

Chapter 65

“How is the defense really going?” Tibs asked as he, Jackal, and Carina left the inn, both to know, and because he didn’t want to think about how Kroseph held him responsible for not being here to protect the town. He could have explained how getting purity was better in the long run, but that wouldn’t take away how his friend had been attacked.

“It’s going well,” Jackal answered as they walked through the alleys, “in that we haven’t lost any of the runners already here. It’s going bad in that my father’s caught a lot of people returning. I don’t know how many of them are Runners, and what he’s done with them, but I’ve yet to see anyone we’ve confirmed he took get out of that building they were brought in. He’s also taken control of a lot of the town. Mostly housing, since we were already watching the shops and a lot of taverns.”

“Can’t let him control the ale?” Carina asked.

Jackal tried for a smirk and failed. That, more than the words, told Tibs how bad things were. “If he gets hold of any more of them, we might as well let him have everything. With everyone we need to house and feed, we need all their kitchens. Not that we have that much food left.”

“I’ll talk with Sto, see if he’s ready to open. I can ask him to make sure there’s more meat and vegetable. Maybe if there’s a small barrel of ale, I can bring that to him and he can add those to the drops.”

“That’ll be good,” Jackal said, “but I doubt my father’s going to let us just go in to do runs. He can’t let us do anything that will make us stronger, and him weaker, in return.”

Tibs made sure the street was clear before they hurried to the other side. “Do you think he killed the Runners he captured?”

Jackal didn’t answer immediately, and Tibs glanced at him. He was worried. “It depends what he’s really after. He isn’t stupid, so he isn’t going to anger the guild needlessly. Trying to take the town isn’t doing it, and somehow he must have known that, but outright killing one of us? We’re the guild’s property, so that’s going to give him pause. Of course, if he’s after the dungeon, then he’s already planned for dealing with the guild’s reprisal, and we don’t matter.” He paused. “But if he somehow found a way to take control of a dungeon from the guild, why bother with the town?”

At the next road, they had to wait until a patrol walked by after Jackal confirmed they weren’t part of the town’s defense.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Jackal,” Carina said once they were in the alleys again. “But how in the abyss does your father have so many people here? How come you haven’t wiped them out already? There’s no way they’re tougher than the dungeon.”

“Me and what army?” the fighter snapped. He looked away and cursed quietly. “Everyone left when the dungeon closed. I’m not blaming them. If I didn’t have Kro, I’d have been the first on the platform, but that didn’t leave me much to work with. The conscripts are skilled and we have as much of the town as we do because some of them are great at this kind of stuff. If you had doubts about Quig’s stories, you can consider them confirmed. But the few who have an element are Upsilon. I think some are ready to get an element out of

this, but we have no one to take them to their audience. And unlike you, I don't think they're willing to throw themselves off a cliff or into a fire for the chance."

Another empty road and they were in alleys, getting close.

"My father holds a city, Tibs. With nothing more than the people he controls and his coins. He's been holding it for decades now. I'm not going to claim his people are better than the king's army, but then, neither are we. And for every one we do take down, he brings in three more. They're the only ones who arrive and don't get shot. They have a signal, but we haven't figured out what it is, or how to give it to anyone on their way here if we were to get it. Even Serba hasn't been able to find out what it is."

Tibs smiled. "You're talking with her?"

"No," Jackal protested. "I don't want anything to do with her and her mutts. And it's too dangerous. If my father finds out she's helping us, he won't hesitate to kill her. She sends her mutts with messages and someone else deals with them," he added. "Quig likes mutts, for some reason."

"We need to take him out." Tibs pushed them back into the alley as a patrol approached. Unlike the previous one, these took the time to peer in before continuing.

"You are asking for a lot, Tibs," Jackal whispered. He looked at the roofs on the other side. "Watch for archers. There's been some each time we tried to reach the housing buildings."

Once the street was clear, they ran to the other side.

"Why are you talking like we can't win?" Carina asked.

Jackal looked at her. "Because we can't. We're just a bunch of Runners. We need people with real strength. We need those assholes in the guild building."

"Stop." Tibs focussed on what he sensed at the edge of his range. It was only a mass, but he could tell they weren't animals, and that there were more people than the patrols they'd encountered until now. "There's a group further away." He oriented himself. "Close to our rooming house. I don't think they have an element, but I need to be closer to be sure, and to tell the people apart."

"He didn't have groups there before, just normal patrols." Jackal looked at Tibs. "He knows you're back."

