

## Stepping up-10

Carina twirled in place, then ran a hand down her robe, smoothing it down.

Tibs looked up from the slate on his lap and chuckled. She'd written words in neat curved letters and he was trying to figure them out. It didn't give him the headache from months ago when he started learning, but he still didn't enjoy it, so watching his friend enjoy her loot from the run was a nice distraction.

The robe had cost him the amulets, and Carina had to hand over coins. Tibs, Jackal, and the others had offered to help, but she'd refused. She had the coin, so she would handle it. Other than the amulets, there had been few enchanted items, and the guild didn't care about normal ones; those they sold to Darran.

The robe moved as if the thick wool it was made of was thinner and lighter. There was essence woven through it, earth and air, and others. Tibs figured earth meant it was tougher, air accounted for the way it moved. What the other essence did Tibs couldn't think of. What else could a robe benefit from other than being tougher and lighter?

She smiled at him. "Sorry."

"Why?" Tibs asked, chucking again. He took out his air knife and made it float over his hand. "I still enjoy doing this."

"I should be helping you learn your letters, not parading."

"Sitting next to me frowning isn't going to make me learn faster." He sheathed the knife and rested his head against the wall. "I don't think anything will."

"You'll get it. It isn't something easy, but don't get discouraged." She touched the amulet at her neck as she sat on the chair next to Tibs's bed.

It reminded Tibs he'd wanted to address this when they left the dungeon the day before, but he'd forgotten, with watching Jackal be healed, then dealing with the loot.

"It's not full yet?" he asked.

She shook her head. "It's going to be a few days before it is. I don't feel like spending hours focusing on speeding it up." He indicated the slate on his lap. "You might find this boring, but it's nothing compared to staring at an amulet and pulling essence out of the air into it. *That's* boring." She frowned. "But you know that, right?"

Tibs nodded. He remembered the hours holding his first amulet, eyes fixed on it. Pushing water essence from around him into it as hard as he could and only a trickle making it in. He didn't miss doing it that way.

"How do you draw essence out of it?" he asked.

"I just do," she answered.

Tibs shook his head. "We don't just do something with essence. We have to know what we're doing. We learned the," he searched for a word, "shape of our essence?" he shrugged, but she nodded her understanding of his meaning. "It's the same with interacting with the amulet. We are doing something when drawing from it, it doesn't just happen."

"I hadn't thought about it, but I guess you had to."

"I keep draining my reserve." He made a puddle of water in his hand. "That's about all

my reserve. If I spill it, I feel it. I make it a little larger and I'd find out what happens if someone drains their reserve entirely."

"I've read that you can sever your link to your essence doing that," she said, biting her lower lip.

"I didn't know that." He was happy he never tried it. "But because of it, I learned to quickly pull from my amulet into my reserve. I don't really think about it anymore." He absorbed the water.

She looked at the hand he kept extended before him. She was smart, she'd figured it out. Not that Tibs minded explaining things, but Carina enjoyed thinking.

"So, when you make the puddle, you refilled your reserve."

Tibs nodded.

"Then where did the water you just absorb go?"

"Back in my reserve," He said.

Her frowning deepened. "But it was full, right?"

He nodded again.

"Did you figure out a way to overfill your reserve?"

"Alistair said it's dangerous."

"But you've done it before, when you fought Bardik."

Tibs had told her and Jackal the details of the fight. Mez and Khumdar hadn't been present, and neither had expressed curiosity about it when they'd returned.

"That wasn't by choice, and it's my core essence, it was able to overflow through my body. I don't think I can do that with the other essences. So no, I can't overfill it."

She nodded slowly. "Then, how can you reabsorb the water?"

"By first emptying my reserve."

She looked at the bed, around him.

"I don't think trickery would be useful here," Tibs said, chuckling. "I'm not trying to show I'm better than you. I'm trying to teach you something."

"Then I don't understand how you did it. The only way to lower your reserve to make the space for the essence you absorbed is to take out essence, but if you didn't make water elsewhere, there's nowhere for it to go." She trailed off, and Tibs waited. She was realizing she'd made a mistake in what she said, but she wasn't sure what it was.

She took her amulet and looked at it. "You draw from the amulet into your reserve, whereas I pull directly from it into whatever I want to do."

"I used to do that. I'd pull the water over my body to my hand for whatever I needed to do with it."

"Used to," she mused. "But now you pull directly to your reserve."

"It feels faster. Like I said, I barely have to think about it anymore."

"So the question is, why would it only work in one direction?"

Tibs smiled.

"And it refills faster that way?"

He nodded. "Almost as fast as I can refill my own reserve."

