

Stepping up-4

“Everyone grab your crate,” Kroseph’s father called to the assembled people on the side of the transport platform.

Tibs hadn’t realized the work needed to move this many crates of foodstuff between cities. He’d thought merchant simply came and went to get what they needed, or sent the order for a messenger to bring it to them, and he realized that if all the merchant needed was a handful of items, that would work, but Kroseph’s family was bringing everything needed to get the inn in Kraggle Rock running again, and that was more crates than Tibs could count.

They also didn’t want to do multiple trips since they had to pay for each one. There was a charge for each person and crates moved, but even filling the platform with people was less than adding another trip.

Then had been coordinating the platforms. As quickly as everyone stepped on it, it was still ten minutes before they were ready. That was ten minutes during which no one could leave or arrive here, and once they were in Kraggle Rock, it would be the same for as long as it took to step off. Then the two platforms had to coordinate the time, which Tibs had no idea how that worked, since it was mid-day here, and it would be full dark when they’d arrive in Kraggle Rock.

“How are you feeling?” he asked Jackal. The fighter held three crates stacked and tied together, while Tibs only had a backpack. He’d asked for more but was told he was too young, that he wasn’t part of the family, that it wasn’t his responsibility. It had felt like he was back in Kraggle Rock at the start of it all. When all the Runners had to work for their right to a place to sleep, but he kept being confused for one of the workers’ children and wouldn’t be given work as much as he tried to get some.

Kroseph had handed him the heavy pack, and Tibs had felt better.

“I’m good,” the fighter replied, in spite of his pale color. The fever had passed the day before the message came for Kroseph’s father, informing him the dungeon would reopen soon so he could be set up before the Runners and other residents returned. Just this morning, Jackal had had trouble standing for more than a few minutes, and Tibs could feel the way the fighter used his essence to anchor himself to the ground.

“For those who didn’t do this last time,” Kroseph’s father spoke up, “If you’re going to be sick on arriving, hold it until you’re off the platform. They charge for the cleanup.”

“And something else the guild gets money out of,” Jackal grumbled.

“The guild doesn’t run the platforms,” Tibs said. Another thing he’d learned, speaking with the attendants in the cities he’d traveled to. The process had been discovered a long time ago by adventurers with the void essence, and with the help of sorcerers and sages, the possibilities had been expanded. Because adventurers came up through the guild, there was an alliance between the two, but the transporters were independent of the guild.

“I’m sure they still get a cut,” the fighter replied as the essence around them shifted.

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Tibs fought to steady Jackal once Kraggle Rock materialized, doing his best to still his own protesting stomach. This had been rougher than any before, except for the first

time, and Tibs wondered if the number of people and things being moved was the reason, rather than because he hadn't been used to it. Jackal pushed his essence back into the stone and could stand on his own.

Tibs felt for how the essence in his body had been disrupted and forced it back into place, immediately feeling better.

"Off the platform everyone," Kroseph's father yelled, "before we get charged extra."

The mass moved, and Tibs followed, keeping an eye on Jackal. When he was in good health, the fighter had no problem shifting his essence as he walked to maintain the connection, but because he was sick, he was leaving some behind with each step. Hopefully, his reserve was large enough he'd make it to the inn and he could rest.

The procession stretched as they moved, becoming a thick line rather than a mass. Tibs saw guards watching them, looking bored, and other people moving into shops and houses. Soon the town would be alive again.

"Put it down here," Kroseph told Jackal.

"I'm fine," the fighter replied.

"I know, but this is where those crates go. We can't get everything in the inn right now. Dad needs to make sure everything is fine first."

"Shouldn't he have done that before getting everyone here?" Jackal asked.

"More coins," Tibs said.

"And the longer we took to book our time, the harder it would have been," Kroseph said. "It's not even going to be an hour for him to make sure everything's okay. Not worth the risk of not being here when the runners return. Do you know when that'll be?"

Tibs looked at his bracelet. The gem was still yellow. "When this is red is when we have to come back." He placed the pack down. "I'm going to go make sure we have our room. Make sure he rests," he told Kroseph.

"I'm fine," Jackal replied.

"I'll make sure my man has no reason to want to go do anything too strenuous," Kroseph said, taking the fighter's arm and leaning against him.

"I can do strenuous stuff," Jackal complained.

"And you will," Kroseph whispered.

Tibs hurried away. He was fairly confident they wouldn't do anything outside, but not certain, and walking in on them doing 'them' stuff once had been more than enough for Tibs.

He found the rooming house locked, and considered unlocking the door after no one answered his banging, but it had the same magical locks the rooms inside had. None of the shops had such locks, which gave Tibs a sense of what the guild considered theirs. The shops and their contents were the responsibility of the shopkeepers. The rooming house that of the guild, because Runners stayed there, and the Runners belonged to the guild.

He wondered if Darran had a pick that could open such a lock. He headed for Merchant Row.

