

Stepping up-30

Tibs turned on Merchant Row and a commotion caught his attention. Two of the merchant being pulled apart by guards. The row had been more tense recently, but he never expected them to need guards to end an argument.

He put his hand on his pouch. These were the types of distraction pickpockets took advantage and the roof running thief would want what Tibs had back. Whatever it was.

Tibs had taken the crystal lens out of the pocket once he was on his bed and studied it. It had a band of metal, not iron, around it, and the essence was woven so tightly through it Tibs had trouble making out those he could recognize in it.

Because of the essence, a sorcerer was who he should ask, but he didn't know any he trusted. Because he'd gotten this off a thief, Alistair might know what it is, but his teacher wasn't here today and he might take it. It wasn't dungeon loot, but Tibs suspected the guild wouldn't care. It was magic; it was worth coins. Probably gold or whatever was worth more than that.

It only left him one person he could ask with hopes of answers.

He entered the Shield and Rope and was greeted by angry words.

"I told you I'm not interested in what you're offering!" the voice came from behind the counter, but Darran wasn't visible. Before Tibs could call out, the merchant stood and turned to face him. His glare melted away and he smiled. "Tibs! How is my favorite rogue?"

Tibs studied the merchant. He had dark pouches under his eyes. He hadn't been spared the troubles that seemed to affect every business in town. "What's going on?"

Darran waved Tibs's concern away. "Nothing that isn't normal for a shop. There's always someone thinking they can squeeze a copper or two out of us."

"Two merchants were fighting on my way here."

Darran's lips drew into a line. "Ever since the bazaar left, there's been a rash of theft and sabotage."

"What's that second word? And do you think they did something?"

"Sabotage is the act of breaking something someone else has so that it will benefit you." He rested his elbows on the counter. "As for the bazaar, I doubt they did something. Maybe some of them stayed behind, but if we don't make money, we can't buy from them when they'll be back."

"They're coming back?" Tibs hadn't known that. He'd watched them pack the wagons, but had had to go train. Cross had stayed, had anyone else? Someone who thought they could cause his merchants trouble?

Darran smiled. "Of course. There's always money to be made in a dungeon town. Good honest money, and—" His expression darkened "—not to honest one. But you didn't come here to listen to me complain. How can I help you? I see the dungeon made better pieces of armor." He pointed to the bracers Tibs wore.

"Yeah, sorry." He ran a hand over it in embarrassment. He hadn't considered Darran could tell they weren't the one he'd sold him with his armor.

The merchant laughed. “That’s the benefit of being a Runner. You get to find gear none of us can sell. Magical? You didn’t wear the set that came with your armor all the time.”

Tibs hesitated, then nodded. Darran couldn’t sense essence, so he couldn’t tell anything about them.

“Good for you. When the dungeon gives you something better, remember to come see me first and I’ll give you good coins. Now, you still haven’t told me why you’re coming by.”

Tibs took the crystal out of his pouch and handed it to the merchant.

Darran looked it over. “Did you find this in the dungeon?” he asked, frowning. He took a monocle out of a pocket and placed it over an eye, and looked at the crystal again.

“No, I took it from the other roof running thief. I caught them and tried to talk them into stopping before they anger the nobles to the point they bring in thugs.”

“Not enjoying the competition for the roofs?” Darran asked with a smile, tuning the crystal over in his fingers.

“I don’t like they’re angering the nobles enough they’re complaining to Harry.”

The merchant nodded. “This is a Temocles Eye. Not one of the best I’ve seen. The band should be gold, not bronze. But I expect it still gets the job done. Do you have the hand?”

“I didn’t get the thief’s hand, no,” Tibs said cautiously.

Darran smiled. “No, the Temocles Hand. They are a set. I can’t give you much just for the eye.”

Tibs shook his head. “I’m not selling it.” He took the crystal back. “I need to know what it is. What the magic does.”

Darran nodded. “Ah. Normally I’d charge a silver for the information.” Tibs narrowed his eyes at the merchant. “But seeing as you are such a good customer and your team has brought me plenty of good dungeon made items, I’ll do this to maintain our business relationship.”

Which meant Darran expected more loot as payment. Tibs could arrange that.

The merchant took the crystal and placed it over his eye the way he’d done with the monocle, but it was too large for it to stay, so he held it. “This lets the wearer see magic.” He looked around the shop. “The previous owner would have had something to hold it over their eye.” When he looked at Tibs, he hurried to put his arms behind his back. He’d said the bracers were magic. If he didn’t see it, Darran would—

“Unfortunately, without the hand, it doesn’t work.” He handed the crystal back to Tibs. “They’re made at the same time. Temocles was a Sorcerer who was also a Thief King, back in the age of King Dramon. I expect that means nothing to you. It was very long time ago. He’d gotten there because as a sorcerer he saw magic, but his underlings couldn’t, so they were holding his thieving empire back. This let them see magic, and the hand let them move the threads around so they can step around magical warning and triggers.” He considered something. “These aren’t cheap. Whoever your thief is, they have been successful enough to be able to afford it.”

