

## Stepping up-28

Tibs stared at the schedule.

“How are there so few teams left?” Don said, sounding baffled.

There were two and eight teams left, eight of which were noble teams. And three he didn't recognize the names of. Tibs had noticed there were fewer people at the inn, but he thought it was because of the problems Kroseph's family had with their supplies. Another shipment hadn't made it intact, crates had broken as they were carried. Kroseph's father was in MountainSea to find out what was going on with their providers.

Don look in Tibs's direction, but instead of his usual sneer, he waved at the schedule. “I get only the best survive, but...” he looked at the list. “If you managed it, how did so many die?”

“Did you lose anyone on your team?” Tibs asked.

“No.” Don straightened. “Why? You think I should have?” he demanded.

Tibs rolled his eyes. Apparently, there was only so much respect the sorcerer could have for everyone they'd lost.

“No conscript,” Jackal mused.

“There's got to be a limit to how many the kingdoms can send,” Mez said.

Jackal nodded.

“I believe the need for so many runners taken from cells is not a common occurrence,” Khumdar said. “From what I have learned, it is normally only when a new dungeon is born that it is required.”

“I guess this is what happens when someone tries to kill a dungeon,” Don commented, “and someone else goes in a messed that up.”

“Don't tell me you were actually part of those idiots,” Carina replied while Tibs glared at the sorcerer.

“If they'd killed it, we wouldn't still be here,” Don replied. “They wouldn't need us anymore.”

Jackal snorted. “You're were wrong, Tibs. He is an idiot.”

“Watch your tongue.” Don reached for Jackal and Tibs saw the essence surrounding his hand.

He caught the hand. “Don't.” Tibs fixed his gaze on the sorcerer and wasn't surprised at the nasty smile that formed on his lips. Don was predictable.

“Well, if you want to suffer in his place, I'm more than happy to make it happen.”

Tibs studied the cloud of essence as it shifted, solidified, and linked into strands that then latched onto his arm, pumping corruption into his body.

He kept looking into Don's eyes, not reacting, not feeling any pain. He felt the essence seep into his arm, and he remembered how Jackal had reacted to Don doing this to his hand.

The sorcerer's eyes widened in surprise, then dismay, and immediately turned speculative and Tibs realized he might give away too much.

“I was doused in corruption,” he said, to misdirect Don’s suspicions. “This is nothing compared with how much I suffered then.”

Don pulled his hand away, worry on his face. His corruption was his principal weapon to keep people in their place. If Tibs, of all people, could resist him. Would others stop fearing the sorcerer?

Tibs tightened his hand in the cramped claw he’d suffered so he wouldn’t give too much away. It was one thing for him to stand the pain, but corruption affected what it touched and Don wasn’t an idiot. If Tibs didn’t react at all, the sorcerer would suspect something other than having gotten used to the pain.

Don sneered. “You aren’t even worth my essence.” He turned and stormed off, his team training after him. Radcliff last and giving Tibs a powerless shrug.

“Are you okay?” Carina asked.

Tibs nodded, keeping his hand in a claw. He’d taken hold of Don’s corruption and had moved it to the reserve in his bracer. It had been easier than he’d expected. Did something happen once it was in him? Did Don lose control of it? Was it like with Sto, where he couldn’t affect people directly because of their life force?

Yet another question he wouldn’t be able to ask.

“What do you think will happen if too many of the teams die?” Mez asked.

Tibs looked at the schedule. At all the names that were no longer there.

“So long as our name stays on it,” Jackal said, “I don’t care.” His gaze lingered on the list long enough, Tibs knew it was a lie. There had been a lot of fighters, and Jackal had known most, if not all of them. He’d said he was used to losing people he knew, but Tibs suspected it had never happened to this level before.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs opened and closed his hand. They were at their tables at the inn, and only three other tables were occupied, none by runners.

“And the best we have for my favorite runner.” Kroseph placed bowls of stew before them, along with tankards of ale, then sat down.

“Stew’s the best you have?” Jackals asked before digging in.