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The building was deserted.

It hadn't even been locked. The sign was also gone. Tibs didn't know if it had been

there when he'd finally been able to step out of the guild because he hadn't thought to come check. Not all the merchants had left by then, but many were planning to.

He hoped Darran came back. He liked the crafty merchant.

He stepped out to a gray dog growling at him. Tibs took a piece of jerky and crouched, offering it to the dog. The growling stopped, and it canted its head.

"Go ahead," Tibs said. "You must be new. You're too healthy to be one of the roaming dogs here, but I know you like jerky, so just come take it."

The dog took a step forward.

"No!" Serba yelled. "Sato, Sit!" the dog sat, eyeing the jerky.

"Hello Serba," Tibs greeted the guard, standing. "Sato's new."

She stepped around the side of the shop. "How do you do that? I train them not to obey anyone but me."

Tibs shrugged. "Maybe you're too mean to them and they like someone who's nice."

She snorted. "You're a thief, not—"

"I'm a rogue," he corrected.

She snorted again. "One of those wouldn't have anything to do with my brother. He's dirt, that makes you no better than he is."

Tibs studied her. "You know, if you're angry at Harry for keeping you here, be angry at him, not at Jackal or me."

She narrowed her eyes. "Kid, don't tell me what to do."

Tibs shrugged. "Then don't act like you need to be told."

She let out a series of whistles and growling came from the alleys.

Tibs crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm way more Street than you are. You can't scare me with your attack dogs."

"They are going to rip you apart, kid."

"Good luck explaining to Harry how you aren't behind my death."

"How are you not scared I could have them kill you?"

"I'm a Dungeon Runner, Serba. I already know I'm going to die. But I'm not going to die because of your dogs. Anyway, you're too afraid of Harry to risk getting him angry."

"I'm not—" she snapped her mouth shut.

Tibs threw the piece of jerky at the dog. "Enjoy Sato, don't let her be mean to you. Thump can find me if you want someone to be nice." He walked around the guard.

"I swear, Tibs," she called. "You're just asking for one of them to bite your hand off."

He coated it in earth, then water, which he iced. They were welcome to try it.

Reaching Transport Road, he kept going on Merchant Row. He hadn't checked it in any of his previous visits, the silence of the town having been too oppressive. He nodded to the merchants who were moving things into their shops. A few waved and nodded back. Most, he didn't recognize, and they looked at him warily. Merchants could often spot a rogue.

The stench started four buildings before the pool. It was as bad as he remembered it being. The buildings were empty, had been since days after the destruction of the Caravan

Garden by the pool of corruption. Since Bardik had killed everyone in the building. By accident or not, it didn't matter. The adventurer was behind the corruption making it into the town. Had used Tibs for it. With those message opals he had him drop in pockets, or coin boxes.

It took time, but he remembered seeing the bottles containing the corruption Bardik had thrown in the dungeon. A messenger had delivered one at the Caravan Garden, something the shopkeeper's daughter had ordered, according to the man. A young woman with a creepy interest in Tibs, who was called Carolina, who Bardik knew.

She'd been part of it.

The wooden spikes and ropes that had been put up to keep people from venturing too close had been replaced by a stone wall going to Tibs chest. On the other side of it was the pool of corruption. He couldn't see any change to it, which meant the Purity Clerics hadn't sent anyone to do anything about it. Who had told him that would happen, Harry? Khumdar?

Could anything be done, or was this part of the town condemned to always be abandoned? He hated the blight on his town, the reminder he'd been used to hurt the dungeon, the people who lived here.

He turned and headed back to the inn.

He'd make it up to the town for his part in what had happened.

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"Tibs!" Carina called as she wrapped him in her arms. "How are you? Did you grow?"

"No," he replied indignantly.

She looked at the sleeves of his shirt. "Then did you buy short shirts?"

Tibs tried to pull them down. He hadn't realized he'd put on one of his old shirts until after he'd been down.

She hugged him again. "I missed you."

"I missed you too."

"What about me?" Jackal asked.

She looked at him, frowning. "I'm sorry, who are you?"

"He's Kroseph's special guy," Tibs said.

"Oh, Kroseph found someone?" she looked around. "Where is he? I have to tell him I'm back."

"Will it help if I tell you I was hurt pretty bad?" Jackal said.

"What happened?" She demanded.

"He fought in the arena," Tibs said, "and pissed off someone bigger and stronger and a better fighter than he is."

"I didn't mean to piss him off," Jackal replied. "He commented about how Kro was good-looking, and I agreed, then I said I was really lucky he was my guy, and somehow that pissed him off." He thought something over. "I'm pretty sure I didn't insult him or anything in the process."

"The guy would have killed Jackal if the guards hadn't stopped him. Jackal was hurt really bad."

Carina sighed. "Sounds like he wanted to remove you so he could get Kroseph."