Tibs looked at the crystal with the bronze band around it. “If they’re rich, why are they here? Shouldn’t they be in a big city?”

Darran nodded. “I can think of two reasons a successful thief would be in a small town like this; three actually. The least likely one is that they are hiding out. If they were, they wouldn’t go around stealing. Kraggle Rock is still too small for them to hope they’ll remain hidden if they do that. The second reason, more likely, but not the one I expect is the true one, is that they were forced to come here by someone else. It could explain how they got this. It’s a loan to let them do whatever they are here to do and their patron will expect it back.”

Tibs put it in his pouch and placed a hand over it.

Darran smiled. “Lastly, they’re here of their own volition. They came here because they are after something specific and it is here.”

Tibs considered how the thief had been watching Sebastian’s house. “If they’re after one thing, why are they breaking into so many houses?”

“Why do you do it?” Darran asked.

“I need the practice,” he answered. “They clearly don’t.”

The merchant raised an eyebrow. “Really? Why do you say that? Are they so much better than you?” While Tibs considered that, Darran continued. “Do you foresee a time when you’ll be so good as to not need, or want, to do some roof running and high window insertion?”

Tibs nodded and bit his lower lip. He hadn’t thought that far ahead, but Darran was right: he enjoyed running the roofs and breaking into houses. Maybe there would be a time when he didn’t need to do it anymore. But it didn’t mean he’d stop.

“Then why won’t they listen to me? If it’s just practice, they don’t need to take so much. A copper as proof will do it. That way no one bothers Harry.”

Darran shrugged. “This isn’t their town, Tibs. For that matter, even if it was. Not all thieves are as considerate as you. If they are good enough to stay out of the guards’ reach, they don’t have a reason to care about the trouble they are causing others.”

“But we all have to live here,” Tibs complained.

“Maybe they don’t. If they’re here for one specific thing, they’ll leave once they have it and things can go back to normal for the rest of you.”

“Not if the nobles have their thugs here by then. Harry isn’t going to be able to get rid of them.” Nobles were tests that infested everything.

Another thought occurred to Tibs. “Could they be here to cause the rest of us trouble?”

Darran considered it. “I suppose they could, but why? It isn’t like they gain much, if anything, from disrupting the dungeon runs. The dungeon does that by eating as many runners as it can.”

Tibs started to protest, but the conversation between the guild clerks came back to him. Sto was decimating the runners so fast they were getting worried.

“What is someone wants to set up a thief’s guild here?” Jackal said his father ran one in their city and his family had tried to take over the adventurer’s guild once. Maybe this was

a second attempt?

“That’s definitely going to happen,” Darran said, “but a thief causing enough trouble the guard leader needs to bring an expert in to stop them runs counter to a thieves’ guild desire.”

Tibs stared at the merchant. “Who did Harry bring?” He didn’t need someone else in his town causing trouble.

Darran straightened in surprise, then he laughed. “Why, he brought you in to stop the thief, Mister Light Fingers.”

“Oh,” Tibs said as he realized Darran was right. “Right. And don’t call me that.” At least he didn’t have to worry about competition in stopping them until the Nobles brought in thugs. “So, without this eye, they’re not going to be able to break into houses?”

“Not if they have magical protection.”

Tibs nodded. It meant they’d need to get it back or find another one. “Is this something you could get?”

Darran considered it. “Possibly. But it would be expensive. There aren’t that many of them in circulation. No one knows how to make them anymore.”

“If someone asks you to get one, will you tell me?”

Darran shook his head. “I’m sorry Tibs, but if I tell even one person what my customers want. I’m setting up a precedent where no one will be able to trust me. My business runs as much on trust as it does on coins.”

Tibs nodded. He’d come to Darran because he trusted him not to tell others what they talked about. As much as he’d like to insist, he benefited from this as much as the other rogues and thieves.

There were other merchants in town who bought and sold goods a thief would use and who weren’t as tight lips, but just like Tibs hadn’t gone to them because enough coins, or ale, would get them to talk, the thief wouldn’t go to them.

And with this being as expensive as Darran said, they would want it back. So he had to use it to draw them to him.

“Thank you for the information.”

Darran smiled. “I’m always happy to help out a good customer.”

Tibs left, trying to come up with a way he could trick the thief.

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Tibs found Cross at the fighter’s training field, beating up three fighters, at the same time. She noticed him and smiled. “Be there in a minute,” she called, then with three punches, had the three of them on their back.

“And that is why ganging up on me isn’t going to help you,” she said, dusting off her hands and stepping away without looking back. The trainer stepped to the downed fighters and offered them healing potions.