She nodded. "It takes me a few minutes if I'm drained, and the amulet has a larger reservoir, but even if it's ten times larger, I'd still fill it under an hour, instead of the hours of intense concentration it takes me right now." She looked at him. "How do you do it?"

"I treat the amulet as just another part of my reserve. I realized that when I had to draw quickly from it to ice the floor the first time we took down the first-floor boss. My teacher was amused he'd never noticed that when I explained it to him."

She nodded slowly. "Right. It is a reserve, and because it's air essence, it's like my reserve, so..." she trailed off into an extended silence. When she let the amulet drop to her neck, she looked disappointed. "I'm going to have to work on that some more before I can do it, I think. So let's get you back to your letters."

Tibs stifled an inward groan.

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Tibs walked onto the fighter's training field, where two dozen of boys and girls fought with swords. Most were dressed in shabby clothes that marked them as Street, or close to it, while a handful had clothing that looked more like fighting uniforms. Staying tight to their bodies to avoid impeding their motion. He was surprised to recognize one girl in shabby clothing, other than the pants, which looked new. He didn't know her, but she was part of the group his team had run into when they'd exited Sto's second floor that first time. Or was it the second? Those pants were probably from the trap-room's cache.

"Can I help you?" a muscular woman said, with metal gray eyes. She didn't have a sword at her hip, but the belt had wear where the scabbard would be attached.

"I want to learn how to use a sword. A short one would probably be best, I think."

She looked him over. He'd worn his armor since he figured training would involve getting hit. Jackal had come back from his training with bruises before he'd learned to use earth to harden his skin.

"You're Light Fingers, aren't you?"

Tibs ground his teeth. "It's Tibs."

She nodded. "You're a rogue. If you want to learn something, go to that field."

"All they teach there is the knife. I want more reach, but I don't think I'm strong enough for that longer sword." He indicated the one a better-dressed woman was using.

"You should have thought about that before," she said dismissively. "You're a rogue. Rogues use knives. If you wanted a sword, you should have joined the fighters."

"Not every rogue uses a knife. Just like not every fighter uses a sword. My team leader doesn't use any weapons."

She shrugged. "What did do when I'm done teaching them is their business. You're not Omega anymore, so get yourself a teacher if you want to learn the sword. The guild had plenty of sword wielders who could use something to occupy their time." She walked away to deal with one of the fighters. Tibs watched as she adjusted his footing.

Could he learn on his own? He wasn't asking a quick fighter to teach him, they'd just add gold to what he'd have to repay for all the teaching he already had no choice in taking once he reached Epsilon.

He could grab one now. Everyone was distracted and they wouldn't notice one less

sword from the pile of them. But then what? He knew from Bardik's and Tandy's teaching with the knife that it wasn't as simple as swinging it around. There were proper stances, a right way of moving.

What he needed was someone he knew, a friend, willing to teach him. Maybe Jackal remembered enough of his early days when he had to fight with a sword to teach him? Or, Tibs realized, he could ask someone who still used a sword. She wasn't exactly a friend, but their teams were friendly enough to train as a group together.

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"Okay," Pyan said, hand on Tibs's head, with him, arm extended, knife in hand not even reaching her stomach. "I get your point." She chuckled. "But aren't you rogue all about sneaking and catching me unaware? Carrying a sword at your hip is going to get in the way of that."

Tibs stepped back and sheathed the knife. At least Pyan hadn't dismissed him outright when he'd asked her to teach him sword fighting, even if she hadn't understood why he wanted to before the demonstration. And she still didn't, it seemed.

"In a town, I can sneak around and surprise you, but the dungeon isn't giving me a lot of that. Except for two rooms, the creatures are waiting for us. It's hard to sneak when they're looking at you the whole time. I can throw my knives, but I'm not very good at it."

"You'll get better the more you practice."

"But I have to survive for that to happen."

She nodded. "I don't know if you're strong enough to wield a sword, Tibs. It's not—"

Tibs quickly grabbed the sword out of the scabbard at her hip, using earth essence to strengthen his arm as he raised it to her chest. He opened his mouth to brag, but pain lanced through his arm, making him drop the sword as it cramped, and he cursed, cradling it.

"Tibs?" She hesitated.

"I'm okay," he said between breaths. So long as he didn't jostle it, the pain was tolerable. "It's that damned corruption." It would pass, in time. The question was, would it take minutes or hours?

"From when you saved the dungeon," she said, a bit of awe in her voice, and he glared at her. He endured it from strangers, people who weren't Runners, but she'd have done the same thing if she'd been the one Sto had called. He was not different from any of them. He was just another Runner.