Kroseph sighed. “There’s only so much we can do with low-quality meats. Dad had to send my brothers after the caravan to even get that. We were lucky they ride slow, otherwise, broth is all we’d be able to offer. And no, Hun, this isn’t happening only to us. Only a handful of taverns have anything fresh left.”

“Is it not suspicious,” Khumdar said, “that taverns who get their supplies from a multitude of different places all end up with spoiled food nearly at the same time?”

“Your dad?” Carina asked.

Jackal looked pensive. “It’s the kind of thing he’d do, yeah. But I can’t find out. With him in the town, no one’s speaking to me. Turns out they’re afraid of him way more than of Knuckles.”

“But they don’t work for him anymore,” Mez said.

Jackal made a face. “When you’ve suffered at the hand of the man who paid you coin for your work. You know how much more likely it’s to happen when he’s no longer paying

you. My dad is very good at causing pain.” He looked around the nearly empty inn. “A lot of the time, he doesn’t even have to lay a hand on you to do it, too.”

Kroseph placed a hand on Jackal’s arm. “This isn’t your fault.”

“No, it’s my dad’s.”

“I expect this will not be what you wish to hear,” Khumdar said, “but would it not be worth submitting to him to alleviate the trouble he is causing? It would allow you to plan without him constantly watching.”

“He’s spying on you?” Kroseph asked, surprised.

Jackal shrugged.

“I feel the eyes of the people he pays,” the cleric said, flicking his eyes toward the occupied table to their left.

Jackal glared at them, and one of the men grinned in return. They didn’t care if Jackal knew, might even want him to know.

“Well, you don’t know my dad. He wouldn’t stop hurting people I care about just because I submit to him. He’d keep it going to ensure I understood the error of my ways.”

“Killing him?” Carina asked, and Tibs stared at her. That was drastic.

“Even if an assassin could get close to him and make it happen, he has orders in place to destroy everything he considers his if his death is by any cause other than old age.”

“This isn’t his town,” Tibs stated.

Jackal looked at him. “He settled here, Tibs. He considers it his and I can’t think of any way we can get him to leave.”

“It’s not his town,” Tibs said again, more forcefully, and studied the people at the table out the corner of his eyes. He couldn’t see anything giving them away, so Khumdar knew because of his connection to darkness. His need to know secrets. He’d said he could feel when people had secrets.

Tibs needed that. He finished his stew and his ale. He hadn’t seen those people before, so hopefully, they didn’t know his tell well yet.

He stood. “Khumdar, I think it’s time for my next lesson.”

Jackal opened his mouth, but Kroseph tightened his hand on his arm. Tibs liked the server more and more. He had the making of a rogue.

“I suppose it is time,” Khumdar said, standing. “We shall be in our room if you need us.”

“We’re training later,” Jackal said, confusion still on his face.

“We’ll be there,” Tibs said, heading for the exit.

\* \* \* \* \*

He closed the windows in their room. He hadn’t felt essence in the man who’d followed them, but it didn’t mean he couldn’t pay someone. Runners needed the coins and Tibs didn’t have anyone he trusted on the other teams anymore. He wished he remembered how Alistair had created the bubble to block others from listening in on them. Tibs couldn’t think of how to get water to do that.

That question, he might be able to ask the next time he saw his teacher at least.

“And which lesson would I be teaching you?” Khumdar asked, sitting on his bed.

“How did you get your audience?” Tibs pulled the chair away from the table and sat.

“I do not know that how I went through it will apply to you. Clerics must show their devotion to the element they chose. It is not simply a question of being taken there by a teacher.”

Tibs chuckled. “I fell off a cliff, got buried, threw myself in a fire and then in a pool of corruption. I think I fall outside the way others go about getting their audience.”

Khumdar nodded. “I expect you are correct. And you mentioned the elements seem to be expecting you. That would imply lenience is being made on your account.”

“Yeah,” Tibs said dejectedly. “I’m special.”

“Being special is not a bad thing. You can heal us.”

Tibs nodded. “I don’t mind that part. It’s the guild treating me like I’m special that’s annoying.”

