

Chapter 25

“Did you know?” Jackal yelled at Harry as he stormed into the guard leader, his uncle’s, office.

Tibs didn’t want to be here, but Jackal had insisted. Other than breaking one of Harry’s rules and hoping he’d be dragged to his office instead of thrown into a cell, Tibs was the only Jackal could think of being allowed beyond the training rooms and onto the floors where those in charge had their offices.

Tibs hadn’t expected it to work, hadn’t wanted it to work, even if he wanted to help his friend, but helping Harry had come at the cost of more special treatment.

The guard leader’s expression darkened as he looked up from what he was reading. “Of course I do.” He turned the look on Tibs, who crossed his arms and stared back. Maybe helping Jackal get in would finally get them to stop is the special treatment.

“Then what haven’t you thrown his ass out of here?” Jackal demanded, stepping to the desk.

Tibs told Jackal about his father’s visit as soon as he and Kroseph returned from their *them* time. He almost hadn’t. He and Kroseph had looked so happy, arms around each other’s waist and Jackal nuzzling and whispering things to the server that had him blush. It was sickening, but in a good way. But Jackal needed to know, and his friend wouldn’t thank him for more delay.

The change had been immediate: disbelief, fear, and then anger.

“Because my brother hasn’t broken any of my rules.”

“You know what he’s here!”

“To see you.”

“Bullshit!” Jackal spat. “He wants the guild, just the one before him. The one that got you in here.”

Harry shook his head. “He has no interest in the guild or the dungeon,” Harry stated. “I asked him,” he added, voice hard, as Jackal opened his mouth.

“And you believe him?” Jackal asked in disbelief.

“Careful what you’re implying, Jackie-boy.”

“I’m not implying a fucking thing! I’m telling you, you’re an idiot for believing anything my father says.”

“I am light,” Harry said through clenched teeth as he got to his feet. “No one gets away with lying to me.”

“If there’s one person who’d find a way, it’s him!” Jackal snapped back.

“No one,” Harry growled.

“Jackal,” Tibs said, grabbing the fighter’s arm. This was devolving. “Maybe we—”

“How does he even know I’m here?” Jackal yelled, pulling his arm away. “My sister told him, didn’t she?”

“I didn’t,” Serve said, stepping into the office. Tibs looked for her dogs, but none were there.

“You’re lying,” Jackal said dismissively without turning.

“She isn’t,” Harry replied. “You think I kept her here because I enjoy having family around?”

“And did you bother keeping her from sending messages to him?” Jackal countered.

“You know Jackie,” she said with a sigh, “I usually find your paranoia amusing, but come on, I’m no happier with Dad being here than you are.”

Jackal glared at her over his shoulder. “Really? Little Miss will Do anything to be Daddy’s pet isn’t happy to see him?”

Tibs stepped between the two as Serba took a step forward.

“Enough!” Harry yelled, and the word slammed into Tibs with what felt like a physical force. Tibs stared at the guard leader, trying to understand how he’d done that. Light couldn’t be solid, could it?

The siblings kept glaring at each other, silently.

“Did you come here for another reason than to make my life difficult, Serba?” Harry demanded.

“See him storm his way in here, so I figured I should keep an eye on what he was doing. I didn’t plan on stepping in until he accused me of being the reason Dad’s here. And to make one thing clear, I didn’t know he was here until you yelled it for everyone to hear. Unlike you, he didn’t bother seeking me out.”

Jackal rolled his eyes.

“Then you can go back to your station,” Harry said, “which you shouldn’t have left. I’m dealing with Jackie-boy.”

“Uncle.” Serba stopped at the glare. “Sir. As much as I hate to say this, because it means I’m agreeing with him, if my Dad’s here, there’s a plan beyond seeing how much my brother missed him.”

Harry looked from one sibling to the other in exasperation. “How is it neither of you think I know my brother?”

“When’s the last time you saw him?” Jackal asked without looking away from his sister.

“Hours ago. When I watched him arrive on the platform and demanded to know why he was here?”

“Before that, Obviously,” Jackal said, breaking the staring contest to look at Harry. “I never saw you visit while I still had to live there, and my father complained about you often enough, I know you didn’t visit while I wasn’t looking. So he was what, my age, younger, the last time you saw him?”

Harry kept glaring.

“Do you really think you know the kind of man he became in all those years?” Jackal asked.

“I know the kind of men who grow up to rule our family,” Harry replied darkly.

“And you still let him into town?”

“He hadn’t broken my rules,” Harry said through clenched teeth.

Jackal sighed. “And you think you’ll know if he does?”

“I have guards watching him.”

