

Stepping up-35

Tibs walked as confidently as he could considering his legs trembled, his vision went in and out and the world threatened to spin out of control. His stomach had stopped bothering a week ago, which Carina said wasn't a good sign. He'd spent the last week in bed, only standing to use the chamberpot, and he'd needed help doing that for the last few days.

He needed to seem healthy, otherwise the cleric would heal him, and they didn't know if that would undo his hunger.

"Just up the steps," Carina whispered, and Tibs looked up. He nearly lost his balance, only the hand at his back keeping him upright.

"This isn't going to work," Mez said, looking at the guards and cleric by the entrance. "She's going to know something's off. She had to go through this, right? She knows the signs."

"Clerics take years to train themselves to the point they will try for their audience." Khumdar said. "I doubt she will recognize this as an attempt to have an audience, or that it would even be possible for someone who isn't at the Purity Dungeon to do this."

Carina sighed. "He's right. Clerics tend to be narrow-minded in their views of who can and can't become one of them."

Tibs did his best to keep up with his friend as they walked up the steps, but again, only the hand at his back kept him standing.

"We still need to be careful," Jackal said. "One healing touch from her and this might be for nothing."

"Please don't let this be for nothing," Tibs whispered. "I don't want to have to do this again."

"One step in front of the other," Khumdar said. "And everything will go according to the plan."

"Please don't say that," Tibs replied, barely able to manage a groan. "It never goes according to the plan."

"That is true, but you have the dungeon on your side. I am certain this will go well."

"Does he need healing?" a woman asked and Tibs's head snapped up, and he had to pull on earth to remain standing. They'd reached the top already?

"He's fine," Jackal said in a surprisingly casual tone. "He spent the night running the roofs and forgot we had a run this morning."

She stepped forward. "I can remove the effect of lack of sleep."

Tibs stepped back as she reached for him and nearly feel as his foot slip off the edge of the step. He had a flash of slipping off the edge of the mountain top, the dread of hitting the ledge, then he was held in place by Khumdar, the guards laughing.

"Let them in," the massive warrior said, "it's their decision if they want to feed their thief to the dungeon."

"He's a rogue," Jackal replied, tone harsh.

The guard scoffed. "Sure, like polishing a title changes what he is."

“Just like putting you in leathers makes anything more than a thug, Murgen.”

“Watch your mouth, Jack.” Tibs caught motion, but before he could come to his friend’s help, the guard was flying back against the rock wall.

“You should watch where you step, Murg,” Jackal replied. “You need to stop throwing yourself against my fist; it isn’t healthy. Lady Cleric,” he continued, “while I am certain my friend would appreciate the assistance, he is due for a lesson. The run comes first, his pleasure seconds.”

Tibs snorted. “Says the fighter who jumps Kroseph any—” Carina put a hand over his mouth.

“We’ll make sure he survives,” Jackal said, “but a few close calls will to him good.”

“I am expected to heal anyone who goes in the dungeon,” she said.

“We’ll all vouch that you healed him,” Jackal said. “Isn’t that right, Murg? Allan?”

“Whatever you say,” the other guard said. Tibs couldn’t make out what Murgen grumbled.

“See, you as far as anyone who matters knows, you have healed him.”

She made a displeased sound, then sighed. “If asked, I’ll say he needed to earn this one due to taking what we clerics do for granted.”

“Whatever tale you want to sing, I’ll be happy to repeat.” Jackal stepped into the dungeon and Tibs was urged forward.

When they stopped again, Tibs looked around, trying to understand why. They were in a hall lit by glowing stones. He stared at them; they were pretty.

“Tibs?” Carina stopped him from reaching for one.

“I want one,” he said.

“I’m sure the dungeon will give you one, if you ask. Has he said how he’s going to arrange you audience?”

“No, he’s staying quiet. I might not have noticed we’re here.” Tibs took a deep breath. “Sto!”

“Does yelling make a difference?” Mez asked. “Doesn’t it know everything that happens inside, well, its body?” He sighed. “I liked this a lot more before I knew it was a person. This is feeling really weird.”

“You should imagine how it felt the first time I had people walking inside me,” Sto said.

“Hey, you’re here.”

“Are you okay?” Sto asked. “Don’t they have a cleric to heal you?”

“You weren’t watching me enter?” Tibs asked, surprisingly hurt.

“Okay, there is definitely something wrong with you. Get one of them tell me what’s wrong.”

“I can tell you,” Tibs said.

“I think the dungeon’s here,” Jackal said.

“Of course he is,” Tibs replied. “He’s all around us. By the way, where did you learn to lie so well? You are horrible at lying.”

“Did you give him ale instead of water?” Carina demanded. “I went to the expense of getting him cleaned water, and you went and got him drunk?”

“I didn’t give him anything!”

“I believe the hunger is affecting his thinking,” Khumdar. “We should hurry this along. It cannot be a good sign.”

“I’m fine,” Tibs said.

“Why are you hungry?” Ganymede asked.

“Hey Ganny! You’re here too. I haven’t eaten in a long time.”

“Why?”

“It’s what clerics do,” Tibs answered.

“Alright,” she said cautiously. “But I don’t see how that means you should be doing it too. You’re a rogue.”

Tibs lowered his voice. “It’s a secret, but it’s not just the clerics who can do it. Khumdar did it too.”

“I am a cleric.”

“That’s right!” Tibs lowered his voice again. “But the best way to be all emotional is to feel like you’re dying. And I am dying!” He said proudly.

