

Stepping up-16

Jackal looked at the assembled people Tibs brought to the training field. “I thought you said they were a team. I count eight of them.”

“They’re Omega,” Tibs replied. “Team’s a loose term at that stage.”

“And you want us to train them,” he stated. He didn’t sound for or against it. When Tibs had explained what he wanted, Jackals and Carina had exchanged a look, then agreed. Khumdar and Mez had come with them, although Tibs wasn’t sure if either were interested in helping.

“Are we even allowed to do that?” Mez asked.

“The rule says we can’t talk about the dungeon,” Carina said. “Nothing in it about helping teach the new arrivals.”

“I believe,” Khumdar said, “that is because there are not usually new conscripts after the initial group, and those who pay to come, will have received the needed training before.”

“If it ain’t in the rules,” Jackal said, grinning, “We ain’t breaking them. We might have to stop, once Knuckles decides we can’t do this anymore, but until then, let’s take advantage of this and make it as hard as possible for the dungeon to eat one of you.” He looked them over. “Which of you are fighters?”

Three raised their hands, two girls and a guy. The guy looked so excited he was bouncing in place.

“Get a sword and join me.” He walked away. The girls hesitated, but the guy ran to the box with the sword, grabbed one, and was next to Jackal, talking and motioning, nearly stabbing the fighter in the process.

Mez watched them, then sighed. “Archers?” a guy and girl raised their hands. He studied them. “Come with me, we need to go to the archery field.”

Carina looked at the three left over. “You, and you?” she pointed to the two guys left. “You’re sorcerers.” Surprised, they nodded. “I don’t know what I’m going to be able to teach you without you having the starter amulet. I can’t lend you mine since you don’t have an element yet.”

Tibs produced two plain-looking amulets and handed them to the two sorcerers. “These will help.”

Carina narrowed her eyes. “Where did you get them?”

“Darran lent them to me. I have three more since I didn’t know how many would come.”

“Do I want to know where *he* got them?” she asked, taking one and studying it.

Tibs shrugged. “He’s a merchant. I expect he bought it off someone.”

She looked at him doubtfully. “I’ll take two more then. These don’t have much in the way of reserves and I can’t recharge them.”

Tibs handed her two more. Then it was only him and Tara, who didn’t look happy. “Are you going to teach me to pick a pocket?” she demanded, “since you’re so much better?”

Tibs shook his head, taking a knife out. “Picking pockets if for out here. I’m going to

help you survive in the dungeon.” He looked at it. “The first advice I’ll give you is to learn to use a sword, even if the teachers say you can’t. These aren’t useful unless you’re good at—”

She snatched the knife out of his hand faster than he expected and with a flick sent it at the box containing the sword. It hit in what Tibs thought was the middle of it. At this distance, he wasn’t sure he’d even get close to that. She eyed him defiantly, crossing her arms over her chest.

“How good are you at locks and traps?”

“Get me one and I’ll show you.”

Tibs nodded and led her to the rogue’s training field, where far fewer people were being instructed by a younger teacher than the one Tibs had had, but who showed the same level of disinterest in the instruction he gave. He didn’t even look in their direction when Tibs took traps and locks out of the box, along with a set of lockpicks for Tara to use. Apart from the others, he set them on the ground and motioned for her to proceed.

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“I am a horrible teacher,” Jackal said before digging into his meal.

“Maybe you should teach them to fight with their fist,” Khumdar commented.

“Can’t, without an element to use as protection, they need the reach, even if all they’re doing is swinging it wildly, it’s an improvement.”

“How are the archers?” Tibs asked Mez.

“Horrible,” he said flatly. “I have no idea why they picked the bow, neither has experience with it.”

“Range,” Jackal said. “Anyone smart stays as far from their enemy as they can.” Tibs joined the others at the table in eying the fighter. “What?” Jackal replied, grinning. “You guys know I’m not smart.”

“How was your student?” Carina asked Tibs.

“She doesn’t like me.”

“Really?” Jackal asked. “How can she not like you?”

Tibs shrugged. “But it makes her work hard. She wants to prove she’d better than I am. That she doesn’t need anything I can show her.”

