

Stepping up-42

The guards at the dungeon door eyed Tibs more than Jackal this time, but remained silent. The cleric looked them over. This time, she was a woman of Carina's age, with an extremely pale complexion.

"Do any of you need healing before you enter?"

"You're not doing anything for them," the smaller of the two guards said.

"It is my duty as—"

"Unless you want to have to heal yourself, you're not doing anything to them."

"I will report you to the head cleric," she said, and looked at the group apologetically.

"We're fine," Jackal said. "We like to take it easy when we're not on a run." He grinned at the surprise his comment caused the two guards.

For the last week, Tibs and his team, as well as those who had agreed to help, had been guarding the shops and the shopkeepers. Serba had been instrumental in identifying who were guards and who were only posing as them. The guards on Sebastian's employ had only been prevented from intimidating the merchants. Anyone else received a serious beating.

The nights were active with rogues patrolling the alleys and roof against the thieves. Those altercations were nastier in Tibs's experience than those the daytime protections had, if not at deadly. Thieves and rogues were adept at getting out of fights.

Tibs's luck with taking down the thieves he chased off wasn't great because of a certain roof runner constantly interfering and causing his quarry to escape. He hadn't shifted his focus to them, yet, because they at least waited until he'd ensure the thieves were prevented from getting into the buildings they targeted. That small show of respect for what Tibs did gave them the leeway to then become a nuisance.

The daytime attacks on Tibs had become more frequent, but they couldn't be obvious about it or they would draw the attention of Harry's guards. That, and Tibs's senses, gave him enough of an advantage he had given his attackers the slip more often than not.

"Hey, Dungeon," Jackal called as they entered. "I hope you're ready for a fight, because this time, we're all here and functional."

The taller guard gave Jackal a look that made Tibs chuckle. From the interactions Jackal had with Sebastian's people, he had the sense they thought there was something wrong with him for not working with his father, and now this man was doubting Jackal's sanity entirely.

"Oh, I am ready," Sto said, sounding smug. "You're not going to break my avatar as easily this time." Tibs felt Sto's impatience mount as he walked in silence. Finally, the dungeon let out a huff. "Tibs, tell him. How am I supposed to gloat when he can't hear me?"

Tibs looked behind him to confirm he was far enough from the entrance. "Sto says he'd going to kick your ass."

“Good enough,” Sto said as Jackal snorted.

By the doorway to the second floor, the fighter took his pack off and pulled cloth-covered items out, and placed them on the floor. “These are the best vegetables Kro’s family could get. They’re really appreciative of those you’ve been providing, but variety was lacking.”

“I would complain about how the town seems to be treating me like some general store,” Sto said, “but this is a lot more efficient than me dropping copper and silver coins. I’ll add them to the list.”

“It’s also better for the runners who bring them,” Tibs said. “The inn and taverns pay them more than the coins you used to give.”

“That won’t last once we’ve dealt with Sebastian,” Carina said. “Once the normal supply lines are opened, the only advantage Sto will have will be the freshness of what he’s providing. That’ll be good, but it will lower how much we’re being paid for them.”

“Then I’ll have to see about making sure what I provide is the very best,” Sto said as Mez opened the doorway.

Tibs stepped onto the second floor and felt the essence trigger move on the bride. They were back to the high speed they had been before his last run.

“So,” Jackal said. “How are we crossing this time?”

“You take the bridge,” Tibs said. “I’m going for the cache this time.” He walked toward the pool.

“Is that wise?” Khumdar asked. “There is something in the water, is there not?”

“Let him do what he wants,” Mez said, “like he always does.”

“Mez,” Carina said in a chastising tone as Tibs plunged into the water.

He propelled himself along the wall, looking for the color variation that marked the cache. He found it on the other side, by the bridge, and set to work on it. He smiled as he opened a smaller panel in it and found a cylinder with spinning rings. It only had four, and they didn’t slide up or down, so what he needed to do was different, but it was clearly inspired by Cross’s puzzle.

He spun the rings and realized he had an unplanned advantage. The water within the mechanism let him feel the gears more and where the gates were. As he was lining them, he felt a presence at the edge of his senses and smiled. He had had time to consider how to deal with it this time.

Now that he wasn’t surprised by it and fleeing, he could better feel it. It was twice as long as Tibs was tall, thin for the length, and moving by undulating its body. He couldn’t feel arms or legs as other than the size, it reminded him of the worms that came out of the ground after a rainfall.

He released all the water essence he had in his reserve and let it propagate, pulling it and the water close to him when the creature was halfway to reaching him. He kept pulling it tighter and tighter, making it denser until he thought it could stop the creature, if that was his plan, but it only covered the area before him. It was unwieldy so he couldn’t move it around if the creature went around it.

