

Chapter 48

The inn was full.

It was busier than Tibs remembered seeing since its early days; when it was the only place offering an alternative to the slop the guild had for them. He made his way through the Runner and got glared at by some. A muscular woman even growled at him. Tibs kept his hands to himself. He didn't want to be responsible for a brawl here. The inn was the one place he knew how that didn't have a reputation for them.

He waved to Kroseph when he saw him, moving through the crowd, with the ease Tibs had on roofs, holding a tray with platters and tankard. The server acknowledged him with a nod, then he was swallowed by the crowd around the bar. The recruits wanted ale, rather than coins, even the poorer kind Kroseph's father could only get.

At least the food was good again.

He breathed in the spicy and oily aromas. No, it was great again. His stomach growled as he dropped into his seat and Carina raise an eyebrow. Tibs ignored the questioning look and focused on looking innocent. That Jackal wouldn't look at him gave him an idea of why she was expecting something of him.

She, like Mez and Jackal, had shadows. Khumdar wasn't with them, but Tibs had caught sight of the cleric, and he was certain the lack of shadows within him had nothing to do with not having secrets. The cleric had more than the entirety of Kragle Rock. Or more precisely, he probably had every secret contained within the town.

"Don't you have anything to say for yourself?" she asked.

"I'm hungry," he replied.

She sighed. "Tibs, you have to give time for your stomach to get used to food again. Clerics who return from—"

"I'm a rogue."

"You still went a week without eating. Then you spent the morning gorging yourself at the bazaar. You're going to make yourself sick."

Tibs shrugged. "I'll take sick over hungry." He tried to find Kroseph in the crowd and hoped he wouldn't take too long to bring his meal.

The crowd thinned slightly as many left the bar unhappy. There was now enough meat coming from Sto, he had to turn them away, and they had to settle for one of the taverns which didn't pay as well. He wondered if Sto would realize that too much meat wouldn't be any better for the Runners than no meat at all.

Could it be something they sold to other towns? Exporting, Darran called it. Most dungeon towns make part of their coins by exporting something their dungeon created.

Tibs stared at the dark form sitting at a corner table, her back to the wall, seven dogs lying around her. He could tell by the essence. Even animals had it, and in some, it was denser than in people, even if the dogs also had no elements.

Or at least Tibs didn't think dogs could have an element. He hadn't seen one with a tint to their essence.

He stopped seeing the darkness, and she didn't look happy to be there. She didn't meet his gaze when she looked over him as she scanned the room.

Kroseph placed a tankard before Tibs, along with a bowl of broth.

"What's this?" Tibs demanded of the haggard-looking server.

"Meat broth," Kroseph answered.

Tibs looked at Carina. "I'm hungry."

"Tibs," Jackal stared, and stop at the glare.

"Please?" he begged the server.

"Start easy, Tibs," Kroseph replied before his father called him away.

"I'm going to give all my coins to the food booths at the bazaar," Tibs grumbled, searching the broth for even a small piece of meat or vegetables. Could he get Sto to drop vegetables along with the meat?

"Don't you mean other people's coins?" Mez said.

He looked at his supposedly friends. "You know that once I'm too hungry, I won't be able to sneak and I'm going to get caught. You need me for the runs."

"We need you healthy, Tibs," Carina said. "Eat your broth, then we'll discuss letting you steal from our plates."

Jackal pulled his plate away from Tibs. "Hers. I'm not agreeing to this."

Tibs eyed the fighter's plate. There was more food on it than Carina's, and Kroseph always gave his man the best of what they had cooked, so it would be better, and after rattling him out to her, Jackal owed him, so—

"Eat, Tibs," Carina coaxed him.

"There has to be something in there for it to be eating," he replied.

She smiled. "Then drink."

Tibs pointedly took a long swallow of his tankard and then made a face. Ale. Could Sto make barrels of ale? He looked in his tankard. Good ale?

A shout rose above the already loud conversation. A table crashed to the ground as people moved away from the starting fight. Before Tibs or Kroseph's father reacted, Serba's dogs were in the middle of it, Growling and forcing the two Runners away from each other.

Tibs was surprised neither of them kicked the dogs. They were big dogs, but those men looked like they'd have no problem kicking anything. With the things Jackal implied someone had to do to end up in a king's catacomb, they couldn't be scared of the dogs.

Serba looked more annoyed as she stood, and Jackal cursed. He hadn't known she was in the inn. The two Runners moved away from her, as well as the dogs.

"Her dogs have sent half a dozen of those Runners to the clerics," Jackal answered at Tibs's silent query. "Word spread quickly, and now they don't want to risk it. I told you they were monsters," Jackal muttered under his breath.

"They're nice," Tibs said, then felt a nuzzling of his leg. Thump said next to him, looking up balefully. "Sorry, you're going to have to go hungry, too. Someone wouldn't let me get jerky this morning."

Jackal was standing and the woman behind him complained loudly as his chair hit hers, but didn't do more. "Don't tell me one of those things here."

