

## Chapter 70

“I don’t like this,” Don grumbled, staying close to the alley’s wall. “I shouldn’t be putting myself at risk like this. I’m the leader of this whole thing.”

Tibs glared Jackal silent.

He and the fighter were accompanying Don and his team to Sebastian’s house. They’d told Don it was to help, but this was what both had been worried about. Although they had picked up an unexpected ally within Don’s team.

“They need to see you be part of this, Don,” Radcliff said, glancing into the alley’s intersection. “Like you said, you’re the leader. You think any of them would be doing their part without you here showing them how it’s done?”

Don straightened and when Radcliff motioned for them to move forward, he gave Tibs an amused smile.

The attack on Sebastian’s house had been simple to push through. Destroying your enemy’s base of operation was a sound strategy, and they now had someone who could get them through the magical defenses of the building, with Don and his element.

That was when things had gotten complicated for Tibs.

With realizing the plan needed him to be on the front lines, Don had become resistant to it, even if, until then, he’d been more than happy to take the credit for it. He wasn’t loud in his resistance, he clearly understood he had to maintain the illusion he was behind the plan to keep people looking up to him, but he kept trying modifications that allowed him to do his part at a distance.

Jackal had had a hard time staying silent when confronted with the sorcerer’s cowardliness. And while Quigly had no problem remaining friendly as he tried to keep Don on point, he never cared what people thought of him. Tibs had stayed out of it because he didn’t know anything about strategy, but despaired of the plan falling apart until Radcliff had joined in the manipulation.

The rogue had been able to word things so it made Don sound more important for being with them. He talked about Don’s leadership, his wisdom, and his charisma. At no point did Radcliff say Don needed his ego fed, but to Tibs that was clearly what he was saying.

And it worked, although they had to keep reminding Don how important his place in the plan was.

Sawat climbed down from the roof and took up her bow. “There’s a group two intersections ahead. I counted six.” She was a conscript who’d graduated to Upsilon the day before Sto closed his door. Don had made her part of his team since his official archer had yet to return. She had air as her element.

Tibs sensed seven. Not that one person without an element would change how this fight went.

“Jackal,” Don said. “Once they’re in sight, you and Raonull rush them. Radcliff and Tibs are on the roofs to flank them. Sawat finds a vantage point to shoot at anyone trying to run. Don’t worry about kill shots. Once they’re down, we’ll make sure they’re out.”

Tibs was up the wall the moment Don stopped giving instructions. The direct line to the roof he wanted wasn't possible as the alley was wider than he could jump. Then he noticed Radkliff was heading away, and the others were moving slowly on the ground. Even Sawat was staying there for the moment.

Without anyone to see him, he ran for the large gap, already anticipating how fun that was going to be. He threw himself over the void and channeled air to push him further, only managing to keep his glee to a chuckle as he realized even then he wasn't going to make it. He sent essence ahead, hardened it, stepped, and leaped again, arms wide as he pirouetted the rest of the way.

He landed and posed for the crowd that wasn't there, and his momentum sent him tumbling down the angled roof. With an oops at his miscalculation and a laugh, was over the side and falling. He switched to earth and hardened himself only seconds before the impact.

He remained there.

Being still was comfortable, right. Being still was when the thought best. Considered his actions. He had to act, but he should never be hasty. Haste led to him falling off roofs.

But he did have to act.

He let go of the essence, then hurried up the other wall. Two more leaps placed him on the opposite side of the attack as Jackal and Rao started it. He threw a knife at a woman's back as she engaged with Rao, but the pommel hit, instead of the blade.

He hated how bad he was at throwing when he didn't have essence to help.

Tibs was down, short sword in hand, and joined the fight by cutting a fighter's back open. Then he was backhanded and was on the ground.

"Stay there," Radkliff called as the fighter stepped in his direction. "And be ready."

As the sword went up for a strike, a loop of rope fell around it and tightened at the wrists as the rogue pulled on it. The fighter staggered off balance and Tibs planted his sword in the man's side. When that didn't make the man fall, he twisted it, pulled, and planted it there again. The man fell, taking Tibs's sword with him.

He had a knife in hand as he stood and looked around for a target. The only one still alive wasn't anymore as Jackal slammed a foot down on his neck.

"Injuries?" the fighter asked.

"That bastard sliced my armor!" Rao complained, looking at his side and the cut hard leather. "And it was my first time wearing it in a fight." Blood left a small line going down his pants from there.

"Good here," Radkliff said.

"Me too." Tibs picked up his knife.

"Haven't you been practicing with those?" the rogue asked, trying not to chuckle.

Tibs gave him a mock glare. "That's why I have this too." He pulls his sword out of the body and sheathed it.

"We should have brought a cleric," Jackal said, catching Tibs's attention.

He shook his head. The cut was too visible for him to wrap it and—

"I'm fine, it's just a scratch," Rao said.

