

Stepping up-19

“Tibs’s you’re back!” Sto exclaimed as Tibs was a few feet away from the steps leading to the dungeon’s door. “Where’s the rest of you team? I have something to show you!”

“I’m not going in today,” Tibs whispered, but not low enough. The Runner next to him eyed him, and then stepped away. He looked around, there were a lot of Omega Runners, and by their nearly terrified behavior, they were new again.

“Really? You have to hurry, I can’t wait to show you.”

Tibs looked around before replying, wishing there was somewhere within Sto’s range that wasn’t populated by people, but on top of the Runners, some of the Bazaar’s merchants had setup booths to sell items before they went in.

He’d come back in the night.

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Tibs wouldn’t get used to walking the street in the dark. He missed his roofs. He opened and closed his hands, enduring the pain. As he’d opened the door to his room his hand had cramped into a fist and only had only opened a few blocks away.

He couldn’t wait to be done with that. Once he’d talked with Sto, he was going to the pool. He was ending this tonight.

The plain leading to the mountain was deserted, the ground more bare earth than grass now, due to all the Runners trampling it. The guards stood at the bottom of the stairs instead of the door, a lantern planted in the ground next to them, on a staff, and the half dozen stalls illuminated by lanterns hanging from their facades were unoccupied.

No, he realized as someone detached themselves from them and walked on his direction.

“Evening, Light Fingers,” Cross called as she met him halfway between the steps and the stalls. “I hope you’re not thinking of ‘visiting’ the stalls.” She had a slightly glowing object in her hand, a cube, Tibs thought.

“Their’s not one to sell me anything there, why would I go there?”

“For exactly that reason,” She replied, then lobbed the object at him.

“Stealing’s not allowed,” he said, catching it. Each face was divided into nine squares etched with symbols. “What is it?”

“Rule aren’t known to stop your type, are they?”

“My type?” he asked, narrowing his eyes.

“Rogues, thieves, miscreants.”

“I don’t steal from the town.”

Cross smiled. “We’re not in the town.”

“I’m not here to steal,” he replied. The cube could rotate in sections. The six faces could be turned when they were aligned, and, paying attention, he noticed there were only six symbols in total. He couldn’t tell what essence was woven within the wooden cube, but there was only one type, he figured it was light because of the glow.

“Don’t force the turns,” Cross said, “just make sure the squares are aligned and they’d turn easily.”

“What’s in it?” Tibs had the nine symbols on one of the face. The cube couldn’t contain much once open. Was the way to unlock it to get all the faces to match, or did he have to make a specific pattern with the symbols? It would be an impressive lock, since not only would a rogue need to figure out how the cube worked, but then they’d have to either know what the pattern was, or figure it out through trial and errors.

“There’s nothing in it,” Cross said and Tibs nodded. She chuckled. “I mean it’s not a box. It’s just a puzzle.”

Tibs frowned. “What’s the point then? Locks are to keep people from getting your stuff.”

“Why did you keep working on the puzzle I gave you the other day after I told you there was nothing in it?”

Tibs shrugged. “I wanted to figure the lock out.”

“But why, you wouldn’t get anything out of it.”

“I just like it, I guess.”

She nodded. “So do I. And that’s why I picked this up in Kartrage, I wanted to figure it out, now I like to see if I can get patterns.”

Tibs nodded. He had the crown around the face matching.

“So, why are you here, Tibs?”

“Why are you?”

“I’m doing my job.” She pointed to the stalls. “We can’t leave those unattended, considering some of the people in the town.”

“I’m just walking,” he replied, frowning, as he’d thought he had the ring set, but trying to put the last square in place had undone the face.

“I’ve never known a t—rogue, to just walk at night.”

“You know a lot of rogues?”

“Thieves are more the people I know.” He glanced at her and she smiled. “I’m a guard, I come across a lot of thieves.”

“You’re not a guard,” Tibs said, he had the face back in place, but now the crown was screwup. “That’s just your job.”

“So what do you figure I am?”

“A fighter. You’re like Jackal. You like to fight, and I guess being a guard gives you plenty of chances.” The crown was back in place. So what had he done while setting the ring that had undone the rest. There was a set of notions there, he just needed to figure them out.

“I guess challenging the Runners to fight me was telling,” She said.

“Jackal was the one who beat you,” Tibs said.

“I know, I heard his name. And let’s be fair here, he didn’t so much beat me as trick me into losing.”

Tibs shrugged. “If you lost, he won. Jackal doesn’t care how he wins.” He had a set of turns for the cube, it had undone the face, but instead of trying to fix it, he studied how the squares had moved. He could almost see the sequences now.

“Hey, pit fighters aren’t big on the fighting fair part.”

Tibs snorted. “The dungeon doesn’t fight fair. You should Runner it. I think you’d be good.”

She snorted in return. “Dungeons aren’t for me. I intend to live a long time.”

Tibs paused in turning the cube and thought about Harry, Alistair, Bardik. They were all older than they looked. “If you survive, you can get an element, and with that you can live longer.”

“It’s that ‘if’ I’m not comfortable with. I like problems I’m sure I can beat. It’s why I like puzzles. No matter how hard they are, there is a solution, I just have to figure it out.”