“It’s Thump,” Tibs replied, petting it.

“Don’t touch it,” the fighter warned. “It’s going to bite your hand off.”

“His name,” Serba said, her tone more annoyed than usual, “is Thumper.” The dog looked at her as she said its name, tongue lolling out between its teeth.

“He likes Thump better,” Tibs replied, regaining the dog’s attention.

“How can you be that bad of an influence on him?” she demanded. “On any of them.”

“It’s a gift,” Carina said. “Do you want to sit? I don’t think Jackal’s using his chair.”

“I am,” the fighter protested, taking it and moving it back to the table, but he looked next to Tibs and couldn’t seem to get himself to sit.

“Thanks, I’d do it, too, just to watch Jackie squirm, but I have a job to do and that doesn’t include socializing with Runners. Anyway, if I let them spend too much time with Tibs, the next thing I’ll know, they’re going to start snuggling up to my brother.”

Jackal let out a terrified croak and looked around.

Kroseph wrapped his arm around his man. “It’s okay, baby. I’ll protect you from the big bad doggies.”

Jackal relaxed.

“Thanks for keeping them from fighting,” Kroseph told Serba. “The last thing the inn needs, now that food is no longer a pressing issue, is to become a place people don’t feel safe in.”

“Just doing my job,” she replied, and Tibs watched, waiting for something to happen. Light shone on lies, was what Harry said, and he knew Serba was lying since her job wasn’t to stop the fight. Or maybe she’d just meant she was here as part of her job and this meant nothing?

Was the lack of anything light-related happening due to her not lying, not thinking she was lying, or his lack of knowledge about how to use light?

“Why aren’t the others doing anything about the fighting?” Mez asked in reply to something Serba said.

“How would I know?” he replied, eyes fixed on Jackal.

Now, Tibs knew she was lying, so the lack of a reaction from light meant... something. She had nothing magical on her. Maybe, unlike darkness, it wasn’t something that happened automatically. Did that mean Harry had to be looking for the lies for him to see it? Or did it become automatic once he was used to it?

Tibs rubbed his temple. Why did there have to be so many questions?

“My father’s behind it,” Jackal said. “Obviously.”

“If you say so,” she replied.

“Serba, you’re working for him. I don’t care how friendly your dogs are with Tibs, it’s just some big ploy from him for you to get close and learn stuff from us. Why do you even bother pretending anymore? Come on, for once, come clean about something.”

She snorted. “You don’t even know what you’re talking about, Jackie. If I could, I’d get my dogs to rip that man apart. I’d feed every little piece of him to them, to all the dogs in this town. And don’t bring up this ‘the guild owns me’ bullshit. You know dad’s going to find a way around that and get you back.”

“Don’t fight,” Tibs said as Jackal opened his mouth angrily. “You’re family.” And it was his fault it looked like Serba was working for their father.

“No, Tibs,” Jackal said, glaring at his sister. “*We’re* family. She’s just someone I’m related to. Like my father.”

She rolled her eyes as she turned. “Come on, Thumper. We have better things to do than hang around a deluded fighter and his pet rogue.”

Tibs didn’t know if he should be hurt or impressed. Even knowing she was on their side, she sounded like she meant the insult.

Thumper looked up at Tibs and whined before joining her and the other dogs. The Runners moved out of her way as she left.

“Are you sure she works for your father?” Carina asked. “Doesn’t he want trouble to happen? That’s why not every guard’s doing their job, right?” She looked at Tibs and Jackal.

“She likes this place,” The fighter replied, running a hand over Kroseph’s arm. “Just like everyone in town. But she’s a Wells. If we aren’t leaders, we’re nothing more than thugs following someone’s orders.”

“You don’t obey anyone,” Tibs said, and wondered how much of that was more than his friend’s anger speaking.

Jackal stared at him. “Tibs, how can you say that? I do everything you and Kro tell me to.”

Tibs looked away as the two of them looked into each other’s eyes. Then lunged for the fighter’s plate, pulling it to himself as Jackal tried to get out of his laughing man’s arms.

“Tibs,” Carina protested as he shoved meat and vegetables in his mouth and then moaned. Even the vegetables tasted good, as hungry as he was, crunchy and full of—

He stared at the plate and the healthy vegetables on it. He swallowed.

“Where did you get the vegetables? I thought everything had arrived rotten.”

“Runners,” Kroseph answered. “This morning they had vegetables as well as meat. Said they dropped from the dungeon too.”

“Kro!” His father yelled. “If you’re with your man instead of doing work, you can move in with him!”

Kroseph kissed Jackal’s cheek and whispered, “tempting,” before letting go and vanishing in the crowd.

“You’re getting your own room,” Tibs warned as Jackal sat.

“You don’t have to worry. Kro loves the inn too much to put me before it.”

“So, did you do that?” Mez asked.

“You were there on the run. Food only came up in terms of Sto wanting to feed me.”