Jackal’s expression turned to disbelief. “You have people watching him. Like he isn’t already used to that. Do you know how many of time the nobility back home’s tried to insert into the household, and how quickly they either vanish or switch to working for him? And the nobility paid their people extremely well. How much do you pay the guards? Considering how many I recognized from before I was brought here. How many do you think are loyal to him instead of you?” He searched his uncle’s unreacting face. “Come on, tell me you aren’t that stupid.”

“Jackie-boy,” Harry growled.

“What?” Jackal snapped. “My father’s in town. You think you can scare me now?” he rested his hands on the desk and leaned close to the guard leader. “My father’s been here a few hours now. How many guards didn’t report for duty?”

Harry didn’t react, but Tibs saw the concern on Serba’s face.

“Harry.” Jackal paused. “Uncle. You have to get my father out of here before things turn bad.”

Harry eyed Jackal suspiciously. “He hadn’t broken my rules.”

Jackal laughed bitterly. “Of course he has. He’s here. My father has never followed any rules but his own, and only when those benefit him.”

“Get out,” Harry growled.

“Sir,” Serba started.

“All of you! That’s an order!”

Tibs felt something urge him to the door, as if something inside him; as if his essence was trying to move him. He exited with Jackal and Serba, but kept watching the now tired-looking guard leader as he dropped into his chair. Harry looked up, saw him, and with a growl, there was a flash of light and the door slammed shut.

“Jackie,” Serba said, but the fighter ignored her. “Jackal,” she called, and that made him stop and turn. “We need to work together. Uncle isn’t going to—”

“Fuck off, Serba. I’m not giving you a chance to spy for him.” Jackal turned, missing his sister’s darkening expression.

“Jackal,” Tibs said once he caught up to him. “I think she can—”

“No, she can’t.”

“I think she’s honest about how she feels about—”

Jackal stopped and grabbed his arm. “Tibs, I trust five people in this town, in the whole fucking world. Any more than that, and I’m giving my father an invitation to get in our room and either plant a knife in me while I sleep or steal me and bring me back home.”

Tibs nodded. He couldn’t force Jackal to let someone else help.

As soon as they were outside, Jackals was looking around in what Tibs suspected the fighter thought was a discreet manner.

“Stop it. You’re telling everyone watching that you’re searching for someone. I know what your father looks like. I’ll tell you if I see him.”

Jackal let out a breath. “He isn’t who I’m looking for. There’s a handful of people my father never travels without. It’s one of them I want to spot before they spot me.”

“Then you need to pay better attention,” a man said, stepping out of the shadowed alley they were walking by. Tibs reached for his essence, placing a hand on his knee even if he recognized him as one of the guards, but unlike the others, while he worked the green and black, he favored the black.

He was an archer, didn’t have essence, and the last time Tibs had noticed him was when he’d shot a Runner trying to escape the town by faking having the bracelet they’d been given. Jackal had recognized him then. Been afraid Tibs would call him out on it.

“I don’t have time for you,” Jackal replied and kept walking.

“Make the time, Jackal. Your father’s here.”

The fighter rounded on the archer. “I know that. Why haven’t you killed him already? Isn’t that why the king placed you in his service?”

“The king doesn’t do assassinations. How do you even know he’s who I work for?”

“You’d be amazed at who you run into in the pits and what they know. What do you want?” Jackal asked tiredly.

The archer looked at Tibs. “I don’t think you want Mister Light Fingers here for this conversation.”

“Feel free to tell him to leave,” Jackal said, then smirked. “And good luck getting him to do it.”

Tibs crossed his arm over his chest.

With an annoyed shake of the head, the man motioned for the alley he’d stepped out of. When Jackal followed him in, Tibs went along, sensing further for anything out of place. Once they were out of easy hearing range, the archer leaned against the wall.

“Well?” Jackal asked when the man didn’t immediately start speaking.

“My orders are to help your father bring you back.”

“No,” Tibs said.

“I’m with Tibs, that’s not happening.”

The archer nodded. “I’ve watched you enough to know that.”

“How does the king even know about me?” Jackal asked. “I’m just a pit fighter.”

The archer laughed. “That is the least of what you are. As for how he knows, that isn’t something I’m privy to.” He shrugged. “But if I had to guess. I’d say not all those people who met in the pits were there by accident.”

Jackal rubbed his face. “Please tell me a man like him doesn’t believe that story my father made up.”

“I don’t know why he’s interested in you, Jackal, and I’m not going to share my suspicions.”

Jackal cursed softly. “I don’t need this. Why is my father here? Don’t tell me it’s just to bring me home. I’m not *that* important to him.”

“I’m not one of the people your father explains himself to. But I’m guessing you already have ideas.”

“Fine. What are you going to do?”

“The strict minimum I have to say I’ve followed my orders. That means you can’t

count on me to keep the worse of your problems off your back anymore.”

“What are you talking about?”

The archer sighed. “Your father considers you important, Jackal. My employer considers you important. Do you think there’s anyone back home who isn’t aware of that?”