Tibs nodded. “I like opening locks.” He went back to spinning the faces and after the fourth try, he knew he had the sequence. He put the face back together, then the crown and carefully ran through the sequence, and the ring came together. That left him the bottom crown and face, although he saw that solving the crown, would automatically resolve the face.

“I guess that’s what makes you a good rogue,” Cross said, watching him.

He shrugged.

“Tibs?” Sto asked, and he looked up before he could stop himself. Cross tensed and looked around. He hadn’t noticed that they’d walked close to the stairs. He’d been aiming away from them, but he’d been so focused on the cube he’d let Cross guide him and she’d kept them close to the other guards and the stalls.

“What is it?” She asked, her voice soft. The guards at the stairs eyed them, bored.

Tibs shook his head. “I thought I’d heard something, but it’s only us, so if I had you would have too.”

“What are you holding?” Sto asked. The dungeon could see what took place within his range, but he couldn’t sense people and things they held. Something about life forced or auras, or the power of their mind. Tibs hadn’t been able to get a firm answer from Alistair or anyone else he’d asked. Because they couldn’t talk with a dungeon, those who theorized about how things worked couldn’t get confirmation.

“Sneaky types tend to have better ears,” Cross said.

“Not every rogue depends on their ears. A lot of them depends on bodyguards.”

“I don’t think of those as sneaky types,” she answered.

Tibs paused in spinning the cube, trying to figure out what the sequence for the bottom crown might be. He’d never thought about it, but were there different types of rogues? There had to be. Thieves guild had a variety of thieves, pick pockets, roof walkers, cut throats. That had to translate within the guild’s rogue.

“I haven’t been at this long enough to work those things out,” He finally said. Yet another thing to ask Alistair about. He had so many now, that he kept forgetting which one he wanted to bring up anytime he met his teacher.

“I expect they work themselves out without help,” Cross said.

“Tibs,” Sto said, “bring it in with you when you come in.”

“Can I keep this?” Tibs asked. “I don’t think I’m going to figure it out tonight.”

She took it from him. “Sorry, I don’t let this out of my reach. Night guard duties are

too boring without something to distract me.”

“You have to cylinder.”

She took that from a pouch and handed it to him. “That I can lend you. Just don’t break it.”

“That isn’t the same thing,” Sto said, disappointed.

Tibs nodded. “Thanks.” He waited for her to put the cube in a pouch or do something else with it. Knowing how she stored it would—

“You realize I know what you’re waiting on, right?”

“Sorry?”

She rolled her eyes. “I’ve been around thieves, Light Fingers. I don’t make a habit of showing them where I put things I care about away, and anyway, where would I put this? I can’t afford the kind of pouches that let me put items larger than they are in it. This would bulge out visibly. Unlike that cylinder.”

“So you just hold it?”

“Until I get to my tent.” She narrowed her eyes. “I have a warded chest there. Light fingers. Don’t think about stealing from me.”

“My name is Tibs. I hate being called Light Fingers. The man who gave that tried to kill the dungeon.”

She raised an eyebrow. “That can be done?”

“Seems like it. Dungeons are alive. My teacher said it’s possible to starve a dungeon by sending Runners who are much more stronger than he is, then he keeps having to spend his energy making the loot and the monsters but doesn’t get enough in return to feed himself. It’s why they control the ranks of the people going in,” he grumbled.

“Huh. I had no idea there was so much thought put into who went in a dungeon. I thought they just gathered people and threw them in.”

“At the Omega level, that’s when the Runners don’t have an element,” he added, “it’s kind of what they do. They just make sure there’s one of each class in the team. But once we get an element and become stronger they pay more attentions.” He was silent. “It might break up my team.”

“What?” Sto asked.

“How so?” Cross asked.

Tibs sighed. “Jackal is Lambda, which puts him one level above the dungeon. The last time we went in, the dungeon nearly killed him and he had to push himself hard, that caused him to become stronger, and then the guild tested him, and they decided he’d gone up in rank. They only allow one teammates to be above the dungeon. Otherwise the guild’s afraid we might be too strong for him.”

“And you could end up causing it to starve,” Cross said. Tibs nodded.

“But they’re sending in all those weaklings,” Sto said. I can easily feed on them.”

Tibs worked out how to say the next part without giving too much away. “I don’t think the guild knows how dungeons really work.”

“I thought they made the dungeons,” Cross said.

Tibs shook his head. “They find them. They have a way to know what a new dungeon

appears and they come to guard him.” He indicated the town. “And get Runners to feed him.”

“More like decide how little I get fed,” Sto grumbled.

“How do you know so much about dungeons?” Cross asked. “I’ve never heard any of that before.”

Tibs smiled. “I ask questions.”

“And you get answers?” she sounded surprised.

“Most of the time. My teacher likes my curiosity, and the guild leader will answer me sometimes, others she sends me to Alistair, that’s my teacher.”

“Hmm. Never actually though to do that.”

Tibs chuckled. “I noticed not a lot of people ask questions. Even my teacher is surprised that I got answers he never thought to ask. A lot of people just don’t seem to want to know, I guess.”

She chuckled. “We don’t all need to know stuff outside what we do. That’s a sorcerer’s job. To figure things out. Maybe that’s what you should be.”

Tibs shook his head. “I’m a rogue.”

“But you don’t have to be one, right?”

Tibs grinned. “But I like being a rogue.” With a wave he headed to the town. Any conversations with Sto would have to wait until his next run.