The cleric smiled. “I believe the fault for that falls on you, not the elements you have. After all, they are not what compelled you to go save the dungeon. Although they may have played a part in how you survived being doused by corruption.”

“You think so?”

Khumdar nodded. “When I reached you, there was so much of it that you should already have been turned into a puddle. I am not sure even Don could have survived that. There is a limit to how much protection having the essence that is attacking your offers.”

“Okay, so, how did you get an audience?”

“I stole the technique the purity clerics use and modified it for my purpose.”

“So I’ll be able to use it for the other essences too?”

Khumdar thought in silence. “I expect you will be able to, yes. The issue will be finding the location where you can perform it. I can guide you to the one for my element, and there is only one location for purity, but I do not know where you could go for light.”

“Okay, so I’ll learn the method, then I’ll worry about figuring out the locations. Maybe I can figure out a way to ask Harry.”

Khumdar smiled. “Please allow me to be there when you do. I believe watching you try to lie to a man so in touch with Light will be quite entertaining.” He fell silent. “There is much of the clerics in him.” He shook himself. “But he is not what we need to discuss.”

Tibs nodded and settled back. If he could get the rest of the elements with this one method, he needed to pay attention.

“For a cleric to get their audience, they must first show their devotion. They must meditate on themselves and their element for seven days in solitude with nothing more than the robe identifying them and water for company. Once their meditation is done, they must travel to the location of their element, and again show their devotion. Genuflecting and explaining to the element why they show accept you. You must be pure in your words and—” he paused, then chuckled. “That part may be unneeded, I am realizing, it may be something only needed for the purity clerics, but you must be truthful. The elements know your heart.”

“Your thoughts,” Tibs said, and Khumdar looked at him curiously. “They take the word they use from our minds when they talk with us, so they have to be able to see the rest.”

The cleric nodded. "I suppose that is true. If you are true in showing your devotion, they will grant you the audience, and then you must convince them again. Or I had to. As they seem to be waiting on you, your presence might be enough for them to accept you." Even before Tibs shook his head, Khumdar had a knowing smile.

"They don't just give the part of my essence. Even Corruption, who made it as easy as he could, only offered it to me. I had to take it. With Earth, I had to find a way to move through the earth encasing me to reach it. Air had me chase it. Fire... gave it to me too, but I was dying, and I still had to reach for it, which was hard with being burned all over. There's going to be something I have to do."

Khumdar nodded. "Darkness is about secrets and weakness. So I expect what you want will be hidden." He closed his eyes. "But I cannot envision how it will do so. When I glimpsed it, it was quite noticeable." He sighed. "I wish there were others I could ask, to understand how it is that you and I saw it, while Jackal, Carina, and Mezano did not."

Tibs shrugged. He didn't care so much about that part. "So, how do I meditate?"

Khumdar opened his mouth, then closed it. He chuckled. "It is something I learned so young, I no longer even think about it." He closed his eyes again. "Meditation is thinking on nothing while thinking on everything."

Tibs groaned, and the cleric smiled.

"You must remember, clerics are who are taught that. There is a certain level of embellishment added to the procedure to make it worthy of what they are seeking to accomplish. It should not be something the common folk can do."

"You were supposed to be a purity cleric," Tibs said, the realization hitting hard.

"What?" Khumdar stared at him, worry and fear in his eyes.

"You said you were taught young. That means you were raised to be a cleric, but there's only purity clerics. And..." he closed his mouth with a snap, remembering how offended Carina had been by Khumdar claiming to be of the Temerity family. The amused expression on the cleric's face when Mez had explained how having the name didn't mean he was from *that* family.

"You are from *that* Temerity family. That's how you were able to take the methods they use. They taught them to you."

The cleric's face fell, then he forced a smile. "I believe Darkness will welcome you. You can tease apart secrets from mistakes people make." He rubbed his face. "I would ask that you not speak of this with anyone, especially not Carina."

"Why? She's our friend and teammate."

"The answer to that is complicated and would reveal things that aren't for me to say."

