

## Stepping up-18

“We’re the third to last team,” Tibs said before Carina could direct him to read their position off the board.

“Where you belong,” Don sneered, leaving. Like previous times, he was the first Runner team to go in the dungeon. Before him were the nobles. The corruption sorcerer might be the reason other Runner teams finally gave coins to the guild for a higher position on the board, just to shut him up.

“That gives us more time to train,” Jackal said, ignoring the sorcerer. “Pyan’s not on the board.”

Tibs bit his lower lip, looking it over again. “DO you think she joined another team?” He looked at Mez, who shrugged, then Carina.

“I haven’t spoken with Tandy. She’s been avoiding me.” She glanced at Mez. “I’m guessing she associates painful memories with us.”

Mez sighed. “I—”

“Explained things,” Carina replied, “I know. Unfortunately, words don’t do much for a broken heart.”

Pain crossed Mez’s face. Then the expression hardened, but he remained silent.

“Alright,” Jackal said. “Let’s go check on Pyan, if nothing else, dragging her to the training field and letting her punch me for a while will make her feel better.”

“Could we make that offer to Tandy?” Khumdar asked.

“I don’t think punching me is going to help her,” Jackal replied.

“I meant Mez.”

“Tandy uses a knife,” Tibs pointed out.

“That would be cathartic,” Carina said, smiling at Mez.

“I don’t know that word,” Tibs said, frowning. It didn’t even sound like any of the ones he knew.

“It means that someone improves through a painful experience,” Khumdar said.

“But, wouldn’t Mez be the one feeling the pain?” Tibs asked. “How will Tandy improve that way?”

“The word doesn’t state who needs to feel the pain for one to improve,” the cleric said.

“Or,” Carina said, eyeing the archer. “You know, maybe Mez is the one who needs to improve?”

“That’s enough,” Jackal said as Mez’s expression darkened. “Mez has duties, and he’s holding to them. I might think he’s doing a shitty job, but I’m going to respect his decision.”

“That not as helpful as you think,” Mez said through gritted teeth.

Jackal smiled. “It’s exactly as helpful as I want it to be.”

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Smoke rising in the air was a common thing, but not such a thick column of it. Tibs ran toward it. Fire wasn’t a good thing. Fire was hungry and most buildings in the town were

made of wood.

Tibs pushed his way through the crowd, watching it, and pocketed a handful of copper in the process. Guards were keeping people from stepping closer as a shop burned, the fire getting close to the ones on either side. Tibs didn't know which one it was, only relieved it wasn't Darran's shop.

"Where's the water brigade?" a man asked, nearly in tears.

"They're coming," the guard replied, tone hard.

"I heard the wagon's broken," someone else said, and the man, the shop owner, Tibs suspected, nearly crumbled.

"Do something," the man demanded of the guard.

"Not my job," he replied.

Tibs looked around. Why wasn't anyone doing anything? Even if the brigade was on its way, the fire would spread too much. Tibs slipped by the guard.

"Hey, you can't go there." The man tried to grab him, but Tibs avoided the hand. Stepping closer. There was too much fire for him to take hold of it, not to say it would reveal to the guild he controlled more than one element, but if he thought he was strong enough, he'd do it anyway.

He took his knife out. All he had were two attacks, but they were water. So maybe they could do something? His water fling wouldn't help, but the water cross could charge and get stronger, so maybe?

He started tracing the 'X', and the guard grabbed him, pulling him away. With a curse, Tibs coated his arm with water, causing the grip to slip.

"Get back with the others," the guard ordered.

Tibs looked behind the man. "Someone keep him away from me. I'm going to try to put the fire out!"

The guard reached for Tibs again, for a Runner grabbed the man. She nodded at Tibs.

"Go, I'm going to keep him from you."

Tibs turned his back on them. Took a step toward the fire and began tracing the 'X' again, the amulet in one hand and pulling essence to him at the same time. His attack had shattered the sphere, but that was crystal, and the fire was already doing enough damage by itself. Hopefully, he'd do more damage to it, rather than the building.

He stabbed the center and essence pulled through him and into the attack. He forced himself to maintain the connection, instead of breaking it early as Alistair had him practice. Less water wouldn't be a good thing here.

