards are part of the problem," Jackal said. "Knuckles's so sure they can't lie to him he expects them to not even try. I don't know if he needs to will his ability to know lies like I do my stone body, but I've skirted the truth with him enough I know some of the guards can do it too."

"And that makes it our responsibility?" Mez asked, looking at them. The cleric was the only one absent. Khumdar spent most of his time on his own. Even meals weren't something he did with him often.

"Who else is going to do something?" Carina asked.

"We're Runners," Mez countered. "And there's only five of us. Four these days, with Khumdar wandering about. What can we do?"

"Whatever we can," Tibs said.

"This isn't our responsibility," Mez repeated.

"I'm not a child," Tibs countered, and the archer's face turned red before looking away.

"That's got nothing to do with it," Mez replied. "We have to focus on what we can do. And that's the runs, train, get more powerful so we can reach Epsilon and leave this place."

"I think, Mez," Jackal said, "you missed the point where Tibs decided he wasn't leaving."

Tibs's head snapped to the fighter in surprise. "I didn't—"

The raised eyebrow stopped him. "Your town, Tibs. Your people. You've been calling it that for months now. If you weren't planning on staying, or at least making it your base of operation once you're free to leave is as you want, I don't think you'd be fighting this hard for it, would you?"

Tibs didn't have a protest for the fighter. He hadn't thought about staying. He'd only focused on surviving. Just like making this team his own family without entirely realizing it, he'd made the town his family too.

He was okay with that.

"It's a good place to stay," Carina said. "We get to be here to help shape what it becomes. Not a lot of people get to say that, to do that."

Mez looked at them. "This is our cell. It's bigger than the room we were held in, but it's no different."

"I'm not about to die," Jackal said. "That's different enough for me."

"You could die anytime you go in the dungeon, Jackal," Mez replied, a hint of exasperation in his voice.

"Could is better than will," the fighter replied. "Anytime I walked into a pit, I could die. I still did it because I love the fight. I never had the kind of fights the dungeon's given me before, and I love it. The penalty for being caught killing someone back where I lived before was to be tied to a post and beaten by passersby until there was no life left in me." He took a long swallow from his tankard. "I'll take dying in the dungeon over that anytime."

The sound that came out of the archer's mouth was pain and anger, and something else Tibs couldn't place. When it ended, he got up and left. Tibs looked at Carina and Jackal. The fighter shrugged; he didn't know what that was about any more than Tibs did.

Carina looked at the leaving archer. "That sounded a lot more like what his girl says than what Mez would."

"How do you know what she says?" Jackal asked. "I can only understand his side of the conversation."

Carina smiled. "I'm from a big city. That means a lot of people and a lot of different languages. I had to learn a few of them as part of my expected duties. Turns out Mez is from a place where they speak Karkaran, and it's one of the languages I had to learn."

"You never said before that you knew it."

She shrugged. "I didn't know until he introduced her. Remember, because of the platform's magic, we all understand each other in our own language. She didn't get the benefit of that. And as part of going against my family's wishes, I learned the wisdom of not revealing everything I know."

"So she's turning him against the town?" Tibs asked.

Carina took her time answering. "She isn't doing that. She has nothing against Kraggle Rock, except that it's not her home, Mez's home. He's betrothed to her, so she expects him to return there with her. It sounds like her family tried to get the guild to release him."

"And he wants to go with her." Tibs looked at the door his friends had left by. He knew that he'd prefer being with his special girl, instead of the team, but Jackal made it work. He'd thought Mez would do too.

"It's more complicated than that," she said. "I think it's related to that comment you made about not being a child. I haven't picked up on the details, but he had a responsibility to her as part of being betrothed, and it conflicts with him being a Runner."

"So we fix that and it's going to be okay again."

She smiled at him. "Tibs, I don't think this is the kind of problem *we* can fix. Mez is going to have to be the one to figure out how to make it work; if that's what he wants to do."

Tibs didn't like it. The more Mez was with his special girl, the more he was acting like one of the nobles in the town, instead of what he'd said the nobles of his home were like.

"He'll work it out, Tibs," Jackal said. "Want it or not, he's a Runner, and that means he's got to stay here."

"You're a bad liar," Tibs replied, and Jackal grinned.

"I lack Khumdar's practice at it."

One problem at a time, Tibs reminded himself. He'd figure out what to do about Mez and his girl after he had the situation with the merchant under control. Maybe once the town was at peace again, he could convince her this place was a good place to live in, even if it wasn't the home she came from.

He sighed.