Tibs narrowed his eyes. "You were working hard to get her to say something when you first joined. I'm guessing it's whatever you don't want to tell me now."

Khumdar nodded. "It is. Back then, she was not a friend. Getting her to reveal her secret would have been amusing. Now... No, even then. Tibs, there is a difference between knowing a secret and revealing it. It is not that I cannot reveal a secret. Darkness only demands that I find them. What I do with them is up to me, but if a secret is known, how is it a secret anymore? I do not know how to explain it any better, but there is a delight in

knowing something others don't. I am not entirely certain that is something Darkness did to me. I was searching for secrets before I was drawn to it. It is how I discovered Purity was not the only possibility for a cleric. I enjoy knowing more than you."

Tibs nodded. "I get it. It's like knowing how to break into a house. If other rogues know it too, they could get in before you."

"No." Khumdar shook his head. "It is nothing like that, Tibs. I do not care to use the secrets I know. I am not holding them until I can gain something from them. The simple act of holding a secret is enough. I will use one if it is helpful to me and my friends, but it is not why I accumulate them."

"I don't get it. What's the point of having something you aren't going to use?"

Khumdar spread his hands helplessly, then smiled. "Have you heard stories of dragons?"

Tibs shook his head. He had heard the word, but he couldn't think of anything that went with it.

"In the bard's tales, they are great beasts who decimated the land seeking riches and once they had them, they would hoard them, killing anyone who came to take it back. They would do nothing with it other than hold it. Know they had it." He chuckled. "I am a dragon of secrets."

"But those are stories. People use what they have. They use it to get something. Even the nobles use their coins to give themselves power."

"Maybe it is because I am a cleric. I do not know if I would be this way had I not taken Darkness into me. But it is who I am."

Tibs nodded. "I won't tell anyone. You're my friend."

"I thank you."

"So, meditating is what? Sitting around not doing anything?"

"No, it is thinking about as little as possible, so that you can understand as much as possible. I know, it still sounds as something a purity cleric would spout, but it is the best explanation I know to give you. When I thought as little as I could, some thoughts would push through, and in them I found understanding. Again, I do not know if this is because I sought to be a cleric. But that part is something purity clerics go through, as well."

"Seven days of that, not eating anything, only water. Water is going to be easy for me." He coated his hand in it and reabsorbed it. "But I don't know if I can go seven days without eating."

"It is difficult. It is part of the purification you must put yourself through to achieve the state that will bring you to the attention of the Element."

"Except it's something purity clerics are taught," Tibs said, looking it over.

"It worked for me, therefore there is truth in it."

Tibs nodded. He recalled what Ganny had said. "The way to get an audience is strong emotions while surrounded by the element. Fear is the one used when we get our audience. I was drowning, Jackal was buried alive, Carina falling endlessly. Not eating for seven days had to be painful."

"If you are correct, then you should be able to arrange it in such a way that you can

get the fear without the danger?"

"No. We tried it when I was trying to get the audience with Air. I'd fall from higher and higher places, with Carina ready to catch me. Knowing she was there meant I wasn't as afraid. There was fear as I fell, doubt, but I trusted her to catch me. It's when I slipped and fell off the cliff with no one to catch me that I had my audience."

"Then it is possible the meditation is added by the purity clerics to make it seem special?"

Tibs shrugged. "Maybe. You'd know more about that than I would."

Khumdar chuckled. "I am no longer certain I know as much as I believe I do. I suppose that making each step seem more meaningful than they are is a way for those in power to maintain control. If I had believed all I needed to do was starve myself on the Black Night, I might have attempted it sooner, rather than spending years preparing myself in secret." He smiled. "I supposed you will be a demonstration of if they are right or not."

Tibs shrugged. "Except that I'm special, like you said, the Elements are waiting for me."

Khumdar nodded. "And yet, you have had to go through the same process as someone seeking an audience for the other elements. I expect that their willingness to grant you an audience does not extend to easing your way."

"I guess. So, when's the Dark Night?"

"That," Khumdar said, "I do not know."