

The crowd gathered into the vacated space created by the removal of the stalls was mostly Runners. The only ones Tibs saw who weren't, were the townsfolk who'd paused in their shopping at the further stalls and permanent shops to watch. Among the nobles, who were on one side of the field, Lamberto waved at him, tried to break away, only for Palden to grab his arm. The exchange was heated, but the younger noble didn't act as cowed as Tibs had seen during the run. Lamberto shrugged, gave Tibs another wave and stayed with his siblings.

The Runners broke into their teams as more of them arrived until they were all there.

It felt strange for there not to be the crowd of Omegas of the previous times. Was the guild really satisfied with only these few teams to do the runs now that the fourth floor could be reached?

The woman who took position a few steps higher was a clerk of some sort, with Water as her element. Certainly not a guard. She dressed well, and Tibs sensed the medallion around her neck; it had the same feel as the one he'd copied from Brogan. She was one of the more important clerks.

"Welcome back," she announced, smiling. "I'm glad to see we didn't lose anyone this time around."

"Really?" Quigly muttered, stepping next to Tibs and his team. "What happened? No one new to impress, so the higher ups figured we didn't merit more than a clerk?"

"As you can tell," she continued cheerfully, "the dungeon has reopened its door. This means the fourth floor is now accessible to anyone strong enough to clear the third."

"Been there," Manas, Quigly's rogue, said. "Done that. Didn't even get scars to prove it."

There was pride in how the clerk stood and spoke. Whatever the Runners might think of her being the one to explain how things would proceed going forward, she felt it was something she'd earned.

"Now that the dungeon is Lambda, there will be changes."

"No, really?" Don drolled. "However will we deal with it?"

"The first one is that clerics will be joining any team Rho or higher. Those teams will be allowed to switch out one of the two runners occupying the same role, but will not be required to do so. Do remember that the dungeon is also getting stronger, and that it could stop giving healing potions as rewards at anytime. A healer on your team can make all the difference, even if they won't be fighting."

Tibs shrugged at Jackal's questioning look, as mutters spread among the Runners. Sto hadn't responded when he walked by the cliff the previous evening, and he wasn't commenting on the announcements, so he was busy elsewhere.

The two archers on Quigly's team studied each other before looking at their team leader.

"No," the warrior said. "I'm not saddling us with someone who can't fight."

"If you chose not to take one now," she said, once the muttering died out, "you will have to take one when one of those two Runner die."

More muttering.

"Not if," Mez pointed out.

"The dungeon will be eating a lot of us on the fourth floor," Don replied with

confidence.

“Makes you wonder why the guild isn’t bringing anyone new,” Jackal said, looking at the sorcerer. “All the cells are empty? The kings have had enough of not having anyone to release when they felt the city needed to see they were benevolent?”

Quigly snorted.

“I never read about guild procedures,” Don replied. “It wasn’t something I considered I’d have to deal with before, and once I was here, I didn’t want to know the details of what waited for me.”

“The second change.” She raised her voice over the still not dead muttering. “Is that you now have to decide which floor you will run before your name can be added to the board. You are only allowed to run that floor, unless you clear it. Then, you are allowed to continue on to the next one. You also can only request a floor you are able to access directly through the doorway.”

This time the rising conversations that forced her to pause was more questions than outrage.

“Is there anyone left who’s Omega?” Quigly asked Tibs, who shook his head.

There were three Upsilon Teams, seven who had enough members at Lambda they might qualify as such, but the bulk of the Runners were Rho. Tibs didn’t know if the final classifications would be based on the lowest floor any team could access. If so, there were no Lambda teams yet.

“Who’s going to run the first floor, then?” Manas asked.

“It may be possible the guild counts on some of the Upsilon teams to lack the confidence needed to brave the second floor,” Don replied.

“Any team that doesn’t inform us of which floor they intend to run by the end of the day before the board goes up will automatically be assigned to the lowest floor they have reached. How much time each floor gets will be adjusted based on the previous runs.”

The protests were loud this time.

“If they give us less than half the day to clear the third floor,” Jackal told Don, “you need to have a talk with the guild leader.”

“Why me? She likes Tibs better.”

“You’re less likely to kick her in the shin,” the fighter replied.

“I’m not going to kick her,” Tibs said. “I need her to think I like her.”

“That’s why Don needs to be the one talking to her,” Mez said. “So she won’t anger you so much you’ll lose control.”

“Now,” she said once the protests were down to mutterings again. “I expect you’re wondering why there are so few of you here for this announcement.”

“I was wondering that before you even opened your mouth, bitch,” Markel said. He was Quigly’s latest sorcerer. The precious one had been kicked off the team after arguing leadership roles. Tibs had asked the warrior how he’d managed it, since the rule was that only dead team members could be replaced, and Quigly had smiled and said that not making himself the enemy of the person who enforced the rules had been his first step.