When it flew out of his control and at the burning building, Tibs dropped to a knee, panting. He forced himself to watch as the attack splashed through the fire. Unlike with the sphere, the 'X' broke apart, maybe due to the heat, or maybe it was responding to what Tibs wanted?

The curtain of water fell on the water and cheers rose behind as the fire died, then turned to horror as steam rose and it came back to life. Tibs cursed and pulled water back into his reserve and amulet. He needed to do it again.

"Leon, make me an Air sphere," Someone said, and Tibs looked. A dozen steps away,

Don pulled another sorcerer with him past the guard who was trying to keep them back. Two fighters were interposing themselves.

“But, Don, air feed fire and—”

“Do what I tell you,” Don snapped.

Tibs ground his teeth. What was Don up to? He couldn’t want to help destroy the building. As self-centered as the sorcerer was, the town was vital to the Runners, and the shops were vital to the town.

“Bigger,” Don ordered as a ball of air formed between the two men. “Leon, I swear, if you don’t try harder, I’m going to feed you to the dungeon.”

Tibs saw sweat form on the air sorcerer’s forehead as he focused. He didn’t know the man, and by the level of concentration he needed to just form a larger ball of air, he might be someone who only recently graduated to Upsilon.

It would be just like Don to grab someone without the experience to know better than to join his team.

“I can’t make it bigger,” the sorcerer finally said, looking as if he was about to drop. All his attention would be needed to keep control of the air now, which was near twice their height.

“Fine, I’ll work with this,” Don said, annoyed. He placed a hand before the ball and did something. Tibs ‘saw’ the man’s essence flow into the ball, and he smelled the effect, a fetid smell very much like the one of the corruption pool, if not as intense.

Tibs couldn’t work out what Don was up to do, and because of that, he let him proceed.

“Okay,” Don said to the other man. “When I say so, we throw it into the fire.”

“Don,” the man protested.

“Don’t argue, Leon.”

Resigned, the man nodded.

“Now!”

They both motioned the ball into the fire, and Tibs felt the ball explode on contact with the rebuilding fire. Somehow, as the corrupted air spread, the fires turned sickly yellow and diminished to the point where only a few flames were left.

Don saw Tibs looking in his direction and smirked. The air sorcerer looked as baffled as Tibs felt. The cheer dropped and Don’s triumphant expression darkened as he looked at the building, and the fire growing again.

“Leon, I swear if—”

“Okay,” a woman said, stepping forward and slapping her hands together. “This I can deal with.” The guards were too busy watching to stop her.

She spread her arms, let out a breath, then inhaled. As he did so, what was left of the fire flew away from the building and into her. Tibs saw the fire break into essence at the last moment, and then he was only the three of them and a smoking building.

“Wo!” she exclaimed. “That’s rush!” She chuckled. Tibs watched as her red-tinted essence became denser, brighter, before settling.

“You’re Rho?” Tibs asked. Trying to compare the essence in her with what he’d seen

in others, but the varying colors made it difficult.

“Just graduated,” she replied. “How did you know?”

Tibs was saved from having to make something up by a guard stepping forward. “What did you do?” she demanded angrily.

“They saved my store,” the shop owner said, awe in his voice.

“They probably destroyed some of your stuff with this stunt,” she replied.

“Some, probably,” the owner said, saddened, but the fire would have destroyed everything and spread to the other buildings.

“It’s the water brigade’s job to deal with fire, not them.”

“And where are they?” the shop owner demanded. “I don’t see them. Would you have let my shop burn while we waited?”

“There are rules,” she replied.

Don snorted. “Rules are for those who can’t act.”

Tibs raised an eyebrow at the sorcerer.

“Don’t look at me that way. You’re a rogue, you break rules all the time.”

Tibs shrugged and did his best not to smile.

“And what if they’re made things worse?” the guard demanded.

“At least they would be able to say they attempted something,” Tirania said, stepping out of the crowd. “Unlike you.” She looked at Tibs and smile. “Why isn’t it a surprise that you’re part of this Tibs?”

Tibs shrugged. “I couldn’t let the fire continue.”

“Not that you stopped it,” Don said.

“Neither did you,” Tibs snapped.

“Enough,” Tirania said. “I’m not interested in who won. This wasn’t a contest. The three of you saved the building, along with those around it. You should be proud of that.”