One problem at a time.

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He felt the eyes on him as soon as the fighter started to trail Tibs.

He'd been walking through Merchant's Row, listening to the complaints, the arguments. He'd stopped three more sabotage attempts since the thieves with the worms, but it didn't seem to make much of an impact.

Just now, a man and woman dressed in the guard's green and black were hassling the leatherworker. He couldn't hear the words, but Tibs had seen this happen often enough on his Street, although not by guards. They were demanding payment for the protection they were forcing on the merchant.

He noted their faces and manners. He'd try to find them later and make them pay for this, somehow.

The fighter stepped faster, moving closer, and Tibs decided he had enough. He stopped and spun, glaring at the tall, muscular man who stopped in one step. Tibs was impressed. He'd seen Runners not have these kinds of reflexes after surviving what Sto threw at them.

Tibs didn't know the man, but he recognized the body language from the most recent conscripts. Hard, ready for a fight, not willing to take any perceived slights. His body was darker, covered by the large number of secrets he kept.

"Well?" Tibs demanded. The people walking the street gave them space, and at least one guard watched them, ready to intervene. Tibs made note of him, too. If he could identify the real guards from those working for Sebastian, it would make this easier, he was sure of it.

"We need to talk." The man's voice was deep, growling. Tibs decided that if Sto got Big Brute to talk, it would sound like this man.

"Then talk."

"Not here." The man didn't bother looking around. His eyes were a normal pale brown with flecks of gold. Not in public meant trouble.

Tibs didn't have the time for this. "You want a dark alley or a tavern?"

The man narrowed his eyes; as if Tibs reaction didn't match his expectations. He'd lost count of the people accosting him for the first time who had this kind of reaction.

"A tavern," the man said.

So this wasn't about trying to stab him.

The man nodded to the one between the cookware shop and cobbler. Tibs only moved once the man did. Staying out of easy reach.

The tavern was busy. People pausing between their shopping, shop workers needing a respite.

The man pointed to an empty table at the back before heading to the bar. Tibs scanned the room for anyone waiting, but the only other one Tibs thought was a Runner was alone at a table on the other side of the room, mournfully looking in his tankard.

Tibs sat, back against the wall, and the man returned with two tankards and placed one before Tibs as he sat. Tibs eyes it, felt the essences in the liquid. There was corruption, which he'd found out from looking at Darran's offering of that time was part of all poisons,

but it was also in ales, and the quantity in this was more consistent with ale than poisons, so he took a swallow.

“I’m told you’re the one to talk with about surviving the dungeon.”

Tibs raised an eyebrow as he placed the tankard down. “We can’t talk about the dungeon outside of it.”

The man leaned forward. “Do I look like I give a fuck what the people running this place want? I’d be gone if a bunch hadn’t tried it before I came up with a plan and were dumped in the dungeon with us watching.” He took a long swallow. “So now I’m going to survive this thing until I can make them pay for dragging me here. And you’re going to tell me how.”

Tibs chuckled. “You think you can force me?”

The man opened his mouth, then closed it. “You can’t be working with them. I heard that you saved the dungeon, but I’m not sure I believe that. What I confirmed is that you got dragged here too with the first group. There’s no way you want to stay here any more than I do.”

“You’re wrong. This is my town.”

“You don’t run it, there’s some guy setting himself up to do that.”

“Are you going to work for him?” Tibs tried to keep the question casual, but the man’s expression turned guarded.

“What’s it to you?”

“This is my town,” he repeated. “The guild built it. They brought me here, but I didn’t have a place before. I’m not going to let Sebastian ruin it. If you plan on working for him, I’d rather you die in the dungeon.”

“How old are you?” the man asked, disbelief seeping into his tone.

“Old enough to have survived my Street and now be someone you’re seeking for help surviving the dungeon.”

“He’s going to crush you, you know.”

Tibs shrugged. “He’s already tried. I’m still here.” Lies and exaggerations were his friends in this situation. Not that he was afraid of Sebastian. By now Tibs was confident the man had worked out he was behind the failed attempts behind some of the sabotage, so the attacks would come.

The fighter before him studied him while he finished his tankard, then motioned to a server for another one.

“How did you do it? Survive the dungeon those early days?”

Tibs shook his head. “Are you, or are you not, planning on working for Sebastian. I’m not wasting my time with someone I’m going to have to get rid of later.”

The tankard arrived, and the man handed the copper over, looking at it the way Tibs used to look at letting go of his last sliver of a coin. The man was paying dearly for this conversation unless he had another run lined up soon.

