

“So...” Jackal nodded toward the sorcerer at the counter, speaking with Mez, as Tibs sat at their table. “You don’t hate his guts anymore?”

“We talked.” Immediately, that sounded inadequate. “I listened. He didn’t lie when he said he was scared we wouldn’t let him on the team.”

“He was correct,” Khumdar said. “Without Tirania forcing the issue, you would not have allowed him to join.”

“I know.” Tibs watched the exchange between the archer and sorcerer turn heated, and people step away from them. It was mainly Mez talking and gesturing, and Don looking penitent. “I couldn’t see past how he’d been.” He shrugged. “But I believe him when he says he wants to be better.”

“Believe?” the cleric asked. “Or know?”

“He’s being truthful when he says he wants to change,” Tibs replied. “That’s what light sees. I can’t know if he’ll stick to it.”

“You have to get Void for that,” Jackal said between bites.

“I’d rather not.” Tibs shuddered. “They all seem to turn strange.”

Kroseph placed a plate of spicy smelling meats and vegetables before Tibs. “I’m proud of you.” He squeezed his shoulder, putting the tankard next to the plate.

Tibs didn’t feel like he’d done anything worth being proud about. It had taken being confronted by his own hypocrisy before he’d done the right thing.

The server nodded to Don in greetings as they crossed path, then he and the archer sat at the table.

“You two going to be okay?” Jackal asked.

“We’ll see.” Mez started eating, then paused. “But you don’t have to worry about me shooting him in the back anymore.”

“He made it clear he’d look me in the eye before planting an arrow into me,” Don added.

“It’s always good to know it’s coming,” Jackal said. “That way, you can think about what you did to deserve it.”

“Thank you for the advice,” the sorcerer said, sarcasm slipping into the tone. “I’ll make sure to face you next time you deserve being punched.”

Mez rolled his eyes. “Shot him with corruption. You’ll just break your hand if you punch him.”

“And I do not believe that is an action warranting the use of a healing potion.” Khumdar added.

“We know clerics, don’t we?” Don asked.

The cleric smiled. “But how many of them like you?”

Don opened his mouth, closed it, then narrowed his eyes at Tibs. “You know. I’m starting to regret this ‘being better’ thing.” The words glowed. “It was a lot easier to get stuff when I just went around scaring people into giving it to me.”

“Poor little sorcerer,” Mez said. “However, shall you survive it?”

“You are so lucky I promised to be nicer to you, Mezano,” Don said, trying to sound threatening.

The archer beamed. “Don’t worry, I’ll take full advantage of that.”

“Jackal, can I get your permission to punch the archer?”

“Not unless he does something to deserve it,” the fighter answered, barely pausing in eating.

“He’s—” Don sighed. “You know, you guys are supposed to be the nice ones.”

“But this is us being nice,” Jackal replied in an offended tone. “We let you back on the team, didn’t we?”

“Just so I could suffer,” Don muttered.

“You simply aren’t seeing the way they torture each other,” Kroseph said as he placed food and drink before the sorcerer. “Don’t worry, once the novelty passes, you’ll see they aren’t treating you any different than they treat each other.” He paused. “Other than Tibs. He has this way of never ending up on the receiving end of the other’s barbs.”

“I’m a rogue,” Tibs replied casually. “We’re good at avoiding blame.”

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Tibs walked among the booths filling the field in front of the cliff wall. It seemed that each time he was here, there were more of them, as well as buildings. If this kept up, there would be no telling Kragle Rock from the dungeon’s waiting area. It was probably what had happened with the purity dungeon.

Merchants hawked their wares to the Runners waiting for their turn in the dungeon, or others looking at what was available, and how it could help them survive.

Tibs’s immediate reaction was annoyance at the merchant taking advantage of newer Runners with barely any coins to spend. But as he looked at them, dressed in worn, but better clothing and armor than he remembered getting from Sto even after a month of running him, he realized that he might be wrong about how few coins they had, or how inexperienced the surviving Runners were.

Had Sto become more generous on the first floor? Had Tibs been too focused on everything else he needed to do to notice the faster improvement? Everyone assembled had an element, which spoke to experience.

He found the team he was assigned to easily enough. Palden argued with one of the guards at the bottom of the steps. They were better equipped than the other teams. Palden and Silus, the metal user, were garbed in chain mail. Palden had a mace hooked to his belt and a shield on his back, while his brother had a sword on each hip. The archer, Carlan, wore heavy leather armor and held an intricately carved bow. Lamberto’s armor was lighter, more thick fabrics with leather sewed where he needed more protection, and he had a handful of knives at his belt. Gabrielle had on the usual sorcerer’s robe, although hers was decorated with symbols in black threads throughout the light blue material.

It all looked like it had been purchased just before they stepped onto the field and had light weaves of varying elements that Tibs figured added protection and efficacy as the items demanded.

“Tibs!” Lamberto yelled, waving enthusiastically. “We’re here!”

He pushed the annoyance down. It was like the boy didn’t understand the danger they were preparing for. Did he think this was a visit to...MountainSea? He couldn’t think of anything even close to a dungeon that wouldn’t feel life threatening.

