

Stepping up-21

“You can’t seriously be doing that,” Jackal told Pyan as Tibs approached them. She was sitting at her usual table at the inn, Jackal standing next to her, looking exasperated. “You’re a team leader, you can’t just join another team.”

She looked up at him. “And what has being a leader gotten me? Geoff’s dead.” She took a long swig of her tankard; there were three more on the table. “Everybody’s going to die. I might as well just be one of them. And Tihomil’s a good team leader.”

As Tibs reached the table, Jackal took one tankard and sniffed it, making a face. “Who’s Tihomil?”

“You shouldn’t be drinking this stuff, Pyan,” Jackal said as placed the tankard down.

“Oh, you’re one to speak.” She glared at him, lifting the tankard to her lips. “You’re always drinking.”

“Ale, not this strong stuff.”

“Who’s Tihomil?” Tibs asked again, more forcefully, forcing them to break the glares and look at him.

Kroseph was the one who answered, stepping next to Tibs. “He’s one of the most recent Upsilon.”

“Another,” Pyan said. Motioning to the tankard on the table.

Kroseph pursed his lips. “I agree with Jackal, you shouldn’t have more.”

“I have the coin, server.” She glared at him. “So get me my drinks.” She threw a silver coin at him.

Kroseph caught it with the ease of someone who was catching coins often. He shook his head, looking at it, but took the empties and headed for the bar. Tibs saw Carina at their table, looking over papers.

“Wait, how is one of the Omegas Upsilon already?” he asked Jackal and Pyan. “It’s only been two runs, hasn’t it?”

“You’re forgetting how it was when we were Omega,” Jackal said. “We’d get added to any team missing a member.”

“And the dungeon’s way harder on them than it was on us,” Pyan said bitterly. “So the survivors have to get stronger a lot faster.”

Tibs tried to judge if their last run of the first floor had been that hard. There had been more rats and bunnies, but it hadn’t felt that difficult. Nothing like when he’d been Omega. Which could be it. He was a lot stronger now.

Kroseph placed four tankards on the table. “Please take your time with them, Pyan. Itricion isn’t meant to be downed. You aren’t going to help your new team by being drunk out of your mind.”

“Why don’t you mind your own business, Server?” she replied hatefully.

“You are my business, Pyan. Not just as a customer, but as my friend.”

She snorted. “The only thing you care about is my coins.”

Kroseph opened his mouth, but Jackal placed a hand on his shoulder, shaking his

head.

“Pyan?” Tibs asked as she drank from a new tankard. “How about we go to the training fields and you teach me how to wield a sword? My sickness is gone.”

Jackal looked at him, surprised. As with most nights now, he’d spent it with Kroseph, so he hadn’t been in their room when Tibs returned. For which he’d been grateful. Of his team, the fighter would have been the one to wake up and see him without clothes on. It wouldn’t be the first time, but it would be a first for Tibs coming into the room from the window and Jackal would not miss that opportunity to quip at Tibs’s expense.

“What’s the point,” she replied, putting the tankard down. “It’s not like it’s going to keep you alive.”

“It can’t hurt, can it?”

She narrowed her eyes at him, then looked at the tankards on the table.

“I’m sure Kro’s can keep them for you,” Jackal said.

“Kroseph!” the innkeeper called from the bar.

“I’m taking five, Dad,” Kroseph replied over his shoulder.

“Sorry, but this can’t wait. I need you to go to Gulmer and see if he has any salt. We’re almost out.”

Kroseph frowned. “That can’t be.” He turned and headed for the bar. “There four bags in the cellar.”

“Rats got into them and spilled the content on the floor, and somehow water got in too, and there’s barely enough to last us the day.” Then they were close enough to lower their voice and Tibs couldn’t make the words out.

He refocused on Pyan, who downed another tankard, then smirked at him. “Come on,” she said, standing. “Let’s go waste your time.” She headed for the door.

“Try to keep her busy as long as you can,” Jackal said. “I’m going to try to convince Kro’s dad to stop serving her this stuff.”

Tibs nodded and hurried after her.

