

Chapter 04

“Everyone grab your crate!” Kroseph’s father called to the people assembled in the area set aside for large groups like theirs next to the transport platform.

Tibs hadn’t known the work needed to move this many crates of foodstuff between cities. He’d thought merchants simply came and went to get what they needed, or had a messenger bring it to them. That worked when the merchant only needed a handful of small items, but anything large, as in, everything needed for Kroseph’s family to run the inn in Kragle Rock, required an entirely different approach.

Even if they could have done multiple trips, which they couldn’t because of something Kroseph called the ‘benefits of bulk’, some of those crates required two people to carry.

Another complication had been the coordination with the other platforms. Unlike when it was only one or two people traveling, or a small family, their groups would occupy the entirety of the platform, making it impossible for someone to arrive while they stood on it.

Or rather, one of Kroseph’s sisters said with a grin, he didn’t want anyone arriving while they were on it, since it got really messy, very fast.

They also had to ensure that the platform in Kragle Rock was clear for their arrival. Considering how long it had taken the group to simply exit the inn in MountainSea to go pick up the stored crates, this platform would be unable to function for a while.

One of Kroseph’s brothers tried to explain how the Attendants could coordinate between platforms and the accent didn’t help, so Tibs decided magic was enough of an explanation.

“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 even getting that had proved difficult. Everyone told him he was too young to do the work. When he pointed to a girl around his age with crates, he was told she was family, so had to work. He wasn’t.

The behavior irritated him enough he snapped that he was a Runner and not some kid. This was too much like when he’d arrived at Kragle Rock and could get any work, as every Runner had been ordered to as payment for having a place to sleep and food to eat. It had been amusing at first, but that hadn’t lasted.

Before Tibs yelled again, Kroseph handed him the heavy backpack, and he’d been mollified.

“I’m good,” the fighter replied, in spite of his pale color. The fever passed a day before the message came, informing Kroseph’s father the town was ready for him to return if he was interested, but just this morning, he had trouble remaining standing for more than a few minutes. Right now, Tibs sense how Jackal used his earth essence to anchor himself to the ground and stay up.

“For those of you who weren’t with us the last time we did this,” Kroseph’s father called over the raising noises. “If you feel yourself getting sick on arrival, hold it until

you're down the stairs. They charge for the platform cleanup."

"And something else the guild uses to get money out of us," Jackal grumbled.

"The guild doesn't run the platforms," Tibs said.

It was something he'd learned while speaking with the Attendants when one of them wasn't busy and willing to converse. While like him they had grown in power through the guild and running dungeons, because they had void as their element, the people running the platforms pay off what the Runner owed so they could work for them. No one could tell him the exact nature of the platforms, other than the methods had been discovered a long time ago.

Tibs was getting the sense that everything about essence and its uses had been discovered a long time ago and no one other than the sorcerers bothered trying to find out more anymore.

"I am sure they manage to get a cut of even that," Jackal replied as the essence around them shifted.

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Tibs fought to steady Jackal one Kragle Rock materialized, doing his best to still his own protesting stomach. Other than his first time traveling via the platform, it had never affected him this way, and he wondered if how much was being moved affected how the essence behaved during the process.

Jackal pushed his essence into the ground and steadied himself.

Without having to focus on the fighter, he sense his own essence, felt how it was disrupted, and pushed it back in place. His stomach settled instantly.

"Everyone off the platform," Kroseph's father yelled, "before we get charged extra!"

Tibs kept an eye on Jackal as they moved with the group. When he was healthy, the fighter had no problem shifting his essence as he walked, maintaining a proper connection, ensuring he didn't lose essence, but now he was leaving some behind with each step. Hopefully, his reserve had enough to make it to the inn, and he could rest.

The procession stretched as they moved through the narrower roads and streets and soon it was more of a long and thin line, rather than a mass of people. Guards watched them, in their green and black uniform, looking bored, but others appeared, looking excited. The reopening of the inn meant the town would be alive again.

"Put it down here," Kroseph instructed Jackal once they were before the building.

"I'm fine," the fighter replied irritably.

"I know, but this is where these crates go. We can't get everything inside at once. Dad's going to make sure everything's fine with the inn, then we'll start moving them inside in the order they are needed."

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

"More coins," Tibs said.

"He couldn't come first and then send for us," Kroseph answered. "He had to book the time as soon as he found out. The platform here's is only going to get busier as time passes and more merchants return. Not being here when most of the Runners return would kill the inn. Speaking of. Do either of you know when the Runners will be called back?"