“Ohhh, that could be a problem,” she said.

“No, no, it’s how we do it. I’m almost dying, I see Light, then we go back to our room and in two days I go see Darkness. It’s going to be the Dark Night then.”

“When did you eat last, Tibs?” Ganny asked.

He shrugged. “A while back.”

“How long is a while?” Sto demanded. “How long can people live without eating?”

“I don’t know,” Ganny said, “but not for much longer if Tibs is anything to guess by.”

“Okay, I know it’s against the rules, but I’m making him something to eat. He can’t go through the second floor in this state.”

“No, I can’t eat!”

“Tibs! You can’t fight anything in your state.”

“I’m not fighting,” Tibs replied. “I’m going to have an audience.”

“You have to go through the second floor to get that Tibs!” Sto said, exasperated. “I put the room in the same place I put the fire room.”

“Oh, that’s bad,” Tibs said. He snorted, then he chuckled, then he laughed. Hands held him up.

“Did the dungeon say something funny?” Mez asked in a worried tone.

“It’s not going according to the plan!” Tibs exploded in more laughter.

“I think the hunger may just be too much,” Khumdar said.

“Okay, that’s it. I’m putting food on the other side of the doorway,” Sto said. Tibs tried to protest, but he was too busy laughing.

“I don’t think it’s going to help,” Ganny said.

“Look at him!”

“He isn’t like you, Sto. He can’t just absorb it and be better. He has to eat it and his

body had to process it. You saw it when you experimented with making one of them. Even if he eats now, he'd not going to be better for a while."

"Then what am I supposed to do?"

"Get me the audience," Tibs said between laughs, then quieted, panting.

"I can't turn to room off, Tibs. You're going to have to go through the traps, the creatures. There's no way you can survive in your state."

"My friends will help me."

"We will," Jackal said.

"Can we know what we're agreeing to first?" Mez asked.

"Are you saying you won't help Tibs?" Sto demanded. Then let out an exasperated cry when Mez didn't answer. "Why didn't your mysterious 'them' make it so I could talk to people?"

"I've got a plan for that," Tibs said. "Might take a while though."

"Are you feeling better?" Carina asked. "For a moment there, I wasn't sure you were going to stop."

"It wasn't that funny," Tibs said with a disappointed sigh. "I really don't like this anymore."

She helped him up. "Then how about you tell us how Sto is going to help you get your audience, then we can get you back to your bed and hope you survive for the next audience."

"Survive?" Sto demanded, and Tibs groaned at the volume.

"We need to go to the trap hall. He turned it back into the one where I had my audience with Fire."

"The one that nearly killed you," Jackal said.

"It was the fire, not Sto. I don't think Light's going to hurt me, otherwise I wouldn't have to go hungry."

"But there's four rooms between here and there," Mez said. "You're in no shape to get us through trap room, let alone fight in the others."

"I can slow the triggers' movement back to the first time you were in the room," Sto said.

"Sto," Ganny warned.

"Oh, come on, Ganny. Look at him. I'm supposed to help him, not get him killed."

She took a long time replying, then sighed. "Fine, but you have to stop after this, Sto. I'm telling you, they are going to notice."

"Whatever. How about I don't do anything to the other rooms? Will that keep those 'them' happy?"

"That's not how this work, Sto."

"You don't even know how any of this works."

"Hey!" Tibs exclaimed. "That's not fair! She's doing the best she can."

"It's okay Tibs," Ganny said. "He's just scare for you. Dungeons don't usually get attached to anyone coming through them. This is new for both of us."

"I'm not—" Sto began.

“You *like* me!” Tibs yelled and started laughing, then stopped himself. “Okay. I shouldn’t do that again.”

“Has anyone worked out anything useful from this?” Khumdar asked.

“Not a thing,” Jackal replied.

“Sto is going to make the trap room easy, but he’s not doing anything to the monster rooms. He likes me, but Ganny wants him to avoid attracting the attention of them as much as possible. Sto doesn’t actually believe they exist.”

“Tibs can’t fight,” Carina said.

“I told you, this isn’t going to work,” Mez added.

“Tibs, are the rooms where we need to fighter going to be harder than the last time we when through?”

“Sto?” Tibs asked when the dungeon didn’t immediately answer.

“Go ahead,” Ganny said resignedly.

“No, I’ll set them to the last time.”

“They’re going to be the same,” Tibs told Jackal, who nodded.

“Carina, activate the doorway.” He picked up Tibs.

“Hey, I can walk!”

“I’m not risking you with the trap room. Easy or not, you are in no condition to attempt it.”

“We can’t go,” Mez insisted. “Tibs can’t fight.”

“We leave him in the hall before the rooms,” Jackal said. “We can take the monsters without him.”

“Don’t we need him to find all the loot?” Mez asked.

“Fuck the loot,” Jackal replied and Tibs slapped him, “Ow! What was that for?”

“You love the loot! You love it almost more than Kroseph. I’m going to help find it. Except the one in the pool. There’s something big and scary in there now.”

“Have you heard anything about that Carina?”

“No. But as far as I know, no one’s swam across. They either take the bridge or the ledge. I’ll mention it to the next team and they can investigate it.”

“I wanted to be the first to find it,” Tibs said, pouting.

“Does hunger really make someone more childish?” Mez asked.

“The only thing I know of going hungry is that many would be cleric die of it,” Khumdar said.

“I’m fine,” Tibs replied, then rested his head on Jackal’s shoulder and closed his eyes.