But that wasn’t his plan.

He let go of his hold on the essence and it returned to its previous volume with enough force Tibs was sent back against the stone wall and lost his concentration, choking on the water and having to fight to access his air essence to pull enough around him so he could breathe.

He smiled as the creature was not only nearly at the edge of his sense now, but fleeing as fast as it could undulate.

He returned to the puzzle turned lock, and rotated the rings until it clicked, the sound muffled in the water. He checked inside for another trap and grinned as he noticed the nearly invisible wire over the bundle in the center of the space.

Back to physical triggers on a floor with only essence one. Many rogues would get taken in by it. He traced the wire to the wall, found the gap in the cache's ceiling where he suspected the blade would come across to cut his hand off, and carefully moved the bundle to him without changing the tension on the wire.

With it in his hand, he used water to hold the wire in place and took his other hand out. He let go of the wire and the blade sliced down. He would have lost his hand.

Could clerics regrow hands? Could they reattach one if he brought it to them?

He swam up, then had the water push him to the edge where his friends grabbed and hugged him.

"I'm fine," Tibs protested.

"What happened?" Carina asked. "The water bowed up near the edge and then nothing."

"I thought you were hurt," Jackal said. "Mez nearly jumped in the water."

Tibs looked at the archer in surprise and Mez glowered at him.

"We need you to do the run," he said.

"I chased the creature away by exploding the water between us. I got pushed into the wall." He rubbed the sore spot at the back of his head.

"You chased it away?" Jackal asked. "I didn't think any of the creatures in here did that."

"I'm experimenting with autonomy," Sto said.

"He's experimenting with autonomy," Tibs repeated. "I don't know that last word."

"It means letting it do what it wants," Carina provided.

"I'm not sure letting it run off like it did is what I want, but you're the first one to manage it. The others have been distracting it while the rogue gets the cache open."

"What did you get?" Jackal asked, visibly fighting the urge to take it from him.

Tibs undid the oilskin and exposed a shirt in vibrant green. With it were pants of the same color and a set of supple leather boots. Tibs was disappointed.

"May I?" Khumdar asked, and Tibs handed him the bundle. Considering the lock and the creature guarding it, he'd expected something with essence, at least. Those were just normal clothing.

"This is impressive quality," the cleric said, holding the shirt in a hand. "Definitely silk, the gold embroidery is reminiscent of Paltanian's work."

"You know your shirts," Jackal said in a slightly mocking tone.

“I have...” the cleric’s pause was purposeful. “Traveled.”

“Oh sure, that explains it,” Carina replied with a roll of the eyes.

“So it’s worth coins?” Tibs asked. He knew well-made clothes cost more. He had a set of good clothes Carina had forced him to get that had cost him nearly all the coppers held made on the first floor at one time. Those he got when she wasn’t there only cost a few coppers.

“Tibs, this is something a noble will be willing to pay silver for,” the cleric said, folding the shirt. “A handful of them for the whole set.”

Tibs rolled his eyes. “How about the rest of the town? Nobles spend coins just to show they have it.”

“I expect no one else here would be interested in something like this. This is not clothing you wear when you are behind your shop’s counter. This is made to impress. And in the right crowd, it will indeed impress.”

“And it’s something the guild isn’t interested in,” Jackal said. “That means all the coins go to us. And it means less coins for the noble who buys it, Tibs. We get richer while they get poorer. A definite win.”

“Nobles don’t notice silvers,” Tibs grumbled.

“But I do.” Jackal grinned, putting the bundle in his pack. “Onward,” he proclaimed as he shouldered it. “We have Whippers to whip.”

Sto groaned as they left the bridge room.

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“You can’t do it,” Tibs said, and Mez glared at him, notching an arrow. He wasn’t being insulting. The button that turned off the triggers covering the hall had a crystal wall before it and to the side, angled so it refracted the light. Mez was a great archer, but this was beyond getting his arrow to bounce off the wall to go around an obstruction. He’d have to get it to bounce off something behind the pedestal, and then the crystal wall.

Even with his control over air, Tibs didn’t think he could make that happen, and not at this distance.

With a growl, the archer lowered his bow.

“This was never meant for you, Mez,” Khumdar said, “that you outsmarted the dungeon this many times is something to be proud of.”

The archer closed his eyes and let out a breath. “You’re right.” He glanced at Tibs. “I’m sorry, you... I...” he sighed and finally shook his head. Whatever he was trying to say would be said this time.

“Are you going to be insulted if I’m happy you’re finally forced to do this?” Sto asked.