“Going forward,” she continued, “the guild will accept anyone interested in running the dungeon.”

“Anyone who can pay, you mean,” Don muttered.

“At this moment, representatives are in the cities, explaining the procedures for those who seek to improve themselves and their lives.”

“A silver not one of them’s going to talk about how easily the dungeon’s going to eat anyone new to it,” Quigly said.

“That’s sucker’s bet,” Jackal replied. “Why do you think they kept going to the cells for Runners? No one in their right mind wants to run a dungeon.”

“We expect you to be considerate of those new Runners. They will be your compatriots; until you reach Epsilon.”

“You are going to be so busy helping them, Tibs,” Manas said, grinning.

“Then it’s good you’ll be helping,” he replied.

“These civilian Runner teams will come below you in priority,” she said, as Manas was quietly ribbed by his team. “You can change which floor you intend to run at anytime before you do your run, but that will put you at the end of the list of guild Runners for that floor.”

“Who’d want to do anything but the lowest floor they can?” Jackal asked. “That’s where the best loot’s going to be.”

“Actually,” Don mused, “depending on how the scheduling is arranged, I can think of times where it might be to a team’s advantage to hop floors.”

“Care to explain?” Jackals asked.

“Only after I see how the schedule is structured. They might have seen them coming and arranged things to keep us from doing it.” Don considered something. “And it might not be worthwhile until we have unlocked the fourth floor.”

“That will be all,” she announced. “If you want to do a floor other than your lowest, see the loot collection table. The schedule will be up tomorrow.”

“Wait, why isn’t she announcing that the Team of Heroes is going first?” Jackal asked, disappointed.

“Wouldn’t make a difference,” Quigly said. “My team’s going to be the first one to set foot on the fourth floor.”

“Not if we going in before you.” Jackal grinned.

“There’s no way you clear the third floor the first time you go back in.”

“I have a gold that says we will.”

“Jackal,” Tibs warned.

“It’s my gold, Tibs. I can double it any way I want.”

“I’m with Tibs,” Mez said.

“You should listen to your team, Jackal,” Quigly said. “I’d hate to take that kind of money from you.”

The fighter snorted, “No, you wouldn’t. And don’t worry about feeling bad. It’s not going to happen.”

The warrior shrugged. “Alright, whoever gets on the fourth floor first gets a gold from the other team’s leader.”

“I am so glad you changed the win conditions,” Jackal said, grinning. “Because now, there’s no way I’m losing.”

Quigly laughed. “We cleared the floor already. It’s just more of the same for us.”

“Then, may the better team win.”

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Tibs's name was the first for those doing the third floor.

"You got your wish," Mez said, "even if she didn't announce it to everyone yesterday. She probably wanted to avoid the nobles rebelling."

"Tirania told them she didn't care how they felt when that noble tried to argue they should go in before us," Tibs said. "And that was with me agreeing with them. I don't think any of them ever bothered after that." He faced his team. "We have three days to train."

Five teams were going in on that day, three for the second floor, and two for the third. No one had opted to redo the first. The name for the second floor only went on for four days, while those for the third stretched to the middle of the following week.

"You think our next run comes after the last team to do the third floor?" Jackal asked.

"The civilian teams will go there," Don replied. "I think they'll put us after them, if there aren't enough to complete the week."

"There won't be," Mez said. "Anyone Upsilon or above is part of the guild."

"Kings' knights aren't," Quigly said, joining them at the board. "Achieving knighthood is arduous enough. Some have been known to unlock the potential to have an element. The guild used to try to take them from the kings, claiming ownership of anyone with an element, but they found that while officially the guild is its own kingdom, they still rely on the others to have access to what their cities need. All they did was withhold access to the places an audience could be obtained, but the kings found places the guild didn't control."

The silence stretched as Tibs, his friend, and Quigly's team stared at him.

"What?" the warrior asked with chuckle. "I was planning on dethroning a king. I did my research. Fortunately, he didn't have any knights with an element. It would have been a quick war if he had."

"But they still need to go through the first and second floor," Mez said. "Even if they are Rho, she said a team can only request a floor they can reach through the doorway."

"While some will have to be Upsilon," Don said, "since without a dungeon it's extremely difficult to grow in power, an element allows someone to have more time, and makes them harder to kill. I expect that any of them who want to start on a lower floor will be provided a guide to take them there and show them how to open it themselves."

"That's cheating," Jackal said.

"It's only cheating," Don replied, "if it isn't the guild doing it. Or they hadn't been paid enough to ignore it," he added mockingly.

"It doesn't matter," Tibs said. "We go in first, and there's only eight places for those knight's teams. Then it's the next week and a new schedule."

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Kragle Rock felt like the bazaar had just set up.