“So, I really didn’t do this?” Jackal asked, surprised.

“Unless you’re lying about what you said, I’d say you didn’t,” She replied.

“Carina, how’s my favorite Sorceress?” Kroseph said, placing the tankards on the table then hugging her.

“Glad to be home.”

Jackal stopped with the tankard at his lip. “Did you call this place home?”

“It is home,” Tibs replied, glaring at the fighter.

“For you and me, sure, but she has a home. Don’t you?” He looked at the sorceress. She took a long drag of her tankard. “I do. Here.”

“Carina, you’re not Street,” Jackal said, “That means you have people out there who —”

“You have family, Jackal,” she replied. “A sister and an uncle, if I remember right, in this very town. Doesn’t that mean you aren’t street either? Who else out there cares for you?” she asked, her tone frosty.

“You do remember how Serba acted toward me, right? That Knuckles hates me?”

“He might hate you less if you stopped calling him that,” Tibs said. “How did you know to come back? The gem’s still yellow.”

“I was visiting with Morishita when she was informed she could return. She’s one of the merchants,” she added. “She sells pigments for art and has books.” She considered something, then took a book from a satchel and opened it to a blank page. She placed an inkpot and pen next to it. “Now, why don’t you write the names of the months you came across in your travels.”

“No!” Tibs replied, horrified, as he looked at the book.

“Tibs, you agreed that you would—”

“Give me a slate,” he replied. “I’m not wasting your paper on my letters.”

“It isn’t going to be a waste, Tibs. It’s going to be a record of how you progress.”

“It’s not worth the gold you paid for it.”

“I didn’t pay for this, it was a gift.”

“Then shouldn’t you use it for the thing whoever gave it to you meant it for?” Jackal said.

She closed the book and ran a hand over the leather cover. “He said to use it to do something that makes me happy.”

“And torturing Tibs is what you picked?” Jackal said.

“The other choice was torturing you,” she replied, “but hitting you over the head with it would damage it.”

Tibs smiled. It was good to have his family back.

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His left wrist itched.

“I don’t know what’s worse,” Jackal said, rubbing his left wrist. “The brand wearing those things put on us, or what having them removed means.”

“I’m going to miss the freedom to travel,” Carina said, running a finger over where

the bracelet had been only moments before.

“The dungeon’s going to graduate at some point, right Tibs?” Jackal asked.

“But it won’t be closed for months.”

“So long as no one attacks him again,” Tibs grumbled, giving in to the need and scratching at his wrist.

“How long until everyone’s back, do you think?” Carina asked.

“Two days,” Jackal replied.

The gem had turned red this morning, which meant anyone wearing the bracelet had two days to return. Once it turned black, their lives were forfeit.

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“Jackal,” Mez said, stepping to the table, “Carina, Tibs.”

Tibs stared at the archer. Instead of the guild armor and good, but worn clothing, he’d last seen the man in, he had good quality leathers, better than Tib’s armor, in a dark brown, and clothing that if Tibs hadn’t known him before, would mark him as a noble.

Mez stepped aside and motioned to a woman slightly shorter than he was with copper hair and the same dark tanned complexion as the archer. She wore clothing of the same quality as Mez, and in the same color scheme.

“May I introduce you to Amanda Dhadly, my betrothed.”

“You got married?” Jackal asked, dropping the fork load of meat on his lap and then cursing.

“What about Tandy?” Tibs asked.

The woman with him said something.

“It’s nothing,” Mez told her. “Someone from the past.” He looked at Tibs. “I’ll explain things to her. I’m certain she’ll understand.”

“Mez,” Carina said. “I hope you can run really fast.”

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Tibs paced in front of the transport platform. He reached the pillar with the box of bracelets in it, the gems were still red. He looked at the guard sitting on the ground next to it. “How much longer?”

The man shrugged. “A few minutes, I’m guessing.”

Guessing wasn’t good enough. Tibs did another circuit and looked in the box again. Still red.

“A few more—”

Tibs turned and snarled.

Where was he?

Tibs didn’t believe Khumdar would choose to die rather than return here. The darkness cleric was aloof, but Tibs thought he considered the team his friends, if not his family. If he wasn’t back, it meant—Tibs didn’t want to think about it. He’d deal with it when he had no more choice.

He reached the box. Still red. He turned for another circuit as the gems darkened and he stared at them.

No, it couldn't be, Khumdar hadn't—

The essence on the platform shifted, and a golden light appeared. An attendant fell to the floor, along with someone else. Tibs ran up the stairs as attendants came from the side. Both men were in terrible shape, their clothing cut, ripped, and bloodied, although Tibs didn't discover that of the man in the black robes until he turned him on his back and it left his hands stained red.

“Khumdar, are you alright?”

The cleric laughed, then coughed. “I have been better Tibs. I have been so much better.” Then he fell unconscious.