

Stepping up-32

The guard stepped before the dungeon's entrance as Tibs and his team approached. He placed a hand on his sword once they reached the last step.

"You aren't going in," he told Jackal.

"What are you doing?" the cleric asked, but the other guard placed a hand on his shoulder.

"This is our scheduled run," Jackal replied.

"I don't care. I'm not letting you go in that death trap."

"There's loot in there," the fighter said. "Loot that me and my team are going to get. So get out of our way."

Tibs studied the guards. They were determined.

"Has the dungeon been closed?" Mez asked.

"Yeah," the guard said, "it has"

"No, I'm not," Sto said as Jackal snorted.

"This isn't official," the fighter said. "It's my father."

"Then you know I can't let you in."

"Maybe no one informed you, but I don't care what the man wants. So move out of my way, or be moved."

"No."

Jackal shook his head and stepped forward, his skin turning the gray of stone. When they nearly touched, the guard took a step back, and another, glancing behind him and getting out of the way before his next step took him inside the doorway.

Jackal grinned and continued, his skin regaining its usual tanned color.

"Why didn't you stand your ground?" the woman demanded in a hiss.

"He wasn't going to stop," the man replied, "I would have ended up in there."

"Better that, than summoned by Wells," she said. "You're on your own when that happens."

The man protested, but Tibs was too far to hear the words. His concern of Sebastian holding more sway over the guards faded over his mulling at yet more implication what was going on in the dungeon was out of the ordinary.

"Tibs?" Jackal said, indicating the section of the wall where the doorway to the second level was hidden. That Jackal knew where it was meant the fighter was getting better at sensing his essence. He hadn't had his hand against the wall while he walked.

"Why don't you see if you can open it," Tibs replied, fighting the urge to look in the direction of the trap room. Should he check it? He didn't want to believe what everything he heard pointed to, but if Jackal's father feared what happened to him, knowing how good of a fighter he was...

"Tibs's right," Carina said. "We shouldn't be relying on him all the time. We also need the practice interacting with essence triggers."

"I'd like to avoid interacting with triggers, since it means they'll unleash spears in all

directions,” Mez said.

“But practicing with this means we’ll be better at—Tibs!” Carina yelled as he took off running. He needed to be in the room before Sto could react.

“Tibs?” Sto asked. His friends were calling after him now. “What are you doing?”

Tibs ignored him. How long did it take the dungeon to make changes? And was the fact he couldn’t make changes when someone was in a room a rule, or an impossibility? If it was just some rule set by the ‘them’ Ganny often referred to, Tibs wouldn’t be able to find out.

“Tibs?” Sto asked again, sounding worried. “Tibs, Jackal has the door open, your friends are going to continue without you.”

Nice try. If Sto was this worried, there was something to this. Tibs stopped once he stood on the first row of tiles.

“Tibs, what are you doing?”

The room looked the same, misshapen stone tiles on the floor, uneven walls with barely camouflaged holes from which spear would come out if someone stepped on a trigger tiles. There seemed to be more holes than he remembered.

“I don’t know what you’re doing Tibs,” Sto said. “You’ve been through this floor before, nothing’s changed.” Then why did he sound so casual he was covering up how he really felt?

Tibs spread air over the floor and let it flow under the tiles, telling fake triggers from the real ones. He picked one four steps ahead and formed a staff of water, then iced it. Standing in the doorway, there were no matching holes for the spears, so this was the one place he was safe. He looked above the doorway. Holes there too, so he crouched to be safe, then extended the ice staff to the trigger and pressed on it.

“Tibs,” Carina called, “what are you—” Her voice was cut off by the spears quickly filling the room, then retracting. So many Tibs couldn’t count on them.

“What was that?” Mez asked.

Tibs tapped the trigger again and studied how the spear covered every angle in the room except the one he stood in. All it would take was one mistake on the part of the rogue searching for the triggers, and everyone in the room would be dead.

This wasn’t a trap room anymore.

“That’s a kill room,” Jackal said, awe and fear in his voice.

“What is going on?” Tibs demanded.

“I don’t understand what you mean,” Sto replied.

“Bullshit!” he motioned to the room. “You’re supposed to test us. How is anyone supposed to survive this?”

“I’ve had to make it tougher as you get stronger.”

“Omegas aren’t stronger! They can’t sense the triggers like we can.”

“I’m just forcing them to be more clever,” Sto said, so casually Tibs ground his teeth. What was going on?

“You’re lying.”

“Come on Tibs, you have a run to do. I finally got the controlling Bigger Brute down,

get there so Jackal can have his fight.”

“Not before you explain yourself.”

“Tibs,” Sto warned.

“What? What Sto? Come on, out with it. If I go to the boulder room, am I going to find an impossible number of rats there?” there had been more the last time his team had gone through. He hadn’t thought much of it, because they had been easy to deal with, but for Omegas? Tibs had nearly died multiple time when there were only a dozen rats there, even when the team reached that room without losing anyone to the traps.