"I thought the clerics had healed you," she said.

"They couldn't clear the corruption, they figure there was just too much of it in my body." They weren't wrong. There had been so much it had seeped into his essence, tainting it. "A lot of it cleared out over time, but what's left doesn't seem to want to go away and every so often." He indicated his arm. "That happens."

She picked up her sword and studied the edge.

"Sorry, I wasn't planning on dropping it."

"It's okay." She ran a finger along the edge and Tibs felt her use essence. "But if your arm seizes up like this, I'm not sure trying to learn sword fighting is going to help you." She sheathed it. "Does it happen when you strain?"

“Not always. Sometimes it just happens.”

“And the clerics can’t do anything for it?”

Tibs shook his head.

“I’m surprised, they’re purity, you’d think they could remove corruption out of someone.”

They couldn’t even tell he had corruption in him anymore. How were they going to remove it? He didn’t like it, but she might be right. What was the point of learning the sword if all he’d end up doing was dropping it? Or falling when his leg cramped.

“Hey Py,” Geoff greeted the fighter before kissing her cheek. “Hey Tibs, what’s taking you to our little training ground.” The archer indicated the little field they stood in. They were at the edge of the town, between houses and the spikes marking the perimeter limiting where they could go. On one side, a new house was under construction.

“Tibs wants me to teach him sword fighting,” Pyan said, “but he isn’t fully healed from his battle, so I’m not sure it’s the right time.”

Geoff watched Tibs’s cradled arm. “She right, you need to make sure you’re healthy before you can properly learn a new skill. It’s going to take a lot out of you.”

Tibs nodded. “I just want to be more useful to my team in the dungeon.”

“Says the person who took on an adventurer by himself,” Geoff replied, “and won.” He looked at Tibs seriously. “Tibs, I don’t think anyone of us would even have dared try it, let alone manage to win. Don’t undervalue yourself.”

“You’d have done it,” Tibs said. “The dungeon is our life. If you’d known what was happening, you would have done everything you could to protect it.”

Pyan and Geoff exchanged a look. “I’d like to think you’re right, Tibs,” she said. “But you’re the one who did it. Geoff’s right, you showed how valuable you are when you did that, even if we ignore all the ways you’ve been helpful to your team before that. You were the first ones to open the first-floor boss room.”

“But I probably wasn’t the first one to notice it. I just happened to have water as my element, which let me pick the lock without tools. Of someone else—”

“Tibs, the facts someone else could have done it doesn’t make what you did less valuable,” Geoff said. “I did a run with you, remember? I know you’re smart, capable, and eager to help. That makes you a great teammate. Once you’re fully healed, you’ll be even greater, but now, that’s what you should focus on. Take it easy, rest, let that resolve itself, then see about learning skills that will make you an even greater rogue.”

Tibs nodded. The pain his in arm lessened, but he knew better than to try to move his arm. It would loosen on its own. Forcing it would just make this take longer.

“Now,” Pyan said, with the tone of voice Jackal used when he was about to hint at something he and Krosel were going to do, “if you don’t mind; me and my man have some things to take care of.”

Geoff grinned and winked at Tibs. Yep, they were off to do them things. He waved at them before leaving them. He hoped they weren’t planning on doing that there. Even Jackal wasn’t such an idiot as to do stuff like that where others could see.

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Jackal sat on his bed when Tibs entered their room. His shoulders were slumped, his head down. He was looking at his hands like he didn't know whose they were. Carina and Khumdar were there too, standing away and watching the fighter warily.

"What happened?" Tibs demanded. Mez wasn't there, but as far as he knew, he was with his special girl, being looked after. Tibs's healing had left him with a mild fever.

"I'm Lambda," Jackal said, sounding like that was the worse thing to happen to him.

"How?" Carina asked.

"Isn't that a good thing?" Khumdar said.

"Something about having to hold myself together when I was stone pushed my essence throughout my body, which is what's needed to graduate from Rho to Lambda."

"Were you even Rho?" Carina asked.

Jackal shook his head. "They were testing me to see if I'd graduated to Rho, that was easy, Tibs showed us how to stop thinking of our essence as the element, I did it so easily they figured they'd see where I stand on the next test and I passed that too."

"What was the test?" Tibs asked.

"It doesn't matter. It's an element thing. You won't get the same one."

"I still do not understand why you are acting as if you had learned your father was ill," Khumdar said

Jackal snorted. "Trust me, this isn't the face I'm going to make if someone tells me my dad's sick." He rubbed his face. "The problem is that I'm too strong for this level of dungeon. The dungeon is epsilon. The guild only allows one teammate to be Rho, and I'm Lambda."