The booths were packed tighter around the transportation platform, and the merchants yelling over each other for the attention of anyone stepping down from it. Even Darran had set up one, somehow managing a place only a few booths away from the steps. He was already showing swords and armors to a group with thin Upsilon essence. Fire, Metal, the golden color of void, the shifting colors of Crystal, and the sparking of Lightning.

A lot of groups were composed of five people, and most of them didn't have an element, or any denser essence than the townsfolk, and few of them were dressed richly enough to have been able to afford whatever the guild asked. Or was the guild not charging as much for anyone without essence, as a way to feed Sto?

"What do you know about the dungeon?" Tibs asked a boy, man? He looked to be slightly older than Jackal, but had youth in his expression, as if this was more than he had ever seen. He was dressed better than the townsfolk, a merchant's son, maybe?

"It's a place to get power and riches," the boy replied with wonder, then stared at Tibs, his eyes growing wider. "You're one of them! You're a Runner!"

Right, his eyes. People in Kragle Rock no longer noticed them, seeing how they all knew who the Runners were.

"You know the dungeon's dangerous, right?"

"So?" the boy said dismissively. "Anything worth getting comes with a little danger."

"It's not a little danger."

"You're younger than me, and you made it. Hey, Karel! Wait up." He ran off to join a group of girls and another boy his age.

He tried again and received a similar reaction.

As far as he could tell, they had heard about what the dungeon did, but either the stories had been told in a way to make Sto seem less dangerous than he was, or too many bards sing stories of great adventures and wealth to be gotten in dungeons.

Tibs certainly had heard too many of those from the bards that visited the inn. And no heroes of their stories failed.

How was he going to keep them from just being eaten? Could Darran get him enough using the Promises to help all of them? Few looked to have equipment for the runs. Were they going to rely on the crap the guild provided? Should he even try to help them survive the floor? Could he convince them they needed help?

"You look—"

Tibs jumped and turned

"—about to jump off the abyss," Cross finished, raising an eyebrow. "The day I can sneak up on a rogue is a day he's in trouble." She considered something. "What have you done now?"

"Nothing. And I'm offended you think I did anything."

"You did do something. You're Tibs Light-Fingers. The bards are going to sing of how you were always up to something that baffled the guards."

"Bards better never sing about me," he replied darkly.

She shrugged. "You never know. You might end up as some famous adventurer once you leave here. I'll be able to tell all my friends how I knew the great Light-Fingers when he was just a little boy, no more than this tall." She placed a hand on his head.

He batted it away. "I'm always going to be this tall. The denser our essence is, the less we grow." And with how dense his essence was, Tibs figured that if the guild assigned rank by that, he'd already be in the wilds with them forcing him to fight one thing or another.

"What's got you contemplating finding out how long it takes to reach the bottom of the abyss?"

Tibs motioned around them. "They're all going to die. And I can't do anything about

it.”

“Not all of them.”

He glared at her. “And that’s supposed to make it better? Some will live to be powerful and used by the guild. The rest, a lot more of them, are going to be food for the dungeon.”

They attracted stares, but no one acted like he’d just said they were going to die.

Cross put her fingers to her mouth and let out a shrill whistle. “I need a team who’s here for the dungeon to talk with.”

There were a lot of confused expression, but a group of five tentatively approached. Three girls and two guys, Jackal’s age or slightly younger. The girl in the lead said something Tibs didn’t understand.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Rala. I’m wondering, why are you here?”

Rala replied, losing the hesitation as she spoke and growing enthusiastic. Here and there, words had light to them, but nothing so bright Tibs felt they were outright lies.

Cross nodded. “And did they tell you about the danger?”

The reply had a clear, dismissive tone.

“And you don’t think that maybe they made it sound easier than it’s going to be?”

The reply was sharp this time, offended. The girl pointed at Tibs, added something in a tone that carried insult. She turned and walked off, her team glaring at Cross before joining her.

“There you go,” Cross said.

“I didn’t understand what she said.”

Cross started to protest, but closed her mouth. “Right, we both have the language enchantment. She heard about the dungeon being open to everyone and formed a team and convinced the people who recruited them that they were right to be Runners. She was warned of the danger, but she doesn’t care.”

“Too many stories of how easy it is to beat the dungeon,” Tibs grumbled.

“No, too much need to escape what her situation was, I expect.”

“She’s going to die! They all are. Fine, not all of them. But why are so many coming here? This can’t be the best there is for them.”

She studied him. “Tibs. Just how many do you think these people represent of those who tried to come?”

“I don’t know, a lot. Look around.”

She shook her head. “Tibs, I can make out six different languages from here. These people, this would be Runners. They’re from all over the world, from a lot of different kingdoms. This might look like a lot of people to you, but it’s a tiny fraction of those who wanted to come, of those who didn’t care about any of this. I doubt the cities they came from even notice they are gone.” He paused. “You know what fractions are, right?”

