

Stepping up-76

Getting Jackal to leave most of the loot out of his pouch, for the guild to get, turned out to be easier than Tibs expected because of how distracted the ring made him. Mez's quiver went in it since it would be too easy for whoever was behind the table to figure out something was odd with it when handling it. Tibs's armor, as well as Carina and Khumdar's robes, they wore, leaving behind the old ones.

Jackal was subdued walking to the inn, and Tibs worried. The ring was a good thing, right? Jackal had them wait outside, and that worried Tibs more. He watched through the door he kept open as the two talked, Kroseph looking worried by the time Jackal returned.

Kroseph looked at Tibs, who could only shrug.

"I need a drink," Jackal said, and headed for the tavern opposite the inn.

Tibs opened his mouth, but Khumdar placed a hand on his shoulder. He waited until the fighter had vanished inside. "He needs time."

"Time for what? And the inn has better ale. Why does he look like he's about to have to go talk to Harry?"

"Because, I believe, our esteemed leader is doing something he is not in the habit of doing. He is considering the consequences of his actions."

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"Okay," Kroseph demanded as he entered the warehouse. "What the fuck is going on?" He looked at them and seemed confused by how subdued they all were.

Tibs understood some of Jackal's feelings now. Tibs hadn't entirely considered the consequences of giving the ring to Kroseph. Jackal couldn't play the 'lucky find' angle with his man, so he needed to explain how he'd come to have it. That meant telling Kroseph about the dungeon and Tibs's ability to speak to him.

Kroseph knew about Tibs's multiple elements. The server had been key in helping him get a handle on how many of them affected him, but somehow, among that, the dungeon had never come up. It was always all about Tibs.

"Look, no one died," Kroseph said, his worry barely controlled, "so unless you're about to tell me one of you is dying of something Tibs can't cure, start talking before I start hitting." He fixed his gaze on Jackal.

Jackal took Kroseph's hand and led him to a crate and they sat facing one another. With Tibs and the other flanking them. The server looked at them before focusing on Jackal again.

"Something's happened," the fighter said, then faltered. "I wanted Tibs to tell you because he's way better at talking than I am, but a certain someone said I had to be the one doing this." He gave Carina a mock glare, and she rolled her eyes. "There's things you need to know, but you won't be able to talk about them with anyone but us."

"I already know about Tibs's element, Jackal," Kroseph searched the fighter's face. "Which means this is something else." He let out a nervous chuckle. "Are you about to tell me you took over the guild and you want me to stop working at the inn?"

“I’d never ask you to give that up, Kro. You know that.”

Kroseph took Jackal’s hand in his. “Then what is it? You know you can tell me everything, right?”

Jackal’s nod was nervous. “It’s about Tibs, and the dungeon. And us too. It’s complicated.”

“Then tell me and I’ll do what I can to help un-complicate it.”

“I love you so much,” Jackal whispered.

“That I know.” Kroseph smiled.

“Tibs can talk to the dungeon.”

Kroseph took a few seconds to process that. “You mean like he talks to your sister’s dogs?”

“Abyss no. Those are just beasts. The dungeon, it can think. Like you and me, well, you anyway. We know how great I am at the thinking thing. But the dungeon, it can think, and it has a name. And it’s a person. No matter what the guild or the bards claimed. It’s an actual person, Kro, with feelings, and rules, and things it wants. It’s not an animal.”

Kroseph looked at Tibs. “And you can talk with it?”

“It’s my element. It lets me do that. We don’t know why.”

Kroseph nodded. “So you’ve been able to do it for a while. You didn’t tell me then, so if you’re telling me now, something’s different.”

“We didn’t mean to keep it from you,” Jackal said defensively. “We just didn’t think of it.”

“It’s okay. I knew there was stuff you wouldn’t be able or willing to talk about. I mean, you still told me a lot the guild didn’t want you to.”

Jackal forced a smile. “You remember when I came back from the run all pissed and I didn’t want to talk about it?”

“Yeah, it’s about the only time you didn’t look like you had fun in there.”

“The dungeon, Sto, that’s its name. It did something hurtful, not just try to kill us, but something that hurt us here.” He tapped his heart. “It didn’t mean to, but that didn’t help, and on the next run, it and Tibs had a talk. I can’t hear it, only Tibs does, but Tibs told us and the dungeon was hurt that it had hurt us. It kind of likes Tibs, and us too, by association. So after Tibs explained why it hurt, it didn’t know to make sure it didn’t happen. Tibs said I can tell you more, but it’s not important right now. Me and Carina helped it come up with a way to do it.”

“Wait, I thought you couldn’t talk with it.”

“The dungeon can listen to all of us when we’re inside. It’s like its body, it can change it, and pay attention to places. And it likes watching us go through it. And Tibs is really clever, so it likes trying to stump him. It likes watching me too,” Jackal said with a hint of pride, then the grin became silly. “But for other reasons.”

Kroseph narrowed his eyes. “It likes watching you destroy its creatures?” he asked in dismay.