“No. This is a rogue room more than the bridge.”

“Exactly!”

“How many others have tricked you?” Tibs asked.

“Tricked me?”

“You know, been smarter than you and didn’t have to cross this maze?”

“Only Mez.”

Tibs looked at the archer. “You’re the only one who thought to trick Sto. You should be proud.”

Mez nodded and Tibs looked at the hall. The setup was the standard essence triggers, with each line using all of them so anyone who sensed essence could make their way through. What made it a rogue room was how narrow the area they had to move between each trigger line was. Some would require contorting his body in ways that would not be comfortable. The advantage he had was how far ahead he could sense. Some areas would be even more difficult if he didn’t approach them correctly.

Even if Jackal was a rogue, with his ability to sense essence only in front of his hands, when he reached them, he’d have to break himself in half to fit that angled passage.

Tibs broke the first line and three spears traversed where he’d be if he had entered the maze and ignored the others. He studied the holes in the walls and ceiling and floor. It was possible to be in the right place to survive breaking a line, but the maneuvering room to do so was minimal.

“We don’t have to do this,” Carina said, and Tibs looked at Jackal, waiting for the protest. The fighter couldn’t get his fight against Sto if Tibs didn’t do this.

“Tell me you can do this, Tibs. Otherwise, we’re turning around.”

“Is he joking?” Sto asked.

“I don’t think he is,” Ganny answered. “Looks like you come seconds to Tibs.”

“Third,” Sto said with a grumble. “Loot comes before me.”

Tibs smiled. “I can do this, but it’s going to be slow.” He was happy he wore nothing over his armor. Loose clothing would be a hazard here.

“Then go for it,” Jackal said. “Show the dungeon you’re better than it is.”

Tibs rolled his eyes. “I’m not showing up anyone. I’m just surviving this.”

The fighter grinned. “And that’s going to show it, isn’t it?”

Instead of answering, Tibs stepped into the hall, between the lines of essence that were close enough to be a wall on each side. This was sort of like the maze to turn the triggers off on the bridge, only instead of having to keep the essence within the lines, he had to keep his body. He bent forward as he turned sideways, the passage narrowing as it angled. As it turned again, he crouched, having the room to do it here. While it disappeared when he’d reach where the height came down.

He lowered himself to the floor, and only the sound of stone on stone warned him.

Jackal yelled his name as Tibs fought the pain as the spear pierced his leg. He wrapped essence around the wound once the spear retracted.

“I’m okay,” he yelled back. He studied the space before rolling on his back. He tightened the essence until his leg was straight. This was going to make the rest more difficult, but he was halfway there, and he could see a path that would take him nearly all the way without having to stand.

He crawled, paying extra attention to where his leg dragged. He’d already had three close calls, and he was nearly out. He was against the wall now, but the next passage required him to climb part of the way to get through. The wall had good handholds, but his injured leg...

He considered simply running across, trying to outrun the spears, but Sto didn't want anyone to run this maze. The final set of spears didn't have any gaps in them. Even without his injury, he couldn't make it through, and he couldn't see the holes in the walls and ceiling to work out where the safe spots were there.

But he could here; not that there was one. Sto had covered this well enough to ensure the rogue needed to climb.

Unless they were willing to take a risk.

Right now, that risk seemed like better odds than climbing with an injured leg. He looked at the ceiling, plotted the angles. There were no safe spots, but there were less damaging ones. If he was quick enough.

He let out a breath and rolled.

He stopped on his side as he coated his upper body in ice. The spear pushed him as it slid against it, ripping a line through the ice and slicing his back. He bit back the pain. Mostly cut skin, by the way his essence reacted, but the ice added to the pain.

"I'm okay," he said, once he had that wrapped in essence. But his friends kept yelling his name. "I'm okay!"

He used the wall to push himself to his feet. He had to be standing for the rest. Three turns and he was out. Only one of which was going to be a problem.

He carefully hobbled through the first turn, then tried to work out how to bend and not lose his balance for the next one. He was nearly there. Could he run it?

No, not in his condition.

So he bent, and leaned forward to match the angle, and nearly ran a hand through a line trying to maintain it. Stopping himself at the last moment and dragging his injured leg forward instead, which caused him to wobble as pain lanced up.

Once he could breathe, he tried again, this time using water to create an ice pillar for him to use as support as he crept into the angled turn. Then it was another normal turn, and he was standing next to the pillar with the button.

He slammed his hand down on it before letting himself fall against the pillar and to the floor.

"I almost thought you wouldn't make there for a moment," Sto said.

Tibs looked up. "Yeah. Me too." He closed his eyes and decided unconsciousness would be nice for a while.