Tibs looked at his bracelet. The gem was still yellow. “It turns red when we have to come back.” He placed the pack down. “I’m going to make sure we have a room. Make sure he rests,” he told Kroseph.

“I’m fine,” Jackal snapped.

The server smiled. “I’ll make sure my man has no reason to want to do anything strenuous.” He took the fighter’s arm and placed it around his shoulders.

“I can do strenuous stuff,” Jackal complained.

“And you will,” Kroseph replied, his voice softening as he leaned closer.

Tibs hurried away. He was confident the strenuous stuff they’d get to would be kept to the inside of a room, but not completely so. Walking in on them doing ‘them’ stuff once had been more than enough for Tibs.

He found the rooming house locked and considered unlocking it when no one answered his banging, but it had the same magical locks as the rooms in it had. Only the rooming houses had such locks, none of the shops. It gave Tibs a sense of what the guild considered theirs.

The rooming houses contained the Runners, while the shop only had goods and coins.

He wondered if Darran had a pick that would open locks like these, so he headed to Merchant Row to ask.

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The building was deserted.

It hadn’t even been locked.

The sign that had hung over the door was also gone. He hadn’t come by after, finally, being allowed out of the guild building because he hadn’t needed anything from the shops at that point.

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

He stepped out of the building to a gray dog growling at him. It was stout, but massive. He took a piece of jerky and crouched, offering it to the dog. The growling stopped, and it canted its head.

“Go ahead,” Tibs encouraged. “You must be new. You’re too healthy to be one of the roaming dogs. Take it, you must love jerky, Thump does. I do too.” He broke a small piece and popped it into his mouth.

The dog hesitated, looked around, then took a step forward.

“No!” Serba yelled. “Sato, sit!”

The dog whines a little, but sat, eyes never leaving the jerky.

“Hello, Serba.” Tibs stood. “Sato’s new.”

She stepped around the shop’s corner. “How do you do that? I train them to only obey me.”

Tibs shrugged. “Maybe you’re too mean to them. Even dogs prefer someone’s who 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.”

He studied her. “If you’re angry at Harry for keeping you here when the rest of us could leave, be angry at him, not Jackal. Or me.

She glared at him. “Kid, don’t tell me what to do.”

He shrugged. “Don’t act like you need to be told.”

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

Tibs crossed his arms over his chest. “I’m more Street than that. You won’t scare me with your attack dogs.”

“They are going to rip you apart, kid,” she snarled.

He smirked. “Good luck explaining to Harry how you aren’t behind my death.” She was trying much too hard.

She looked baffled. “How are you not scared that I’ll have them kill you?”

“I’m a Dungeon Runner, Serba. I know I’m going to die. But it’s not going to be to something in this town. You’re too scared of Harry to risk it, anyway.”

“I’m not—” She snapped her mouth shut.

Tibs threw the jerky at the dog. “Enjoy Sato. Don’t let her be mean to you. Thump can find me if you want someone who’ll be nice to you.” He stepped around the guard.

“I swear, Tibs,” she called after him. “You’re asking for one of them to bite your hand off.”

He coated his hand in earth and water and iced that. It looked brittle and he sense the way corruption was interfering even with that, but it would still be enough against a dog.

He passed by Transport Road instead of turning onto it. Corruption’s effect had reminded him he hadn’t checked in on it during any of his previous visits. He hadn’t been interested in spending any more time in the too-quiet town than the walk to visit Sto and return to the platform.

He nodded to the merchants, who were moving into the shops. Some waved at him in recognition, while others, which Tibs had never seen before, either ignored him or watched warily. Successful merchants seemed to have a knack for spotting rogues.

The stench began four buildings away from the pool, even with the breeze blowing in the opposite direction. No shop had settled in the buildings close to the pool. Even seven away, they had emptied and never seen an occupant.

Where the Caravan Garden used to stand, along with the shop on the left, now was only the pool of corruption. Essence concentrated until it was made solid, or liquid in this case. Tibs didn’t know if it had happened on purpose or not, but the corruption Bardik had had stored in the shop had been released and ate at everything, and everyone, in it.

Tibs was also responsible for it. All those blue opals the adventurer rogue had Tibs drop and take from pockets had been messages about this and their plan to kill the dungeon. He suspected the box he’d picked up from Chuck in MountainSea had contained some, and while Tibs had delivered it to a tavern, it had found its way to the Caravan Garden.

There had also been the black bottle a messenger had delivered there for the shopkeeper’s daughter. He’d seen other such bottles changing hands before in the town, had

even held one, which he'd been instructed to drop in the pocket of a man leaving the town.