"They can't kick you off our team," Tibs stated, tone hard. He wouldn't let them do that.

"They considered it," Jackal replied. "From what my teacher said, there was serious talk about sending me to a different dungeon, one with a floor for Lambda adventurers."

"But you're not an adventurer, you're a Runner," Tibs said.

Jackal nodded. "Got that right, but Hard Knuckles, of all people, convinced them I needed to stay here."

"Would he not want you away from his town?" Khumdar asked. "He has made it clear he does not like you. This would have been a perfect opportunity."

"Yeah," Jackal said bitterly. "Which makes me wonder what that guy's planning."

Tibs had a vague memory of his time while being sick with corruption. He wasn't sure if the guard leader had been there or if he'd dreamed it, or exactly what he'd said, but Tibs had been left with the sense the animosity Harry felt toward Jackal wasn't as strong as he acted as it was, and that it had something to do with Tibs being there.

"Okay, so you're staying. That's good, right?" Tibs asked.

"Yeah," Jackal said bitterly. "You're even still the team that's stuck with me."

"Alright," Carina, "that explains the long face. We all know you can't stand us."

Jackal smiled, but it faltered. "The problem is that rule about only one Rho in a team. How close are any of you to being Rho?"

They looked at each other. Tibs knew what his test was, and he knew he could pass it

now.

“I am afraid I am not familiar with that rule,” Khumdar said, “nor do I expect the guild to be able to rate my level, as they do not normally train clerics.”

“When the dungeon graduated,” Carina said, “Harry explained to the nobles that the reason the guild didn’t allow them to have Lambda or above on their team was that the dungeon is too low to allow it and that because of that, they also only allowed one Rho level member on any team.”

“Can they enforce that?” Khumdar asked, and raised his hand as Tibs and the others glared at him. “I do not ask if they are allowed. I mean, how long until so many Runners are Rho that it is no longer possible to have five people teams with more than one person who is of that level?”

“He’s right,” Tibs said. “So long as we wait until it’s like that to reveal we can graduate, they won’t be able to break up the team.”

“Are we going to have control over it, though?” Carina asked. “My instructor wants me to be tested each time I come back from a run. The only reason I wasn’t tested this time is that he didn’t realize we were going first. I don’t know how long I’ll be able to fail the test without him realizing I’m doing it on purpose.”

“Would Tibs not be able to talk with the guild leader and convince her to not disband our team, even if there is more than one member who is Rho?” Khumdar asked.

Jackal and Carina looked at Tibs.

He sighed. “Isn’t that going to be like us going before everyone else? If we’re the only ones who aren’t broken up, people aren’t going to be happy.”

“Can anyone tell what rank we are?” Carina asked. “You might not be able to hide it, once the story of how you survived spreads.”

Jackal snorted. “It’s already spreading. Clerics are gossips, it turns out.”

“Still, for the rest of us. Unless we do anything in public that draws attention to how strong we’ve gotten, who will know?”

“You mean like a certain someone running roofs and leaping further than should be possible?” Jackal asked, looking at Tibs.

“What? I can’t do that.”

“You mean you aren’t running around testing how to use the other essences you have?” the fighter asked, smiling.

“I have, but I don’t have enough air essence to manage it.”

“Are you saying there’s another one out there running the roofs?”

Tibs shrugged. “You’re the one who said it. But I doubt I’m the only rogue who runs the roofs anymore. Not that I’ve done it since coming back. With the corruption in me, it’s too risky. If my leg cramps when I’m landing, I’m going to fall along the slope of a roof and break my neck when I hit the ground.”

“Then it’s definitely someone else,” Jackal said. “The stories I’ve heard has it happening over the last week.”

“I’ve been here every night,” Tibs pointed out, then sighed. “I hope it’s going to go away because if there hadn’t been water in the pool when my arm cramped in the dungeon,

that would have killed me. I was nearly killed when my leg buckled under me in a fight already.” Maybe he should remove himself from the team so they wouldn’t suffer from his problem. With the guild breaking teams who had more than one member at Rho, that would be a way to do it without having to die.

Tibs’s head snapped up. “What did you say?” he’d been so lost in his head he’d barely heard Jackal, but there had been ‘ask’ and ‘corruption’ he was sure, even if he couldn’t see how that was possible.

“I said that considering you can do the audience thing with other elements, maybe you should just jump in the corruption pool and go ask it to remove it.”

Tibs stared at Jackal. “That has to be the stupidest...” he trailed off. Yeah, it was stupid.

But...