“I’m not,” he finally said, and Tibs was a flicker of something there, a parting among the shadows covering the man and then gone. Was that a truth, or something else? “I like my autonomy. I decide what I do, not someone else.”

Tibs decided to believe him. "Find a team, protect them, have them protect you."

The man snorted his ale. "That's not how the world works, kid."

"This isn't the world, it's the dungeon. If you want to survive it, you need a team, people you trust to keep you safe. You need a rogue to tell you where to step. Your job as a fighter will be to keep them safe in fights until they can hold their own, too. Your sorcerer and archer will pick off what monsters they can so there's less for the two of you to deal with."

"What about the fifth member of the team?"

"Clerics will start coming at some point. I figure you'll get to pick one then if you're still alive."

"You're crazy, kid. I let a thief at my back, and I'm going to get a sword in it, well knife here, since they don't trust them with anything bigger. Or it's edge across my throat."

"You asked how I'm still alive. That's how. Ask any team from back then, or from before you, and they'll tell you the same thing. Without a team you trust, you're dead." Tibs snorted. "Even Don's managed to build himself one, and he's enough of an asshole I can't figure out why anyone would want to protect him."

"Who's that?"

"A sorcerer with corruption as his element. Thinks he's better than everyone, even nobles. Was probably one before ending up here."

"And you say he has a team he can control even though everyone hates him?" The man had a thoughtful expression.

Tibs shook his head. "Don't even think about it. Don's going to have you begging to stop."

"Kid, I don't beg."

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The man fell onto the free chair next to Tibs, shattering it and curling in pain. Tibs glanced at him and then up to the glowering Don, looking back. Next to him, Jackal leaned back to look at the broken chair and hook his head.

"Here's your man back, Light Fingers," Don snarled, turning the nickname into a curse. "Did you really think he could get rid of me for you? I didn't even have to let one of the other finish him."

Tibs looked at the man on the floor. "I told you not to think about it." To Don, he said. "I didn't send him. I told him you were good enough to keep your team in check, and he must have decided that was the kind of team he wanted for himself." He grinned as Don glared back at him.

"You're lying. I know you're jealous of my team and this was your attempt at breaking us apart."

"Come on Don," Jackal said, getting the sorcerer's attention while Kroseph approached behind Don. "Tibs doesn't care about you or your team. He's got me. Whatever else could he want?"

The sorcerer snorted. "You think you compare to me? I seem to recall having you on your knees crying."

“Pain’ll do that to me,” Jackal replied. “Meet me in the training field if you ever want to have another go at it.”

“You aren’t worth my time. Neither of you is.” Don spun and screamed in fright as he nearly stepped into an angry Kroseph.

“The chair, Don,” the server said through clenched teeth. “You’re paying for it.” He pointed to the bar where his father was waiting. And with a defeated look Don headed there, Kroseph at his back.

Tibs looked at the man on the floor, then crouched next to him. Don had done a number on him, the corruption was deep in his body. He could leave him like that; the man had brought this on himself. If he could get himself to the dungeon at his next run, the clerics should be able to take care of it. Don might even get in trouble over this.

No. This was Don defending himself, and he hadn’t killed the man. Harry wouldn’t be happy, but Don hadn’t broken a rule. This man might be the one to end up in a cell for it.

Tibs took the man by the shoulder, absorbing the essence in the process. It fought him, Don’s will was still on it. But Tibs had more of whatever meant he could do this and he pulled it into him and then the gem hidden in his bracer. He left some, not wanting to give himself away.

“It’ll pass,” Tibs said as he sat the man in a chair. “Once he’s no longer focusing on you, it goes away quickly.”

Jackal chuckled. “I’m happy he wasn’t this strong when I pissed him off. What’s your name?”

“What’d you care?” the man snarled back.

Jackal took Tibs’s tankard and placed it before the man. “I’m Jackal, you’ve ready met Tibs. And as we’re all on Don’s bad side, I think it might be good we get to know each other.”

The man glared at the sorcerer’s back, who was in a losing haggling battle with Kroseph’s father. “Does he have a good side?”

Jackal chuckled. “Not that anyone in this town knows.”

The man looked at the tankard. “I’m Quigly. Quigly Marshall.” He drained it and when Kroseph look in their direction as Don handed a silver to his father, Tibs motioned for more ale.

“And tell me, Quigly Marshall, what did you do to get yourself sent here?”

The man smiled through the visible pain and attempted to straighten. “I killed a full regiment of King Barnacle the Just.”