“It likes trying to kill me,” Jackal replied, chest puffing out. Then he leaned in. “I got to fight it.”

“Aren’t always fighting it, when you’re beating its creatures?”

“No, I got to fight it directly, it make a golem, and it put itself in it and we—” Jackal shook his head with a rueful smile. “I’ll tell you later. But yeah, me and Carina helped it and it promised us a reward in return.”

“So that’s why you were so happy that day.” Kroseph grinned.

Jackal mirrored it. “Yeah. Don’t tell Tibs all the things I did to you because of it.”

“Oh, I know better than to start talking about what you can do with that tongue of yours and—”

Tibs groaned loudly. “I’m going to leave.”

“No, you’re not,” Jackal replied with a chuckle. “Well, today we got our reward. And the dungeon made one for you too.”

Kroseph stared at the fighter. “Me? Why? I’ve done nothing for the dungeon.”

“You look after us. Me, Tibs, the team. The other Runners. You’re part of the town and one of the reasons we can go in confident we’ll have a place to come back to. But that’s not why it made it. Remember when I said it listens to us when we’re inside? Well, we talk about you. These guys just can’t shut up about how lucky I am that somehow you haven’t kicked me out of your bed yet, and who am I to contradict them, right? The dungeon’s picked up on how important you are to me. So he made you something because of that.”

Jackal reached into his pouch and kept his fist closed once it was out. His expression grew serious. “The thing is, this comes with consequences. Not from the dungeon,” Jackal hurried to add as Kroseph’s expression darkened. “It wouldn’t do that. It’s about how serious you and me are. If you accept this, Kro, things are going to be different between us. I’m going to have to make changes.”

“I don’t need you to change, Jackal. You know that, right? If whatever you’re holding is going to force that, then I don’t want it.”

“It’s not forcing it, not the way you mean. I love you, Kroseph. You helped give me a reason to fight the dungeon hard. To not let the mess I made for myself drag me down. But I never made you a promise because deep down, I knew something I don’t think you’ve realized. I’m a Runner. I’m going to be an adventurer. I’ve talked with those who guarded us. My instructor, some who come do work for the guild. One thing I got from them is that what we have, it never survives. You’re going to grow old and I’m not; at least, not like you. Unless the dungeon kills me, or one of the things the guild sends me to fight does it. I am going to live decades more than you. Maybe centuries. You’ve heard the bards and their stories of adventurers fighting for always. They aren’t all made up. Because I knew that, I’d prefer one of those killed me while I was with you. I know it would hurt you, but you have no idea what losing you is going to do to me, Kro. My family’s really small, and you’re the only one in it I know isn’t going to be killed by the dungeon or a monster. So I settled on dying first and to enjoy my time with you as much as I can.”

Kroseph placed a hand on the fist. “This changes that?”

Jackal slowly opened it, revealing the golden band. “The dungeon doesn’t know how exact it’s going to be, but if you wear this, you’re going to live a long time. You’re going to be like an adventurer that way. So I’m going to have to change how I think. I’m going to have

to start doing my runs knowing you're going to be with me for all that time, so I am going to have to win. It's going to have to be about more than proving I'm better than it is, about the loot I get when I win. Kro, if you take this. I'm going to have to start fighting for you."

Kroseth looked at the ring in Jackal's hand in silence for a long time. "Are you sure?"

Jackal snorted. "This is me, Kro. Sure isn't something I've ever done unless it involves my fist hitting something. But I don't care about being sure. I care about you being in my life. If you take this, I promise I will do everything in my power to come back to you every time."

The server gingerly took the ring. "Then, Jackal, I accept."

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Jackal and Kroseth vanished for the rest of the night and the next day. That Kroseth's father wasn't screaming for him told Tibs he'd been informed and approved. When they reappeared, the two tried to go back to the way things had been, but the change was visible to the point that even Don commented on it with only a small mouth of disdain.

Jackal threw himself even harder in his training, much to the chagrin of anyone he picked as a sparing partner.

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Something was off with Kragle Rock, and Tibs couldn't figure out what. There had been no reports of unusual crimes from the Runners protecting the merchants. The fighting ring was under control, as usual. The one detail he noted as he walked the streets was that more nobles were out of their neighborhood. That didn't happen often. Only a few of them went to the marketplace that was becoming established around the transport platform. In fact, even on the few days when he could expect them to walk through his town, it was just that, to walk through it, on their way to the bazaar.

Tibs frowned. He counted the days. That was it, he thought. The caravan would have arrived in the morning, so the nobles were heading there.

Only they weren't. They were meandering his streets as if they were lost and didn't understand why.

He hurried to the edge of town where, instead of tents being set up and the bustle of merchants and customers, was an empty field with a handful of people wandering it. The nobles weren't the only ones confused by the caravan's absence.

At the edge, Tibs found Cross. She looked into the distance unhappily.

"The caravan's late," Tibs stated.

"Yeah," she replied through clenched teeth.

"There's something I don't know here, and I don't know enough about caravans to know what question to ask you, so why don't you tell me why you're acting like it's a bad thing?"