“I am,” Don hurried to say, then looked as pious as Tibs had ever seen the man. He wondered how painful that was.

“Thank you,” the woman who’d eaten the rest of the fire said.

Tirania nodded, then turned to the crowd. “Alright, go back to your business. Harry will make sure this is properly investigated.”

The crowd dispersed.

Tibs headed for his room, but stopped as Tirania called to him. “That was indeed impressive,” she said once he was next to her. “Enough that I think it’s time for you to take your test.”

Tibs opened his mouth to protest, but her expression silenced him. She knew he’d been purposely avoiding it, he realized. And she’d let him get away with it until now, probably because she couldn’t watch him practice and Alistair wouldn’t tell her how well he was doing.

But now she knew, and she wasn’t giving him a choice.

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Rho.

Tibs sighed, looking out the window of his room. He was officially Rho. Now the entire team was, except for Jackal, who was Lambda. He wouldn't be able to argue that with him being Upsilon, if one of the others graduated to Lambda they were still technically not higher than one teammate above the dungeon.

He didn't mind that word so much when he was the one using it.

But now, there was no technicality for him to use.

He was about to turn away and join the others who were celebrating his graduation, and he caught motion on a roof. Another rogue training, he thought, then watched closer. There was a confidence in the motion he hadn't seen among the roof traveling rogue in the town.

He'd decided he was the only one who had been roof walking before reaching the dungeon, so every other rogue was only now learning, and mostly stumbling, but this one knew what they were doing.

Harry's thief.

He reached up and grabbed the window frame, pulling himself out. He needed to go after them, get them to stop. He reached for the next handhold—Tibs knew this wall—and pulled again when his hand cramped and he lost his grip.

With a yelp he fell back, his weight pulling his other hand out of the crack. Without Carina in the street to cushion his fall, or hay to land into, this was going to hurt.

His breath left in a huff as his back hit the wall. He opened an eye and looked at the upside-down building on the other side of the street. He looked at his feet, and Jackal holding his ankle.

"You know, you have to be the only person I know who considers falling out of a window a proper way to celebrate."

Tibs showed him his cramped hand.

"That doesn't explain why you were fleeing your celebration."

"I thought I'd seen the thief Harry wants me to stop."

Jackal sighed as he pulled Tibs up and back in the room. "It isn't your job to run Knuckle's errand for him. He had guards to catch thieves."

Tibs shrugged. "They aren't good enough, and that thief is stealing from the nobles, stuff they miss."

"And nobles cause trouble when they get pissed," Jackal finished. "It's still not your job."

"It's my town," Tibs said. "I'm not going to let someone ruin things for the rest of us."

"You're still injured, Tibs," Carina said. "Getting yourself killed trying to save the town isn't going to help anyone."

"Especially not me," Jackal said. "I need you around to stop me from doing stupid stuff."

"I haven't exactly managed that," Tibs pointed out.

Jackal thought about it. "Stupider stuff."

"Like keeping him alive," Mez said.

“Exactly,” Jackal said. “If you die, Tibs. I’m the next one to go. You don’t want that, do you?”

Tibs eyed the fighter. “I’m going to be dead, I don’t think I’m going to be in a position to care.”

“You might return as a ghost and haunt Jackal,” Khumdar said.

“Ghosts aren’t real,” Carina said.

“Are they not?” Khumdar replied, sounding surprised, and Carina frowned. She opened her mouth, then closed it, brows furrowing. The cleric smiled.

“Are you making that up?” Tibs asked, trying to tell if Khumdar was lying.

The man gave Tibs an innocent smile. “Why would I do that?” Unlike Jackal, Khumdar knew the right level to reach, and Tibs couldn’t tell, but he had one clue this could be a ruse.

He pointed to Carina. “To annoy her?”

Khumdar’s smile broadened. “It would certainly be good, if both things were true, would it not?”

Tibs rolled his eyes and grabbed his tankard and took a long drink, then coughed. He’d forgotten that for the celebration Jackal had gotten them potent drinks instead of the usual ale.

“To Tibs,” Jackal said. “Newest member of the Rho graduation.”

Tibs raised his tankard and took a more tentative sip. One step closer to getting his team broken up.

He needed to speak with Sto.