

Stop Running

short story by Turbotastic

Twelve people ran in different directions to save their lives. The demise of Kefka sent his junkyard palace of patchwork pastiche crumbling and tumbling down. Shadow and Interceptor lagged behind their comrades, covering Celes, Edgar, and Setzer from the back. The assassin had gotten separated from Relm and Strago in the chaos of this retreat, and he quickly realized the separation was fortuitous. Those two had taken care of themselves in his absence and could continue to do so.

The ground shook with every step as well as in between the steps. Nature was coming to reclaim this unnatural tower, just as the reaper was coming to reclaim his life. This time, the reaper was closing in.

Shadow stopped running at once.

He ducked behind a mound and sighed, allowing the first true wave of emotion to overwhelm him in years. It was fear that made him collapse, and his body vibrated independently of the junk on which he stood.

His four-legged companion rounded the corner, knowing his master had made his decision. Interceptor voiced his disagreement at first with a bark and then with the clamping of his jaws on the clothes of his master. Shadow shooed him with a shove.

"Interceptor!" he shouted. "Get going!"

The hound released him, then looked at him with a mixture of disbelief and mourning. Shadow extended his hands, and Interceptor placed his paws on top of them.

"Stay well..." Shadow added to his goodbye.

Interceptor barked again, then obediently ran after the trio that had not noticed Shadow was absent.

"Baram..." he said to himself, reinforcing the promise of his heart. "I'm going to stop running. I'm going to begin all over again."

Strago sat at the table in his family room, his breaths short and heavy and his eyes glazed. He was grateful to see another morning but the days had no longer been comfortable for his body. Aches and pains which he had long become accustomed to tugged at his awareness, but something else was sapping the reserves of his energy, and that something else grew stronger by the day.

Relm bounced down the stairs with claps of thunder, and Interceptor followed her. She was already three inches taller than she had been six months ago, while Interceptor had strands of gray in his muzzle. Strago firmed himself and put on a show of youth in his expression.

"Good morning!" he greeted.

"It took long enough for you to get up," Relm teased. "I have a surprise for you. The portait is done!"

"Wonderful!" he leaped out of his chair and immediately his knees chastened him with pain.

"Are you ready to take a look?"

"Of course." She led him to the back day room of their house, and Interceptor herded the humans. Strago felt his pupils tighten as the sunlight filtered through the large windows. They had been a recent addition, a gift from one of the residents of Jidoor. The temperate Thamasan climate meant they were a mere oddity than a liability. Strago shuddered to think if they had been installed in a harsher location like Narshe.

Relm went to the center of the room where there was an easel and a canvas covered by a piece of cloth. Strago braced himself for a stylized representation with bold flat coloring as that had been the style she had used the past few months. He would tell her he loved it and he would; that she made something for him filled him with pride beyond measure.

Relm tugged and removed the cloth in one swoop, yanking his eyes wide in conjunction. Strago was represented precisely, realistically in the pose she had made him hold to the point his knees and back sang with pain. The verisimilitude was amazing and yet she minimized his wrinkles and made his back straighter than it should have been.

"How do you like it?" she asked, her voice free of bravado and antagonism for once.

"It's incredible," he answered with relief and glee. In amazement at the image, his true body sagged and he could not maintain the false front of youth. He shot a glance at Relm, praying that she did not catch his slip.

Instead, a series of fading barks caught their ears as Interceptor ran out of the house. Strago and Relm chased him, as he ran toward a large, loud crowd gathered at the town center. Murmurs only intensified as the dog darted past the sea of legs.

"You have some nerve showing up here!" a booming voice yelled from the group.

Nearly every resident from Thamasa stood at the square. Out of the pile of people emerged Gungho, his energy matching his name. His red cap threatened to leap off his head as he ran toward Strago and Relm.

"You have to see this!" Gungho urged.

"All this fuss over a stranger?" Strago asked. Thamasa had no longer been the isolated community it was before – and shortly after – the Cataclysm, not with Relm's ascendancy to superstardom and the reputation of the town as a "magical place." Thamasa only waited for its citizens to lose magic to earn that label.

"This is no stranger," Gungho replied.

"How dare you show your face around here!" cried a woman holding her child.

Gungho pushed past her and others in the crowd, allowing Strago and Relm to follow in his wake. At the front edge of the crowd the pair could see the man who attracted the attention clearly.

The man crouched as the onlookers stood. His light brown hair was accented with gray, although his beard was buried by Interceptor, who greeted him with licks and a wagging tail. He gave Interceptor a soft command and the dog sat immediately, revealing his weather-worn brown cloak. He stood up and sported a dingy, torn combination of a blue shirt and gray pants, looking the part of the drifter he actually was. He was a man without a home seeking to return to a place that existed only in memory.

Strago felt his chest tighten and he fought off the pain and pressure with his will. He would not let this man be the death of him.

Clyde Arrowny had come back to Thamasa.

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