Mez snorted. “She had a long way to do then. You’re the best rogue I know of.”

“How many do you know?” Jackal asked.

Mez considered it. “Four. Tibs, Tandy, Arnel, and Findley.”

“Arnel didn’t make it out of his last run,” Carina said, and they were silent.

“Khumdar,” Mez said, “you’ve seen other dungeons. Are they all as deadly as this one?”

“I have seen dungeon towns,” the cleric corrected. “But I have never investigated the level of deadliness of a dungeon.” He paused. “I was mainly attempting to remain inconspicuous while attempting to find a way in so I could train and grow.”

“Didn’t you just walk into this one?” Carina asked. “I mean, walk into the town.”

“My passage was paid, as was my admission. I didn’t have the money needed to do it on my own.”

“It was that or else...” Jackal trailed off.

Khumdar nodded, but again, he didn’t expand on why someone would give him a choice between running a dungeon or being killed. To Tibs, it made little sense. If someone wanted him dead, getting the dungeon to do it was a risk, since if it failed, Khumdar would come out of the experience stronger, possibly strong enough to go back and make them pay.

“How are the sorcerers?” The cleric asked.

“Chom Sang has the knack for it. He can use whatever’s in the amulet more efficiently.”

“Does that translate into being a better sorcerer down the line?” Mez asked.

“I don’t know. It does increase his chance of surviving his time as Omega, but beyond that... I never read anything about comparative use of essence in relation to the omega stage.”

“Is that a thing sorcerers do?” Jackal asked. “Compare stuff?”

She chuckled. “All the time. It’s the only way to figure stuff out. After all, how are they going to know what mix of essence works well together if they don’t compare everything?”

“I’d think which ever one survives the longest had the best ones,” Jackal said.

She grinned at him. “And that’s why you’re the fighter and I’m the sorcerer.”

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Tibs sat Pyan at her table, head down, looking at her tankard, and he hurried there. He wanted to talk with her before the rest of her team arrived. “Pyan,” he called, “I need your help. We’ve been helping train some of the Omegas, and Jackal is horrible with the sword, so I thought that...” he trailed off. She hadn’t looked up from her tankard. “Pyan?” He put a hand on her arm.

“Go away,” she said.

“Pyan? What’s wrong?”

“I said.” She glared at him. “Go the fuck away.”

“No, what’s wrong?” Tibs looked around for the rest of her team. He’d expected they were at the bar getting drinks or just late arriving. It was near mealtime, and like his team, Pyan liked hers to eat together when they weren’t busy with training. It was rare any of them ate alone.

“Did someone fucking cut your ears off? Leave me alone!”

Tibs took a step back under the anger directed at him, right into someone who placed a hand on his shoulder.

“That’s enough Pyan,” Kroseph said. “Tibs doesn’t deserve to be treated that way.”

She turned her glare on the server. “And I deserve what happened? He meant everything to me! You can talk, your man’s made of stone, nothing hurts him. Mine wasn’t. He...” She turned pale, looked sick.

Tibs broke out of Kroseph’s loose grip and hugged her as tightly as he could. She stiffened, and he tightened his hold in preparation for her pushing him away. He wasn’t letting her do that. He wasn’t letting her suffer alone. He was going to have words with the rest of her team for deserting her now.

“Let go of me,” she said, her tone hard.

“No,” he replied.

“Tibs,” she growled the warning.

He looked up at her. “I lost too many people I cared about to let you feel that pain alone. You can hit me if you want, but I’m staying.”

Her expression turned from angry to puzzled. Tibs understood her tone now. She was really scary when she was angry, but that wasn’t a reason to leave her alone. Then the puzzled expression broke and tears began falling. She held on to him hard enough he winced.

He said nothing. He just held her and let her cry.

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Tibs ate alone. Jackal was busy with Kroseph, Carina was working with the sorcerer, Khumdar was where ever he disappeared to when not with the team. Tibs didn’t know if he’d found someone to train with, or it was off unearthing secrets. Mez was... not with Tandy, who was seated with Pyan at their table. Pyan could barely get herself to stand and go to their room without help.