"I'm not—" he closed his mouth. There was no point in arguing, and even if there was, now wasn't the time.

They took a longer route, and once he could tell how many there were, he had his friends stay behind as he used the roofs to scout ahead, on the lookout for anyone else on the roofs. He returned with bad news.

"Eight of them. No element. They're in that courtyard across the house the tavern uses when there's too maybe people drinking."

"Keeps them out of sight if we come in from the usual roads, but it lets them see the front. Can we use the back?"

Tibs shook his head. "I was able to sense another group there, as well as one on the side."

"So they're covering everything. But they can't see in that courtyard." Jackal thought

things over. “We need to go in, hit them fast and hard. We can’t let one of them run off to warn the others. Carina, can you do that thing you did to walk silently, but so none of the fighting we’ll do will can be heard?”

“I should, but that’s going to limit what else I can do for the fight. I can’t just set it and move on.”

“Then do that unless it looks like me and Tibs are about to lose a fight.”

“You, lose?” Carina mocked and received a serious look in return. She sobered.

“Okay, this is serious.”

“Tibs, what can you do to give us an advantage?”

“Nothing,” he answered dejectedly, taking the knife out of his sheath. “No bracers mean no reserves. I can’t even make my sword, or be strong enough to lift a normal one. I might be able to pull essence in as I use it, but I have to keep some of my attention on my sword to keep it hard.” Having his bracers made using his ice sword effortless, so he hadn’t bothered with training, and now he was paying for it.

Once Jackal’s father was dealt with, he was getting Carina to write a schedule of everything he needed to be trained in, so this would never happen again.

They moved to the back of the courtyard. The spaces weren’t really alleys there, only places where the houses with their back to the courtyard didn’t touch and a body could slip through.

The men and women were seated at two tables, acting like they were out for an afternoon of drinks and fun. Occasionally, one of them glanced at the front of the housing building, but not with the kind of attentiveness that made Tibs think they took this assignment seriously.

Jackal motioned to an opening on each side, Tibs at one, Carina at the other.

Tibs hurried to get in position. From these shadows, he could see the places where Jackal was, and Carina would be. He didn’t know what the signal Jackal would give was, but since Jackal was giving it, Tibs knew it would be obvious.

Carina stepped out of her shadow only enough for Tibs to see her. Then she was back out of sight. Hopefully, Jackal had seen her too.

He must have because he stepped into the courtyard and was leaning against the wall before the people there noticed him.

“Now, what would my father think of you slackers?” Jackal shook his head sadly. “He sends you here to make sure I can’t get the stuff I forgot in my room, and I just walk here and you don’t even know it?” Another shake of the head as they hurried to stand. “Don’t you lot know how my father deals with incompetence?” he grinned. “It’s almost enough to make me go to him and tell him about you, just to see the result.” He pushed himself off the wall. “But who am I kidding, right? It’s going to be a lot more fun to just push you myself.”

They rushed him as Jackal’s skin turned gray, and Tibs hurried behind them, jumping at one’s back and planting his knife in. He had it in the chest of the one at the side, who’d noticed the attack before the man screamed in pain and fell. His knife caught as a third swung a sword at him, but his throat ripped apart as the air blades slashed through. He nodded his thanks to Carina and moved on to a fourth one, who’d froze, staring at a blood-

soaked Tibs.

She snapped out of it before Tibs reached her, and he dodged her swings but didn't have the reach to hurt her. He considered an 'x' attack, but that required he had the time to etch it.

The slice at his back reminded him he had more than one person to focus on. He wrapped his essence over that. As that man was thrown to the back of the courtyard with a scream.

"Sorry," Jackal said, "that one slipped through." He motioned to the sword woman. "Do you mind?"

Tibs shook his head. It wasn't like he'd been winning that fight.

He hated being useless.

She ran before Jackal stepped in her direction. Only to fly back to the center of the courtyard with a gesture from Carina.

Jackal looked down at her before slamming a foot on her face.

"Is anyone coming?" Jackal asked.

Tibs forced the annoyance away, at least, that he could do. "No. They aren't moving."

"Good, then we—"

"Wait." Tibs focused. "There's a group that wasn't there before."

"Abyss," Jackal looked at the housing building, searching. "Reinforcement."

"I don't think so." Tibs pointed away. "They're over there, not that far. Eight of them." This close, he could sense them moving. One, smaller, was shoved to the ground as two others were held. A woman screamed for them to stop.