“Poison you, you mean,” Jackal said. “Whatever those things that were on the floor when we stepped on the second floor were supposed to be, they were nasty.”

“And I just thought about asking him for that when I was searching for something to eat in that broth. Did any of you mention the vegetables?”

Mez chuckled. “Why are you looking at us?”

“Because we’re the only ones who know,” Carina answered.

The archer shook his head. “You think no one’s been complaining in detail about how bad the food got? You think they stopped because they were in the dungeon? Tibs gave it the idea with the meat. It must have worked out the rest from the complaining.”

“But how?” Carina asked, then lowered her voice. “Tibs said he has to start by copying one. Meat, I get how it did it. Rats and bunnies wandered in. Some died, and there it went. Vegetables don’t just wander in.”

“People,” Jackal said.

“Please don’t say something like that.” Carina’s face took on a sickly color. “That’s one thing I’ve been doing my best not to imagine.”

“Not what I mean,” the fighter said, pulling his plate back to him and frowning at how little there was left. “What I do mean is that people will snack on raw carrots, celery, and lots of other stuff. I’m sure plenty of Runners have died in the dungeon with at least one of those on them. And someone will have eaten during their run.”

“He can sense outside the mountain too,” Tibs added. “Some of the stalls are in his range.”

“Those would only have prepared food,” Carina said. “But Jackal’s theory makes sense. And vegetables can grow in the wild. Maybe there are some near the base of the mountain.”

Kroseph placed a plate of steaming meats and vegetables before Tibs. “Now you have no excuses to steal.”

“Tibs doesn’t need excuses for that,” Mez replied.

Tibs breathed in the sweetness and spiciness before savoring the meat.

“Kro,” Jackal said, his tone thoughtful. “What kind of vegetables have the runners been bringing in?”

“Potatoes, carrots, some nuts I’ve never seen before, but Russ thinks they’ll go well in his stew. I haven’t seen everything since dad deals with that.”

Jackal nodded. “Can you do me a favor? When we’re heading for our next run, give me one of the best vegetables you can find, especially those any of your brothers likes to cook with.”

“What are you going to do?” The server asked, chuckling. “Make an offering as thanks.”

Jackal smiled at his man. “Something like that.”

Amused, Kroseph headed away.

“What are you planning?” Carina asked.

“Unlike everyone here, we know how the dungeon does it.”

“It’s not a secret that dungeons absorb what is in them and can recreate them,” she replied.

Jackal looked at her. “Okay, that might not be a secret with sorcerers and people who actually like to read. But in this bunch, who does?”

“I didn’t know,” Mez answered.

“And neither did I,” Jackal added.

“Please don’t equate what you know to what I know,” the archer said, pained.

“No worries, you’d never measure up. But my point is that we should take advantage of this. We can bring things to the dungeon we want it to make, instead of waiting for it to work it out on its own.”

“Like with the cylinder puzzle.”

“Yeah, sure,” Jackal said, sounding dubious. “But with stuff people actually want, or need. Think about it. Anything my father is trying to keep from arriving, the dungeon can make.”

“Not everything,” Tibs said. “Sto can’t use up all his reserve, and metals and armors take a lot. It’s why there’s only a few of them.”

“But those aren’t things my father’s interested in.”

“That won’t stop the thieves,” Tibs pointed out.

“But theft’s normal,” Carina pointed out.

“Not to this level,” Tibs said. “And this is more to cause problems than get coins. No one’s been trying to get the merchants to buy stuff that was stolen.”

“Not that they could afford it,” Mez said. “Not with the way they’re struggling. They’re also suffering from unexplained losses.”

“Sabotage,” Tibs said. “And we know why they’re happening.”

“To cause trouble,” Jackal said.

“Disrupt the town’s economy,” Carina mused. “And it could be easier for someone to take control.”

“Except that the guild is in control,” Mez said.

“Through the guards,” Jackal replied.

“Most of whom work for Sebastian now,” Tibs finished, “instead of Harry.”

“But wouldn’t Harry…” Carina trailed off. “Right, that item you overheard them talking about.”

“And it’s possible to not lie,” Jackal said, “and still not tell the truth.”

Mez looked at Tibs. “Please tell me you aren’t thinking of trying to stop that man. Taking on one thief is one thing, but this is the guards’ job. We need to tell Harry.”

Jackal snorted. “He’s not going to believe a bunch of Runners over the people he picked himself to help him. You’ll see, this is just the start of it. Soon enough, people are going to have “accidents”, buildings will “accidentally” get destroyed. You remember that fire Tibs helped stop? The one where the guards weren’t doing much to stop? Eventually, the people are going to want to turn to someone to make all that stop, and since it’s going to be happening under the guild’s watch, they aren’t who they’re going to want.”

“Jackal,” Tibs said, remembering his conversation with Cross, and how Darran had greeted him. His comment of people always trying to get something out of a merchant like him. “What happens if the merchants turn to your father for help?”

Jackal’s expression darkened. “Nothing good, Tibs. Nothing good at all.”