Bardik had known the girl here, Tibs was sure of that now. It was why he'd stood here the night after the corruption had been released. Tibs had thought the adventurer had simply been angry that it had happened, but the man didn't care enough about others for that. This had interfered with his plans. That was why he'd been angry.

A stone wall now kept anyone from getting close to the pool; it replaced the spikes and ropes. It went to his chest, but the stench more than it kept people away. On the other side, the pool of not quite black, not quite purple, liquid still sat there, same as it had the last time he looked at it, before some of it was used against Sto.

Did it mean the clerics hadn't been able to do anything to it, or that they hadn't even tried? He sort of remembered someone telling him they would be called in, but he couldn't recall who. The only cleric he had seen try was that strange girl.

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

He headed back to the inn.

He would 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 sleeve of his shirt. "Did you buy a short shirt, then?" she asked suspiciously.

He pulled on the sleeve, but it didn't help. He hadn't realized he'd put on one of his old shirts, from when he had to be happy with what he found, or in this case, took from one of the dead runners. He didn't care how well, or not, his clothing fit him, but her attention made him self-conscious.

She hugged him again. "I missed you."

"I missed you too."

"What about me?" Jackal asked, approaching them.

She looked at him, then leaned closer to Tibs. "Who's the strange guy?" she whispered loudly.

"He's Kroseph's special guy," Tibs replied, and had to keep from smiling at the fighter's eye roll.

She brightened. "Oh, he found someone. I'm so happy for him." She paused. "He didn't settle for this one, right?"

Tibs shook his head. "No, he's had a lot of options, but somehow, this is who won." He lowered his voice. "I think he beat up all the others."

"So you didn't think you could win a man honestly?" she demanded of the fighter.

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

"What happened?" she asked, all pretense gone.

"He fought in the arena," Tibs answered, while Jackal was looking for a more flattering way to say it. "He pissed off another fighter. Bigger and stronger, and better at

fighting.”

“I didn’t mean to piss him off,” Jackal replied in exasperation. “He commented on Kro’s amazing looks. I agreed and added I was really lucky he was my guy, and somehow that pissed him off.” He paused and considered something. “I’m pretty sure I didn’t put insults in there in the process.”

“The guy would have killed Jackal if the guards hadn’t stopped the fight. He was hurt real bad.”

Carina sighed. “Sounds like he wanted to remove you, so he could get Kroseph.”

“Yeah. Wait. Are you saying I actually didn’t cause this?” Jackal asked, surprised.

“Are you lying to us right now about what you told him?” she asked.

“No.”

“Then, as unbelievable as it sounds, no, you didn’t cause this.”

Jackal beamed.

“Carina,” Kroseph greeted her, placing the tankard on the table, then hugging her. “How is my favorite sorceress? You look good.”

Tibs looked at Carina again, and Kroseph was right. Her dark skin had a glow to it.

“Glad to be home.”

Jackal stared at her, tankard to his lips. “Did you just call this place home?” he asked in disbelief.

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

“For you and me, sure,” he replied. “But she had a home.” He looked at her, concerned. “Right?”

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. Both in this very town. Wouldn’t that mean you’re not Street either? Who else is out there, worried about you?” she asked, her tone turning frosty.

“You have seen how Serba acts toward me, right?” the fighter asked. “That Knuckles hates me. Trust me, there is no one out there worried about what might happen to me.”

“He’d hate you less if you stopped calling him that,” Tibs said, then turned to Carina. “Why are you back? The gem’s still yellow.”

“I was visiting Morishita when the messenger came to inform her the town was ready for the merchants who wanted to return. She’s the one who sells pigments for art,” she explained. “She also sells books.” She considered something and took a book from a satchel. She opened it and placed it before Tibs. The page was blank. She added an inkpot and pen next to it before Tibs could ask. “Now, why don’t you write the names of the places you visited over the months.”

Tibs stared at her in horror. “No.”

“Tibs,” She replied, her tone going stern, “you agreed that you would—”

“Give me a slate.” He indicated the book. “I’m not wasting your paper on my letters.”

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

“It’s not worth the gold you paid.”

“I didn’t pay for it. It was a gift.”

“Shouldn’t you use it for the thing whoever gave it to you meant it for?” Jackal asked.

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

Jackal raised an eyebrow. “And you picked torturing Tibs?”

She shrugged. “The only other thing I could think of was torturing you with it, but I don’t want to risk damaging as I hit you over the head with it.”

Tibs smiled as he listened to them bicker.

It was good to have his family back.