Jackal’s eyes widened, and he looked around as if he expected creatures to jump out from the shadows. “Who is here?”

“No one you’d know.” The archer smiled. “But then again. Those were never circles you were interested in being part of.” He pushed himself from the wall and headed deeper into the alley. “Watch his back for me, Light Fingers. I’m one of the few people who’s hoping he’ll survive all this.”

Tibs made to follow him, but Jackal stopped him. “Don’t. He isn’t going to tell you anything more.”

“Maybe he’s going to meet with your father?”

“He isn’t. Fuck!” Jackal punched the wall. “I thought all those people picking fights were just because they were jealous of how awesome I am.” He glanced at Tibs, who raised an eyebrow. “Not buying it either?”

“There isn’t enough coin in the entire town to make me want to. I thought it was the guards. You said they came from your city.”

“There’s been plenty of those, but also just strangers using stupid excuses to start fights. I never minded it, but now.” He sighed.

“Who do they work for?”

“Enemies of my father. And he had a lot of those.”

“You should ask Khumdar what he knows about him, and those fights.”

Jackal frowned. “Why would he know about those?”

“Darkness likes secrets,” Tibs said. He wasn’t revealing anything the fighter wouldn’t have figured out if he paid attention to the cleric. “I got him to look into the ones the people in the town have when he was being too curious about you and Carina.”

“He could just have asked,” Jackal said and Tibs snorted. “I’ll ask him.”

“In the meantime,” Tibs said, “I need to teach you how to be subtle.”

Jackal took a step back in surprise. “Look at me Tibs. Nothing can make this subtle.”

“Only because you work so damned hard at getting everyone to notice you.”

Jackal grinned with pride, and Tibs couldn’t help it. He burst out laughing.

* * * * *

Jackal stiffened, a spoon of stew on its way to his lips, and Tibs raised a hand, looking around and spotting Jackal’s father in the process of locating Kroseph. When he had his attention, he raised his tankard and motioned to the table.

Tibs had looked around town in the hours since the conversation with the archer but hadn’t found him again, or anyone looking out of place who might want to kill his friend. There were always strangers, nobles and wealthy people mainly coming from the platform to visit, so the less respectable ones stood out, but they had been there to see merchants.

Sebastian scanned the room, his gaze slowing only twice, at tables with guards seated there.

Khumdar watched Jackal intently, while Mez and Carina continued eating, unaware anything was wrong.

Tibs had hoped they'd have longer before this encounter. That he could find out more. He didn't know if Jackal had talked with Khumdar. The look could be nothing more than the cleric sensing secrets increasing.

Jackal started when Kroseph placed the tankards on the table, causing the server to first look at his man, then the direction he'd been looking into, but nothing caught his attention. Hadn't Jackal told him? This considered this when Kroseph raised an eyebrow and nodded at the fighter, then shook his head. Even if Tibs thought it was his place to explain this, he didn't have the time.

He was so going to kick Jackal in the shin for keeping this from Kroseph.

Jackal's demeanor shifted as his father approached the table. All signs of worries melted away, replaced with his usual easy smile, and his body relaxed. Tibs had seen this act often. Jackal was good at hiding his worries behind being the brainless buffoon.

This time Carina noticed something was off, but before she could ask, Sebastian stood between her and Mez.

"I guess it was too much to expect your..." He indicated Tibs with a dismissive wave of the hand. "Whatever he is, to have told you I was looking for you."

"Oh, he did," Jackal replied, "but you've come all this way already. Why make the rest of your journey any easier?" He drank while looking over the man. "You look like shit. The king's making your life hard? Or did you piss off one of your so numerous allies... again?"

Carina and Mez turned to look at the man between them, and the archer's behavior immediately changed, responding to how Sebastian was dressed, while Carina studied him.

The man was in the same green and black, with gold and red trim as when Tibs has seen him earlier in the day. And if his essence woven jewelry radiated light instead of essence, Tibs would be blinded.

"You'd know," Sebastian replied, "if you'd stayed home like you were supposed to."

Jackal chuckled. "That wasn't going to happen." He motioned to the room. "This is a happy accident. There were days then I hoped to die in the pits, you know. To make sure you'd never bother me again. But you have to make the best of what the abyss hands out, right?"

"Who is this?" Carina asked cautiously.

"This," Jackal said in a dismissive tone, "is the man behind just about every problem to plague the city back home. Would-be noble, master of crime. The silver-tongued Sebastian Wells." He paused, raising the tankard to his lips, then, as if in an afterthought, added. "My father." He took a long drink.

Sebastian's face darkened, and Tibs thought he looked like an older Harry for a second. "You will speak to me with respect, boy."