“You,” Palden demanded. “Tell him to let us through.”

“Is it your turn?” Tibs asked.

“We’re early,” Silus answered.

“The other team isn’t out,” the guard said.

“Then we’re waiting,” Tibs said.

The guard looked them over. “It’s only five to a team.”

Tibs took the paper the clerk had delivered to his room this morning, along with letting him know today was when Lamberto’s team went in, and handed it over. “They’re getting...preferential treatment.” He couldn’t tell if he’d kept the disgust out of his voice. “As per Tirania’s instructions.”

“Then we’re going in now,” Palden stated.

“No.” Tibs faced the team leader. “Only one team on a floor at a time. The schedule told you when your time was. If the team isn’t out by then, it’s fine to go in since they’ll be considered to have fed the dungeon. How often does that happen on the first floor?” he asked without turning.

“It hasn’t happened since I’ve joined.” The guard handed the paper back to Tibs.

“Then we wait until they exit.” He led them away. “How much training do you have with your weapons?”

“I’ll be happy to give you a demonstration,” Silus said, smiling menacingly as he ran a hand over the pommel of a sword. Tibs couldn’t tell if the eagerness was because he felt Tibs needed to put in his place, or the noble just liked fighting too much.

“Fighting isn’t allowed outside of the training fields.”

The fighter snorted.

“We’ve all had as much training as we could get before coming,” Gabrielle said.

“How good are you with those?” He asked Lamberto, indicating the knives at his belt.

“I’m okay.”

“You should get a sword,” Tibs replied. “I can introduce you to a merchant that won’t scam you.”

“But I’m the team’s rogue,” Lamberto protested. “Rogues use knives.”

“Rogues use whatever gives them the best chance to win.” He formed his sword, and only Lamberto didn’t step back. Instead, the noble rogue looked at the jagged blade with awe. Tibs was starting to think anything he’d do would cause that reaction. “We don’t follow the rules.”

“Light-Fingers,” the guard called. “You’re up.”

The team walking down the stairs had ripped and bloody armor and clothes, but they were grinning, and there were five of them.

Palden hurried up the steps, and the others kept up with him. Tibs trailed behind.

The guard at the door stopped him, and Tibs handed the paper.

“Should we start expecting this with all the noble teams?” she asked, handing it back after reading it.

“I hope not,” Tibs muttered. She smiled, and he added. “You need to check with Irdian or Tirania. She only told me about this one run. I don’t plan on doing this again.”

“Tibs?” Sto asked once he was on the other side of the door. “What are you doing here? There’s already five of them. And you’re much stronger than they are.”

“I’m just escorting them,” he whispered, even if the others were already at the trigger room’s entrance. “They’ll do all the work.”

“So, you aren’t here to make sure they survive?”

Tibs snorted. It was what Tirania had implied when she said she wanted them to have a good impression of the dungeon, but he had no intention of doing more than offering advice. She knew now Galdain had no choice in moving here; he'd told her. He might even have managed not to sound mocking in the process. So whatever need to impress the noble she still felt was on her.

"About time you arrived," Palden said. He motioned to the room. "Lead the way."

Tibs got an impression of straight walls with decorations before the fighter was in his face. "Listen here, street-trash. I'm the leader of this team, and you're going to do what I tell you."

"Palden," Lamberto said, trying to interpose himself. "Don't be like that. Tibs's nice enough to—"

The fighter shoved him away. "Don't get involved, Lamb. You'll just get hurt."

"It's okay, Lamberto," Tibs said, smiling. Gabrielle helped her brother to his feet. "I can handle him."

The fighter snorted.

"Just say the word, Palden," Silus said, hands gripping the pommel of his still sheathed swords. "We're in the dungeon now, kid. We can do anything we want to you."

"You are," Tibs replied, the smile slowly forming, "in my dungeon. So think about what you're planning to do carefully. Whatever training you received? I got mine surviving three floors in here. None of your trainers were as merciless as this dungeon. I've lost countless friends to him. And the only reason I didn't join them is that I got better."

"You think I'm impressed that someone like you was lucky and cheated his way through all this?" Silus sneered.

"Luck's not a thing."

"Okay," Sto grumbled. "I don't like him."

"And I don't care if you're impressed or not," Tibs continued. "Surviving in here didn't teach me to go easy on those who attack me."

"You can't kill us," Palden stated.

"If you mean I'm not strong enough to do it, you're wrong. If you mean I'm not allowed..." he locked eyes with the leader. "Like your brother pointed out. We're in the dungeon. If I'm the only one who walks out, who's going to question how you died?"

"Tibs?" Lamberto asked, worried.

He let out a breath and pushed his mounting anger down. "That isn't my plan, Lamberto. I'm just going to injure them, and then they'll have to worry about surviving the run in that state." He shifted his attention to Silus. "If you want that, Palden? Tell your brother to attack me. Otherwise, you're wasting time." He motioned to the time shield atop the wall. "That's how long until the next team come is. The more time you spend trying to convince me I have to obey you, the less you have to reach the boss room. Which one is more important to you?"