“I do accounts,” he replied sharply and left it at that, trying to understand how any places could have so many people them leaving wouldn’t be noticed. None of the cities he’d traveled to had felt that way. Yes, some part of them had more people, but they couldn’t all have been so packed. Jackal spoke of the people working for his father leaving and not being noticed, but it was also clear Sebastian hadn’t been a man who noticed people unless they mattered to him.

“You need to understand that desperation doesn’t look the same for everyone, Tibs,” Cross said. “For some, it’s screams and clawing at everything until they get what they need. Others dress and act like everything is good, while world crumbles inside them. I’m not saying everyone who came here is desperate. I expect most just believed bards’ songs or whatever the recruiters told them. But for some, this, no matter how dangerous it is, is better than what they had before. I’d think you’d know that.”

“I wasn’t given a choice, Cross.”

“If you were, if you’d been told there was a chance things could be better than what was on your street. What would you have done?”

Tibs swallowed. He wanted to deny he’d ever consider this to escape his street, but he didn’t need Light to know that was a lie.

“How do I tell those who are here chasing riches and power and those for whom this is better than where they came from?” If he could only help a few of them, he would make the help count for something.

Her laugh was bitter. “Magic? I don’t know Tibs. Some, you’ll see it on their face. Others won’t admit to it even with a knife cutting their throat. People are strange that way. They’ll claim one thing, act in a different one.” Her hand moved to her stomach with a suddenness that made Tibs think she hadn’t meant to put it there. “Anyway, I have to go back to making sure no one tries anything.” She stepped away and looked over her shoulder. “That means you too, Tibs. I better not catch you trying anything.”

“Don’t worry,” he replied. “You won’t catch me.”

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“A glass high!” someone called, and Tibs glanced in the direction of the standing man in time for them to burst out laughing, looking at the tankard in his hand.

Tibs’s first thought was that he and the four others dressed similarly at the table were nobles. The clothing certainly was fine enough to mark them as minor ones, but there was a casualness about them sitting here, in the inn, surrounded by common folks, nobles never adopted. Even the nice ones, like Amelia, had an air of superiority about her. And one of the woman at the table whispered something to the server placing the plates, that had him blushing, but smiling.

The five of them had metal as their elements. By the concentration, they were at the edge of Rho, but on which side, Tibs wasn’t sure.

The standing man turned toward Tibs’s table. “A tankard high for the Hero of Kragle Rock!”

Tibs looked for Don, only to realize he’d left during the distraction. Everyone in the inn was looking at Tibs.

“Age matters not to those of strong heart. Size means nothing to those of determination. A Knight is in the doing, and not the claiming.” He downed his tankard and let out a satisfied sigh. “May the Light-Fingers keep his city safe until the abyss claims the Lands.”

Tankards and cheers went up, while Tibs tried to shrink in his seat until he disappeared. The rest of his teammates joining in with the knight did not help.

“Well, that’s a load of crap,” Quigly said, dropping into Don’s chair as the cheers quieted.

“You don’t think he means the compliment for Tibs?” Jackal asked, motioning to Kroseph for a refill.

The warrior snorted. “Do you know where knights come from?”

“The armies, I’m guessing,” Jackal said.

Another snort. “They come from nobles’ asses. And trust me, being put through the trials to get an element doesn’t improve their attitude about being so much better than everyone else.”

“I thought you hadn’t met any,” Mez said.

“Oh, I met plenty of knights on the battlefield. I had to cut down most of their men so I could go and teach them a lesson about leading from the rear.”

Mez looked at the five at the table.

Tibs stifled a chuckle as the server was now on the woman’s lap and she fed him grapes.

“They don’t seem to be like that,” the archer said.

“They’re just putting on air so—”

“No.” Mez tone had finality to it that made Quigly raise an eyebrow. “I won’t dispute that you met horrible example of what a knight should be. Just like we’ve all met horrible nobles. But I won’t accept that those represent all of them. There are those for whom being a noble means accomplishing good things, helping and protecting, not lording. It has to be the same for knights.”

The warrior shook his head. “That’s because you never—”

“Let it rest,” Kroseph said, putting the tankard before his man. “I’m not saying you’re wrong, but I’ve been around enough people to start by getting to know them before judging them.”

“Not that you don’t fall victim to judgementality,” Jackal said with a smirk.

“You deserved it,” the server replied.

“I’m telling you,” Quigly said. “Most of them are going to be no better than nobles.”

“Most,” Mez said, standing, “but not all.” He headed for the knight’s table.

“Some nobles are nice,” Tibs said, ignoring the stare from Jackal and focusing on his breathing. It didn’t feel good saying it, but it was the truth. Some nobles weren’t as bad as the others, and some of them were actually nice.

If there was one thing talking with Don had showed Tibs, was that he needed to stop assuming everyone in a group was the same.