“I don’t have to explain myself to you, Tibs,” Sto said. “I’m the dungeon, I do things the way I want.”

“I thought there were rules! You’re testing us! Everything is about forcing us to get stronger, smarter! If no one survives, how is that supposed to happen?”

“Some survive,” Sto scoffed.

Tibs had trouble finding his voice at the casual way Sto talked about people dying here. He’d never been this uncaring before. He looked at his friends for help, but they stood outside the room, silent and confused. They only heard his side of the conversation. And the only thing keeping them from thinking he was insane was that he’d demonstrated he could hear the dungeon.

“Come on, Sto.” Tibs fought to keep his voice calm. Screaming wouldn’t help. “I’m just trying to understand.”

“There’s nothing to understand,” the dungeon replied. “I’m just doing what I’m supposed to.”

“No!” Tibs snapped. “You’re not supposed to make it impossible for us to get through a room.”

“It’s not impossible. You can get through it fine.”

“This floor isn’t for me anymore! Abyss, Sto, why are you killing everyone? Why...” Tibs trailed off as he remembered the argument Carina had gotten into with another sorcerer over lying on the information the map of the second floor contained. How Carina kept being surprised with how easily they were getting through them.

His blood turned cold.

“You’re making it easier for me.”

Sto said nothing.

Tibs swallowed. Thought of Pyan, Geoffrey, the others.

“Why?” he asked. Then louder. “Why?”

Sto remained silent.

“What made you into a murderer, Sto,” Tibs demanded.

“They did!” the dungeon yelled back so loud Tibs nearly dropped to a knee. “They hurt me! Nearly killed me! Tibs, did you think I’d just let them try it again? Never! They’re never going to hurt me again! I’m not going to let them get stronger so they can then come in here and try to kill me!”

“They?” Tibs had to swallow as he understood. “Sto. It was only Bardik.”

“No! You saw the others. You didn’t hear them talk. Laugh at me, at what they were

going to do to me.”

“They were captured, Sto. Harry threw them all in cells, far away from here.”

“There are others! People who want me dead! Want all my kind dead! I’m not going to let that happen!”

“So you’re just going to murder innocent Runners?”

“They aren’t innocent!”

“Bullshit! My friends came to help, other Runners did too.”

“You’re different,” Sto said, his tone gentle.

“No, I’m not. You think the others wouldn’t have come to help they’d been able to hear you? They’re just like me, Runners.”

“No.” The certainty in Sto’s voice scared Tibs. He’d thought Ganny had been exaggerating when she said Sto played favorite. That it only felt that way to him because he could hear the conversation, knew to mention something his team could use. But if Sto treated him differently...

Tibs sensed the triggers’ locations and walked deeper into the room.

“Tibs,” Jackal called. “What are you doing?”

“Don’t step in the room,” he ordered. “Me and the dungeon have to settle something.”

“Tibs,” Carina said worryingly. “I don’t think putting your life in danger like that is the way to resolve anything.”

It was the only way. He stood before the trigger and looked around to make sure the spears wouldn’t miss him.

“Tibs,” Sto said. “What do you think you’re going to accomplish?”

“I’m like them,” he replied. “If you’re going to murder them, I don’t deserve anything else.”

“Come on, be reasonable, Tibs.”

Tibs raised his foot over the trigger. He considered using earth to steady himself. Losing his balance and falling on the trigger would be a stupid way to die, but Sto could sense the essence and Tibs needed him to know he was serious.

“I’m not the unreasonable one, Sto. I was okay with my friends dying when I thought it was because they hadn’t been good enough to survive. But you murdered them. You’re nothing more than a thug now.”

Sto sighed. “Think of your team, Tibs. Without you, they aren’t going to be able to make it through.”

“Why, because you’re going to make it impossible for them too? Is that what you’re reduced to? Making threats? Do what I say or else? I’m Street Sto, that’s been my entire life until I came here, people threatening me. I didn’t give in to them then, I’m not going to do it now.”

“No, Tibs, you can’t do this. I’m not going to let you.” The floor shook slightly, then again. Heavy steps approaching.

The Whipper from the boss room, or had Sto made a Brute in another room? How long did it take the dungeon to make a creature? Tibs filed the question away for later. For if

he survived this.

“You really think it’s going to be here before I put my foot down?”

“You’re not going to do it,” Sto said. “You don’t want to die. No dying. remember? That’s what you always tell your team. No dying.”

“I think you’ve made it clear that’s not possible.”

“Damn it Sto. Stop this, you’re being silly. I have to eat to get stronger so I can make things more difficult for everyone. That’s how this works.”

Tibs decided to play along. He had time and Sto seemed to have forgotten what he could do to his monster. “Really? Get stronger? Then why didn’t you graduate already? With the number of Runners you’ve eaten, the third floor should be open. Why isn’t it? What have you been doing with all that essence you’ve been gathering?”