"If you want me to address you with respect," Jackal said, "you're going to have to go away and never come back." He paused in the process of taking another sip. "Nope, not going to help. I can't even think about you respectfully." He took a quick sip. "What do you

want?"

The question seemed to startle the man out of his mounting anger. "What do you mean?" He looked at those at the table as if they'd have an answer for him. "You vanish years ago. I thought you'd been stolen from me. I waited for one of our enemies to make demands for your return. Then I was filled with despair as I realized that maybe they'd just killed you and destroyed your body, so I'd never know for certain what had happened. What did you think I'd do the instant I found out you're alive, but a prisoner of the Adventurer's Guild? Did you think I'd just let them turn you into feed for their pet dungeon?"

Tibs almost believed him. If he hadn't talked with him only hours before, seen the anger in his eyes when talking about Jackal. Or heard what the mysterious archer had said, Tibs could believe this was about rescuing his friend.

"So this is what?" Jackal asked. "You bravely coming to my rescue?"

"Of course! They had no right to take you from him. I'm sure that—"

"Oh, cut it out." Jackal's exclamation only surprised Mez, who seemed taken in by the story. Carina had grown more suspicious the more Sebastian spoke. "You know I wasn't taken. I ran away twice before I managed to lose myself in the city to the point the people you owned couldn't find me before I knew they were coming."

"Jack—"

"Don't you fucking finish that name," Jackal snarled. "It's Jackal."

Sebastian snorted, and Tibs saw through the act. For an instant, the disdain was clear, then he was the concerned father again.

"I'm hurt you think so little of me."

Jackal rolled his eyes. "Not even that much. Hadn't thought about you until I found out you were here, then did everything I could to drown those in ale. So feel free to be even more hurt. I can always dream it'll be enough you'll never want to see me again."

"Why would you want me to ever feel that way toward you?" Sebastian asked, hurt.

Jackal's smile turned nasty. "Because I know how you deal with the people you never want to see again. And I know how to deal with people coming at me with intent to kill."

Sebastian was still. The inn was silent, and he's only now noticed, Tibs realized.

"Son." Sebastian swallowed, seemed to search for words. "Son, I am sorry you ever felt I mistreated you. All I wanted was for you to be prepared for the future that waits for you."

"You'll be happy to know I am prepared, then." Jackal smiled warmly. "The guild trained me well for my future, running the dungeon. I even have a team and a town."

"A team." Sebastian smiled. "The one you... lead." It was malicious, and Jackal froze. Carina tried to help. "He's a great leader."

"You don't say." Sebastian's smile bloomed into an evil grin, puzzling her.

"He—"

Jackal placed a hand on her arm and shook his head.

"You've had your fun, father. The guild doesn't relinquish what it owns. It doesn't matter how much you threaten them. So you can go home and rule over those miscreants you enjoy so much."

Sebastian looked surprised, but the grin only intensified. “Leave? But I’ve only just found you again. You can’t ask that I leave so soon. I mean, I only just paid for a nice little house by the noble’s area, so I’d be close to you again, son.”

“No.” Jackal’s bravado broke with that whispered denial. “No.” He repeated more forcefully. “You can’t.” His hand shook before he closed it into a fist.

Sebastian sighed. The sound of a man admitting defeat. “You, Jackal, should know better than anyone that I most certainly can.”

Mez looked between the two, then stood, smoothing his expensive clothing. “Sir,” he said, his voice filled with respect. “I think it’s best if you leave.”

Sebastian looked at Mez as if he only now realized the archer was there, looked him over, studying what he wore, how different he looked from the others at the table.

At another table, Pyan stood too, then Aaruh at another one. As they were a threat, two of the guards also stood, hand on their sword.

Kroseth’s father stepped to their table from the bar. “Sir,” he said, but with no more respect than he uses for customers he likes, “you’re disrupting my customer’s meal. I’d appreciate it if you left. I’m sure that whatever you and Jackal have to discuss can be resolved at a later time, and elsewhere.”

Sebastian looked the innkeeper over, then smiled. “Of course, my good man.” He was all joviality now. “I’d never think of disrupting such a vital business. You have my apologies. Jackal, I will seek you at a later time. Of, if you want to hurry this, you can find me at my new home.” He took a coin and handed it to Kroseth’s father. “For the disruption I caused.” Tibs saw enough of it as it changed hands to tell it was gold.

Jackal opened his mouth, but the two men were leaving in their respective directions.

Kroseth joined them. “Are you okay? Is that really your father?”

Jackal nodded and looked from one departing man to the other. “Kro, I really wish your dad hadn’t stepped in.”

“It’s what he does. We can’t let things like this happen. It’s not good for business.” He smiled at Jackal’s worried expression. “Don’t worry, my dad’s used to dealing with MountainSea City officials.”

“Kro. Your dad has no idea how vindictive my father is.” He looked at his man intently. “No one does.”