“Are you done playing with the puzzle, Mister Light Fingers?” she asked.

Tibs cursed, he’d forgotten about that. “No, I’m still enjoying it.” Where was it? Right... Sto. He’d forgotten to ask for it back after the dungeon had eaten it.

“When you’re don’t with it, I have a different kind for you to play with.”

“Can i—”

“Once I get the cylinder back,” she said. “Finding good puzzles is hard enough as it is. I don’t give them away. Now why are you visiting, if not to return it?” She looked around. “Let’s go to the Crawling Craven. Last I heard, they still have drinkable ale.”

“That’s in part what I want to talk to you about.”

“Ale?”

“The lack of it. All the shortages the merchants and taverns seem to have. You didn’t leave with the bazaar. Could someone else have stayed behind to cause my town trouble?”

“Your town?” She smiled. “I’ve never known a thief to be so possessive.”

Tibs shrugged. He wasn’t going over this with her.

“Is it possible someone came with the caravan to cause you trouble? Yes. Is it likely?” She thought about that one long enough they reached the tavern, which was loud and busy. “I don’t think so. Not that it doesn’t happen, but this place isn’t exactly flowing with wealth yet. If the shortage is organized, it seems counter to someone making coins on it.”

Tibs noticed the green and black uniform as Cross pushed her way through the crowd to reach the bar. The ale was expensive, at a copper a tankard, but it was good. Better than what the inn has, Tibs was sorry to think.

He indicated all the guards. “But wouldn’t it make sense if the tavern with all the guards is the only one left with good ale? No thief would target it and risk angering all of them.”

She looked around. “Where are you from?” she asked him, and Tibs shrugged again. “Small or large city?”

“Street.”

It took her the time needed to make it to a table with a lone occupant on it, who vacated his seat as she sat at the table. “You don’t look it,” she told him once he sat opposite her.

“I’m a Runner now.” Tibs wasn’t sure how he felt about her not being able to tell he was Street. “But I’m still Street.”

She shrugged. “Thing is. A Street isn’t a city, or even a town. It’s its own environment. You see all the guards here and you think, not touching this. I see them and I think, this is a market to exploit.”

Tibs looked around again. “How? You can’t pick their pockets.”

“Oh, I can’t, but she can.” She nodded to the woman behind the bar.

Tibs frowned. “She doesn’t get close to their coin pouch.” He looked around, finding the servers and studying them. “The servers aren’t doing it either.”

“She’s a merchant, she’s going to pick pockets differently than you do.”

Tibs ran a hand over his face. “Why is it that it seems like everyone’s giving me lessons?”

“Maybe if you didn’t ask so many questions you wouldn’t get so many lessons.”

Tibs sighed and took a swallow from his ale. “So it’s my fault.”

“We do tend to cause our own pain,” she agreed. “But think about this. If everyone had good ale. Would you have paid a copper for this?”

Tibs looked at the tankard, tipped it. The ale was better than what'd he gotten at the inn, but was it worth a copper? Even before Kroseph and his family had adopted Tibs and his team, he could have gotten enough for the team to drink with one copper and it would have been at least this good.

He shook his head. "So, she's causing the other taverns not to have good ale so she can charge more?"

"I don't think she's causing this," Cross said, playing with the puzzle cube, "but she's benefiting from it. Anytime there's trouble, someone benefits. The kind of trouble that comes with bad times will lead to an odd mix of who benefits. Usually the scrappers among people. Those of can make more from little. This doesn't feel like that. For one thing, bad times don't attract the kind of caravans I traveled with. And for another, this is a dungeon town. It takes the death of a dungeon to cause those bad times."

"The dungeon nearly died," Tibs said.

She nodded. "And if we hadn't already been on route when the news reached us. We wouldn't have come. But your dungeon didn't die. So this isn't caused by that."

"Then what?"

She shrugged. "No idea. But I doubt it's a 'what' and more of a 'whom'."

Tibs nodded. So he had a thief causing problems which might eventually get the nobles to bring thugs, and now someone was disrupting the merchants for some unknown reason.

He really hoped the two were connected, because Tibs was just a Runner. He hadn't signed up to be Kraggle Rock's unnamed protector.

He grinned as he took a sip of his ale. It wasn't like he had signed up to be a Runner to.

"What's funny?" Cross asked.

"Just thinking about how I seem to be annoyed at whoever made me protector of the town, and that person is me."

"Then stop," she said matter-of-factly. Tibs watched her and realized she could do it. She could simply stop caring about the town. She hadn't been here when it was just tents. Maybe she had a city somewhere to go back to.

But Tibs hadn't had a city, or a town, not even his Street had really been his own. He'd just survived there. This was his town.

So, yeah. Him stopping wasn't going to happen.