The sound of Silus pulling his sword out was the only one accompanying the glare Tibs could feel from their leader.

"Fine," Palden said when the swords were half unsheathed.

"Stop!" Lamberto called out.

"What do you want, Lamb?" Palden snapped, turning away from putting a foot inside

the trap room to face him.

“You really want to walk through that without knowing it’s safe?” Gabrielle said while Lamberto was fighting against withering under the glare.

“There’s nothing there!”

“And what did Father say about dungeons?” Carlan asked in a calm tone.

Palden ground his teeth. “Nothing’s ever easy.” He moved away from the room’s entrance. “Fine. Lamb, make yourself useful.”

Lamberto stepped to the edge, and Tibs joined him.

The room had indeed changed. There were no traces of the cavern from his runs. It was a six-sided room, with irregular tiles over the floor. The walls were covered with colored hexagonal tiles, with the stone spear holes hidden in the shadowed gaps between them. It seemed Sto had removed those from the floor.

The cache stood out to him, but he studied the colors, finding the patterns in them and matching them to the tiles on the floor. Sensing those which had triggers, real and decoys, showed him the code hidden within how the wall was tiled.

It was relatively simple to decode, he thought, so long as Lamberto thought to study them, then noticed the details on the floor tiles.

“Do you—” The boy swallowed, and when he tried again, there was more confidence in his voice and body language. “Do you have any advice?”

Tibs looked over his shoulder to confirm the others had moved far enough away and were busy talking among themselves.

“Before that. I’m sorry about how I treated you during the party. You were nice to me, and all I did was be rude to you.”

“You don’t have—”

“Don’t excuse bad behavior, Lamberto. Not from anyone.” He fought the urge to glare at Palden’s back. “Especially not from yourself once you realize what you’ve done. As for the room. How much practice do you have with locks, traps, and triggers?”

“I’ve mainly read about them.”

Tibs stared at him. “You’ve...read about them?”

Lamberto nodded. “Father also paid one of the city’s best thief to teach me, but he wouldn’t let him teach me lock picking.” He sounded disappointed.

But Tibs was still stuck on the previous thing. “You read about traps.” The chuckle escaped, and with it some pain, but her memory had lost some of the bite. She’d been right, again. There were books out there about rogue stuff. Why he’d doubted her, or was surprised now, was beyond him. Carina had pretty much always been right.

“What?” Lamberto looked at him strangely.

Tibs shook his head. “Just remembering an argument I had with a friend about books and things thieves would share.” He smiled as he remembered her laughter. “What did your teacher say about traps?”

“That if I’m not careful, I can trigger it instead of disarming it.”

Tibs nodded and looked the room over again, considering what to say. “The first thing about the dungeon is that there’s always a way through the rooms. No two rooms will have the exact same way, but it’s there. And it’s a way that allows everyone on your team to cross it. If a room looks impossible to beat, it’s because you haven’t looked at it the correct way

yet. You need to make them understand that, Lamberto. That the dungeon isn't something you rush blindly through. That's he's clever, and he will outsmart you. You just need to learn from that and get better." He took a breath. "And your team has to learn to respect you. You are as important as each of them. More so, as far as I'm concerned." He smiled. "But what else would a rogue say, right?"

He looked over his shoulder, and Palden was glaring at them. He lowered his voice more. "I know they're your family, but if they can't respect what your role on the team is, you need to find another one. Otherwise, they'll get you killed."

"They aren't that bad," Lamberto said, taking a leather roll from his belt and unrolling it. "It's just that having to come here was upsetting to everyone. Father wouldn't let Palden stay behind and he lost all the friends he had. He was nicer before." He stretched on the floor, with his arms only in enough to work the first tile. "You'll see once you know them better."

Tibs didn't expect he'd ever see that side of them. Nobles would never be nice to someone like him. All the lot of them saw was the Street and—

He forced the thought to stop. They weren't all like that. Amelia treated him with respect. Her friends did too, if begrudgingly. Lamberto treated him like... certainly not like Tibs was street-trash. He had to remember not all nobles were the same.

It would be a lot easier to do if more of them weren't so nasty.

But that didn't mean he could excuse his own bad behavior.

"Another thing. You don't have to finish the floor. If you don't think you can survive a room, you need to get them to turn around so you can all live to try it on your next run."

Lamberto made a noncommittal sound as he used a pick and lever along the tile's gap.

Tibs sensed the pick touch the mechanism and forced himself not to react to the click that caused as the trap triggered. Or at Palden's suddenly being there, pulling his brother away as the stone spear crossed the space over the tile well above where Lamberto had been stretched. Chest height, if he'd been standing.

"You okay, Lamb?" And that was concern in Palden's voice.

"I'm fine," his brother complained, shaking his foot out of the grip.

Silus stepped before Tibs. "Let's make one thing perfectly clear. If you let Lamb be hurt in any way, there isn't going to be enough left behind, once I'm done with you, for the dungeon to eat."

Tibs's only response was to raise an eyebrow at the bravado, but... there was no light on the words. The noble fully intended to go through with it to ensure his brother's survival.

Maybe... Just maybe there was hope for the entire team after all.