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Pyan worked him hard for the next five days, and he had to use his earth essence to strengthen himself and keep his endurance up during the training. She made no secret that she considered it Tibs’s fault she couldn’t get drunk anymore, even if Jackal was the one who’d spoken with the innkeeper.

“Everyone knows, you’re the brains of the team,” she snarled, walking around him as he held a long sword before him, his arm shaking. “He doesn’t do anything you haven’t told him to.”

Tibs had pointed out he only wanted to use a short sword, and she’d yelled at him that if he wanted her to train him, he was going to do things her way. So he endured it. Using only enough essence to keep his arm from failing entirely.

On the sixth day, she had a run with her new team, so Tibs used that time to look at the new arrivals. The guild was bringing in yet more convicts to replace all those who’d died.

On the next day, Pyan didn’t show up to the training field, and when Tibs went to the

inn, expecting to find her at her table, empty tankards before her, he found Tandy, Karl, and Amid, solemn and silent.

He turned around, his eyes stinging. He climbed to the inn's roof and then ran his pain away.

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The house wasn't what Tibs expected.

Sebastian had bought a house that had been built on what was then the outskirts of the town, but it had remained unoccupied while the town grew around it, and now it was surrounded by houses owned by nobles. It was two levels, the ground floor being twice as large. It had a yard delineated by the surrounding buildings, which had no yards.

It was a noble thing, Tibs decided, to have houses that took the entire ground allocated to them. The townsfolk who had houses all had yards.

He walked the roofs around it, looking the building over. The windows, the roof, before jumping to it, and lowering himself to a second-story window. Only to stop before reaching to check if it was locked.

Essence was woven through it. It was woven through every window and door in the building. He retreated to the roof and considered the situation. The weave on the window was complex, not the triggers Sto used. They felt more like what made the magical items like his shoes, Tirania's communication crystal, the armors, although the complexity was closer to the crystal than anything else. Could essence be used to make a lock?

He needed to ask Alistair.

But right now he wanted to get in. See what Jackal's father had. Maybe figure out what he was up to, which, he groaned, would mean reading. But he needed to get in first. He looked up, watching the smoke drift up. Then he was standing and looking into the chimney.

There was a fire. He could see its light, but that was no longer a problem for him. The fit would be tight, but the nice thing about being small was that tight could still be done.

Feet on one side and back on the other, he lowered himself until he approached the first fireplace and heard a voice above the crackling.

"This isn't much," Sebastian said.

"Yes, sir," a man answered. "We have to be careful not to alert the others."

"I understand. How is that coming along? Any luck reminding them where their allegiances are?"

The other man hesitated. "The problem is more how to make sure they won't be detected. Until we have a way to shield them, there's—"

Sebastian's sigh was annoyed. "Fine. I have the craftsman working on making more, but it's going to take time. How about the project I gave you?"

"That's coming along. Again, I have to be careful, but they'll learn the error of their way."

"Good. And finally, my son?"

"He won't listen. As you requested, I explained it's best he returns home, takes up the studies you've prepared for him, but he considers himself a Runner, not your son. When I insist, he brings up the guild, and he's right in that they won't let him go, at least not until

he's Epsilon."

Another annoyed sigh.

"If I may, sir?" a pause. "Why your insistence on him? You have other children, some much better qualified, Serba could—"

"No. Jackie will take over for me. It's his duty. He'll see it in time."

"If you say so, sir."

"I know so. You're dismissed." Steps walked away. A door opened and closed, then silence. Movement, crystal clinking, liquid pouring out. A sigh. "Why, Jackie. Why are you fighting your destiny so hard? I explained it to you. She read it on your birth. No one but you can ensure our family's survival."

Crystal clinking again, steps. The door opening and closing.

Tibs lowered himself until he could look through the fire. The fireplace had a grate. He pulled his sleeve up to keep it out of the fire and pushed on it. It didn't move. Locked in place. Sebastian was more careful than the nobles. Which made sense. The man was in charge of the criminals in his city. He knew what they were capable of.

He'd report what he heard to Jackal and his friend would know what to do with it.