Sto didn’t answer, and Tibs smirked. Then it fell, and he looked at his bracers, feeling sick.

“No.” He barely heard himself. He ground his teeth, fought the urge to slam his foot down on the trigger just to piss Sto off.

This was bigger than him, he told himself. This was about his team and the Runners that had survived.

“You have to be stronger, Tibs,” Sto said softly. “I need you to be stronger for the next time they try to kill me.”

“Not at my friends’ expense.”

“They aren’t your friends,” Sto scoffed.

“Pyan was my friend, Geoffrey. I’m going to be friends with other Runners. That’s how it works. We help one another. We become friends. Some become family.”

Tibs looked at the trigger. He could feel the Whipper at the edge of his sense. It was having difficulty crossing the boulder room.

He took a breath. “You need to decide, Sto. Either the Runners are your enemies, and so am I. Or I’m your ally and so are they. They are not different than I am.”

“Sure,” Sto scoffed. “I never hear you say that about Don.”

“Don’s an asshole,” Tibs said. “But he’s a Runner. He’ll protect you if he knows you’re in trouble. He’ll do everything he can to make it about him, but he will protect you. They all will.”

“What if one of them betrays you? Betrays me? Tibs, I don’t want to die.”

Tibs moved his foot off the trigger and placed it down. “No one wants to die. Runners take that risk anytime they come on a run. But it needs to be a risk, not a certainty.” He paused. “Ganny, you there?”

“I’m here,” she answered. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the questioning look his friends gave one another.

“I’m guessing you tried to explain things to Sto.” He began removing the bracers.

“He isn’t been listening to me recently.”

“What are you doing?” Sto asked.

“My friend died so you could make these.” He almost made it an accusation. “I’m not going to just wear them.”

“Tibs, you need them. You’re too weak without proper reserves,” Sto said.

“I’ll manage.”

“It’s not going to bring them back.”

Tibs stopped and fought the tears.

“I’m sorry, Tibs,” Sto said. “I’m sorry for being scared, for not wanting to die, for—”

“Stop!” Tibs cursed. “You can be scared. I get being scared. But lashing out at everyone isn’t going to help. Did you know the guild thinks you’re going feral, whatever that means?”

“It’s when a dungeon loses its faculties,” Ganny said. “It’s rare, but it’s happened. No one knows why.”

“What happens then?” Sto asked.

“A feral dungeon’s a danger to everyone,” she said. “They create monsters and send them out to bring back food. If the adventurers don’t stop them. *They* will.”

“Them again,” Sto said, but there was no mocking in the tone this time.

“We’re going to leave, Sto. You need to decide where you stand. What me and the Runners are to you.”

“But your run, the loot I prepared for you.”

“I think you need to think about that, too. If I deserve special treatment, every Runner does.” He pulled a bracer off his arm.

“I couldn’t survive if I did that for everyone.”

“Then you have an answer, don’t you?”

“Tibs, keep the bracers, please.”

“Sto, I can’t.”

The dungeon was long in replying. “I killed your friends, and I’m sorry for that. Don’t make it be for nothing?”

Tibs closed his eyes, felt the tears run down his cheeks. “Alright.” Maybe he was using the excuse. Maybe he saw it as a way to honor his friends.

He walked out of the trap room as the Whipper appeared in the other entrance.

“We’re leaving?” Jackal asked.

“He needs to think on things,” Tibs answered, and paused. “Sto, can you make the rats and bunnies out of flesh? Like real ones?”

“Sure, but stone’s kind of my thing.”

“What are you thinking?” Carina asked.

He wasn’t certain, the question had just popped in his head. Now he thought he knew where he was going with it. “The town’s having problem with food. Supplies have been going bad before they reach us. If the monsters here were real animals and you let us bring them back, we could supply the town with it.”

“We’d have to eat rat?” Mez asked,

“It’s better than what Kro’s family has had to work with,” Jackal said.

“That would be costly,” Sto said. “I reabsorb the bodies so I can make more, if I have to let that go...”

“How about replacing the copper with meat drops?” Ganny offered. “Meat’s actually easier on you, and you have a lot of essences to make that you haven’t been doing much with, and you get to keep the stone motif you’re so enamored with.”

“Meat drops,” Tibs said. “We could sell that, and it’s probably worth more than a copper at the moment.”

“Okay, I’ll see about that.”

Tibs smiled and started walking again.

“So, we’re really not doing this run?” Jackal asked.

Tibs paused again. “Sto, the puzzle I left you, I needed back. I have to give it back to Cross.” A dozen paces toward the trap room, the cylinder waited on the floor. “Thanks.” He put it in his pouch and headed for the exit.

“Are you sure you don’t want to do the run, Tibs?” Sto asked. “Jackal was really looking forward to the fight.”

“He’ll survive until the next one,” Tibs said. “And we’ll find out then where we stand.”