Looking at her, at her pain, reinforced Tibs’s decision not to get involved with anyone. He didn’t want to do that to someone else. He focused on his food. The steak was very good. He didn’t know which of Kroseph’s brothers was cooking today, but he knew how to cook meat.

“Excuse me,” a man said, and Tibs looked up.

On the other side of the table, an older man stood, watching him, hands resting on the top of a cane. Tibs controlled his reaction at the wealth on the man. The clothing was fine, noble fine, and the gems on the rings, the amulet, and those decorating the coat he wore had to be worth more than the entire town, not including the nobles. Tibs never included them.

It wasn’t the wealth that kept him from sneering. It was the essence woven into everything the man wore. There was so much Tibs checked for what was his element and was surprised to find he didn’t have one. He looked the man over again, more carefully.

His gray hair was short, his beard was darker, and hugged his jaw. His eyes were blue, the normal kind. His face was wrinkled.

“Are you all there?” the man asked.

Tibs looked down at himself. “As far as I know.” He looked at the man again, who now wore an annoyed expression. He sighed, and with that, Tibs knew the man wasn’t a noble. No matter how noble-like he dressed, the sigh instead of a sneer marked him as not noble, not that Tibs thought much of him for attempting to look like one of them. He had to be one of the merchants from the bazaar, although he’d expect word of one dressed like this one to have spread through the town within hours of his arrival.

“Do you know a man who goes by the name of Jackal? I’m told this is the table he eats at.”

Now, Tibs was suspicious, and he hid that too. What would a merchant want with Jackal? His friend wasn’t the kind to do more than buy from them or sell off the dungeon loot. If he had done business with someone like this, Jackal would have talked about it.

Someone looking to have Jackal fight for him? There weren’t any fighting pits in the

town, not officially. Harry didn't allow them, but Tibs knew not every bar fight was a bar fight.

The man sighed again. "Clearly you aren't all there."

"I am," Tibs replied.

"Then maybe you can answer me?" the man's voice gained an edge. Not the threat of a noble who could have him arrested with a word, but the edge of a knife in the shadows.

"I know him," Tibs said.

"And where is he?"

"Busy with his man."

"Man?" the man asked, disdain on his face. "Of course he'd do that to me."

Tibs raised an eyebrow. He knew Jackal well enough to know the man was too old for him. Although, before Kroseph, Jackal had had a habit of not caring about which man he brought to his bed. Maybe this was someone from before the dungeon. But how would Jackal end up in a cell if a man like that had been interested in him?

"Get your mind out of there," the man ordered, which caused Tibs to raise his eyebrow higher. "That is not what I'm here for. What are you that you'd even think that?"

Tibs shrugged.

"When will he be done?"

Tibs grinned. "It's going to be awhile. He and his man have a lot of energy." Not that Tibs knew that, but the two of them tended to disappear for hours when they were together.

The man's disgust was more pronounced. He looked around, and his expression didn't improve. "When he's done, tell him I'm looking for him."

"Okay." Tibs went back to eating.

"Aren't you going to ask for my name?" the man demanded.

Tibs shook his head. "I'll just tell them the guy trying too hard to pass off as a noble is looking for him."

The man's face turned crimson, and he slammed his cane on the table as he rested his hand on it and leaned forward. "I would watch my tongue, if I were you, boy."

Tibs shrugged and ate a piece of the steak without looking away from the man. He had to fight not to grin at him.

Not getting the reaction he wanted didn't make the man any happier. "You will tell Jackal—" the word sounded like a curse. "—that Sebastien Wells is demanding to see him."

"Okay," Tibs replied dismissively.

The man leaned forward more. "Do not think to play with me, boy. I will see my son." Tibs only froze for a second, but the man's smile told him he'd noticed it. "Good, at least he told you who he is." The man straightened and placed the cane back before him. "Therefore, you know what I'm capable of. Consider that, before you decided to show me disrespect again." The man turned and walked out, everyone in the inn watching him.

Tibs wondered if Jackal's father being in town was enough to interrupt what he and Kroseph were up to. He let them have their time. Jackal deserved some good times before things became complicated for him.