"Tibs!" Jackal called after him as he ran. He knew that fear. He'd heard it often enough in his Street when nobles came to have their fun. He wasn't letting one of them do that to his people, not in his town.

He knew it was going to happen. They were going to treat anyone here like there were Streetfolk. Well, Tibs was going to teach them a lesson. He didn't care what the other nobles did. He was going to protect his people.

This courtyard was made of the houses facing it.

Tibs stopped, trying to take in the scene. Where were the nobles? The two half-dressed men who fondled a woman each, their fronts torn off, were thugs. Even the guards the nobles paid were better dressed.

"It hurts," someone complained and Tibs snapped to the boy, held face first in on the ground, the man kneeling between the spread legs, thrusting—

With a scream, Tibs ran at him, knife held high. A man interposed himself, fully dressed in dirty clothes.

How dare he get between him and protecting one of his people? The knife by itself wouldn't be quick enough. He didn't have much, but fire would scare him off even if Tibs couldn't connect. Everyone feared fire.

Not Tibs.

Essence coated the blade.

Tibs loved fire.

It ignited.

Fire hungered like he hungered. Fire would consume them for hurting his people.

A tongue of flame followed his slashing motion, hitting the man where his knife didn't even come close, and continued, hitting the houses on the other side. Almost hitting one of the men who held a woman.

That wasn't right!

He took hold of the fire.

She deserved protection, too!

He redirected a long flame away from the burning wall, keeping it fed by his will. It was alright, he told it. It wouldn't be long and it would be fed properly.

With a scream, the man threw the woman at the fire, and Tibs had it move around her.

Not her. She wasn't who Tibs wanted to feed to the fire.

He exploded a smaller flame on the other side of the courtyard, catching a woman who was running away. She wore leathers, had watched, so needed to be fed to the fire.

The one who had been over the boy stood, exposing himself to Tibs.

Tibs grinned as the man looked around in fear. He molded essence around the man's groin. Never again would he hurt someone like this. Tibs was going to feed his—

He was flying to the side, weight on him. With a thought, he ignited the essence, and the man screamed.

Tibs landed on his back, his head hitting and ringing, keeping him from feeding that attack to fire for trying to stop his revenge. The man was gray, stone, yelling something Tibs didn't hear over the hunger conflagrating inside him. The man raised a stone fist, and Tibs realized fire wouldn't be a defense against that.

He caught the fist in his own graying hand and locked it in place. Earth was solid and immovable when he set his mind to it.

"Why?" he asked Jackal. "I. Was. Protecting. Them." But why the rush? Why had he hurried, instead of considering the situation carefully? Rushing only led to making things worse. Speed was never the answer. He had all the time in the world, so why hadn't he taken it?

"Tibs?" Jackal sounded unsure.

"Who. Else. Would. I be?"

The fighter tried to pull his first out of Tibs's grip.

Tibs smiled. Earth didn't relinquish that easily. It would only happen if Tibs let it, and he wasn't letting it until Jackal explained himself. They were supposed to be friends.

"Tibs, let go." There was urgency in Jackal's voice. "I have to go help put out the fire before they spread to more houses."

Tibs looked around and sighed. This was what rushing did. Every house around the courtyard was burning. The two women were huddled together next to Carina, holding the boy between them. The sorceress had air wiping at the fire, pushing it away, but also feeding it.

Jackal ran to a burning wall, raising earth and pushing it against the fire, smothering it. That worked better than air, but it would be too slow.

Water was best against fire.

He raised a hand and water essence slammed into the buildings.

Fire fought, fire always fought against having his hunger extinguished, and Tibs had fed it a lot. But it lost since Tibs was no longer supporting him.

He pushed himself to his feet.

Whatever satisfaction he might have felt at putting the fire out was extinguished by the pained wailing of a woman cradling the boy in her arms, rocking in place.

He went to her and crouched.

This was his fault.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I wish I’d been here sooner. I shouldn’t have left. I should have done a better job protecting you. All of you.” He pressed a hand to her and the other woman’s brow and let water cool them. “I will do better.”

The woman not wailing looked at him in confusion.

It didn’t matter. He had said it and he would hold himself to it. He would find a way to bring comfort to the town and its people. He would see to it they never had to worry again. He owed them that for such a grave failure.

“Tibs?” Carina called to him tentatively, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, then looked at her. “I am so sorry.”

“Oh, Abyss,” she said, stepping back.