"Because it is, Tibs."

"Why? You know I'm going to keep asking questions, so you should just answer with everything. It's going to be faster."

She cracked a reluctant smile. "Caravan's function on precision. City's will set their

calenders by them. Back in Dorcuvan, they say that the seasons don't dare move at a rate different from the caravans. That's how precise they usually are."

"But stuff happens on the road. They can't know it. There's monsters and stuff, right?"

"Not as many of those as you think. Bandits are the biggest problems for a caravan, and yes, they can't know if a road will have a new batch of those on it. But because of that, a caravan will make sure they have the time to deal with it. If the trip is quiet, it will park about a day's ride away from the town and wait until it's time for them to arrive before continuing."

"Doesn't that mean that if someone wants something early, they can just go to them?"

"Yes, but no self-respecting merchant will sell to those. The bazaar works because everyone knows that's where you need to be early."

"Okay, but stuff happens. Even if they plan for everything, something will go wrong."

"You're right, which is why they have riders whose sole job is to come to tell a town if something like that happened. And yes, something can happen to them too, but you're looking at a level of bad luck even bards won't be comfortable putting in their stories."

"Luck's not a thing," Tibs replied reflexively. Which meant the more likely situation was that someone was interfering. "Can caravans try to cause each other problems?"

"No, they have an organization that manages it." She paused. "There are places, smaller kingdoms, where that's not set up, but anywhere there's a dungeon, the guild will make sure everything works well if no one else does."

"We can't have something like a late caravan disrupt the run," Tibs replied bitterly.

She chuckled. "Considering how they seemed willing to let the town be taken over, that does seem like a strange attitude, doesn't it? One of the things you'll learn about the world, Tibs, is that the people in it don't always make sense."

"I already know that one." He looked into the distance. "Is this worth trying to get Harry to send someone to look for them? None of my Runners are allowed outside the town."

She shook her head. "There's no point. If they're fine and just late, they're going to arrive. If something really bad's happened, there's nothing anyone will be able to do by the time they get there."

"Someone's approaching!" Tandy yelled, running toward them. He stopped and put her hands on her knees, panting hard. "I was on a roof, trying to see if I could find the caravan. See what was wrong. They should have been here before the sun rose. There's someone on horseback approaching."

"That rider you talked about."

"I think they're injured," Tandy said.

"How did you see that far?" Cross asked, hand over her eyes and peering.

"It's a void thing. I can bend the space between two sent of essence and it causes the distance to look closer. I had to get higher because everything vanishes at some point. It's got to do with how the world works. My teacher tried to explain it to me, but when she said

there was a curve involved and that it wasn't that of a hill, I stopped understanding."

"Tandy, once you've caught your breath, gather a handful of Runners. If they're injured, there might be someone chasing them. Let's prepare for that." He nodded and ran off.

"I don't know that It's going to help," Cross said.

"Preparations always help. Even then they aren't needed."

Cross opened her mouth, closed it, then nodded. "Right, essence. One of you can probably take on an entire band of bandits."

"The right one, yes. But I think you could take them too."

She shrugged. "But I wouldn't be looking forward to it."

"Right, you're no better of a liar than Jackal is."

She grinned, and they waited.

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By the time the rider's dust cloud was visible, Tibs had seven Runners with him. Two Earth, two metal, all fighters, Tandy, a crystal sorcerer, and Don. The only one not part of Tibs's Runners.

"Do you want to deal with him?" Tibs asked.

The sorcerer eyed Tibs, and he watched as the snark was swallowed. "I think it's best. That way, the guild won't immediately think you're trying to do their work for them."

Tibs was, but if Don could keep Harry placated, Tibs was fine with it. "I need to know what happened. I can have a cleric see to him, but unless he looks like he's about to die, I need to know it first so I can start planning."

"I know what needs to be done," Don snapped.

Tibs bit back his own snark. "I'm just making sure we deal with the urgency before the politics. If they're hurt, like Tandy said, someone or something hurt them and that's probably not far behind. Do you really want to depend on Harry to deal with that?"

"If it's a monster after them, the guild will be better trained for it."

People snorted at the sorcerer's comment.

"But will they?" Tibs asked.

"Let's see what is going on, then we can start arguing who needs to claim the glory."

"You're welcome to that," Tibs replied.

Don snorted, but the rider was now close enough he couldn't comment. He stepped forward and had to move away, as the horse didn't slow. Cross caught the reins and brought stopped it, then Don barely caught the rider as he slide off.

"I have you," he told the man. His side was covered with blood from the long gash in his clothing. Tibs sensed and the man's essence, while faint was steady. It was the best way he had to tell someone's general health. His face was pale, exhaustion and probably blood loss, but he wasn't dying. "He needs a cleric," Don ordered.

Tibs nodded for Tandy to go, then instructed another to find him a clean tankard before stepping next to the sorcerer.

"What happened to you?" Don asked the man, stretching him on the ground.

“They took over the caravan,” The man rasped.
“Who did?” Don asked.
“Green and black. People in green and black.”