It was more than that, Tibs could sense as much, but the fighter's essence was doing

something around the wound that was slowing the bleeding. Rao had metal as his element, so Tibs didn't understand how that could be healing him. He opened his mouth to ask, then stopped himself. Now was not the time to give in to his curiosity.

"Good fighting," Don said, handing a clean cloth to the fighter. "Bandage that so you don't bleed out before we're down."

"I am fine," the fighter insisted but took it at the sorcerer's glare. Tibs was the only one able to tell the fighter was right, and Rao had been on Don's team long enough any protest died when those eyes settled on him.

"If they weren't such cowards, one of them would be here to help us," Don grumbled. "They and the attendants are nothing more than leeches. The least those could have done was transport us to your father's house and wait to take us back. That way we wouldn't have to risk our lives for their sorry hides just getting there."

Tibs agreed with him about the attendants at least. It had been the one part of Don's plan everyone had eagerly agreed to, except the attendants. They claimed that they couldn't make it any closer than three blocks, and pointed to the injured attendants as proof Sebastian had that line well defended.

No amount of insisting had changed their minds.

The alternate plan was for a massive attack on all fronts to provide the needed distraction for Don to take down the magic protecting the house.

They made it another block before the next fight. Then, as they moved closer Tibs felt... something. He slowed, trying to understand what it was. The essences were still around him, but it... had a different quality to it.

"Can you feel that?" Radkliff asked, stopping by the mouth of the alley.

"We're about three blocks from the house," Sawat said. "I think this is what's been stopping the attendants."

"Then how am I feeling it?" the rogue asked. "I'm fire, not void."

"And I'm air," the archer replied.

"Metal," Rao said.

"Water," Tibs added.

"I'm not feeling anything," Jackal said.

"You can sense that?" Don asked in an incredulous tone. "I thought you couldn't do anything."

"I can sense how my essence is fine," Tibs replied. "I just don't have a lot in my reserve to use."

The sorcerer's smirk didn't last as he looked ahead of them. "If this is affecting all our elements, we'd better turn back and come up with a plan that accounts for it."

"We can't," Jackal said.

"I'm—"

"Come off it, Don. We all know why you—"

"Everyone's committed," Radkliff said, cutting Jackal off. "If we're this close, then so are the others, and Sebastian has to have figured out what we're doing. If we have them turn back, it's going to be a fighting retreat and I can't see that man stopping once he has us

cowering back at the inn. Can you, Don?"

Tibs watched as he felt the essence coalesce around the sorcerer. There was a sluggishness to how it accumulated, but it was still corruption. Tibs hadn't seen Don use it in a fight, but nothing the sorcerer did with it would be pleasant.

"I'm not a coward," Don stated.

"Never said you were," Jackal said.

"Stop talking," Tibs ordered the fighter as Don rounded on him.

"I—"

"Stop talking," he repeated.

Jackal closed his mouth, and Don turned the glare on Tibs. "You better keep him under control, or I'm turning him into a puddle."

Tibs nodded.

Don looked at his hand, and the essence moved around it. "The way it's affecting me, I'm not going to be useful in the coming battle and since I'm the only one able to take down the enchantments on the house it means you're all going to have to work harder at keeping me safe."

He looked in the house's direction and missed the mix of glaring and roll of the eyes.

"Since enchantments are essence-based," he mused. "Whatever is causing this will have to end before we reach the house. It might be why there's so many people between here and the house. He wants to make sure we can't figure out that closer, we'll be able to fully access our element again."

Tibs hoped so because the way his range on his sense ended abruptly only one block away didn't make him confident about the rest of the plan. His reserve was vast, but he had to be able to channel the essence out of himself to be able to use it.

"Me and Rao take point," Jackal said. "Tibs and Radcliff on each of Don's sides. Sawat, you have the rear. Stay far enough that you can fire at anyone that needs taking down. How are you for arrows?"

"I'm down to half my quiver," she said without looking at them. "There hasn't been a lot of archers on the way for me to replenish from."

"Don't count on that continuing. My father's going to have sent word to those at the platform to hit us from behind, so stay alert." He looked at Don. "It's the best protection we can manage with who we have. Does that work?"

Don's nod was curt, and they took position.

"Our goal is the house," the sorcerer said as they started moving. "Don't waste time going after someone go kill them. So long as we destroy their leader, it doesn't matter if they live or die anymore."

"That means no stopping to collect loot," Tibs told Jackal.

"I'm hurt, Tibs." The fighter replied, his tone comically pained. "You know the loot collecting takes place after the fighting's done, not on the way to it." When he continued his tone was serious. "And the loot I want is what I'll get from my father's house once we've chased him away. You guys can come back and loot the bodies."

Instead of moving forward with him, Tibs's sense continued to stop as they moved closer to the house. Then it was like it was being pushed back when he tried to sense around him. This had to be what it felt for Jackal. When he focus hard, he could make out how the essence shook, and if he tried to mentally take hold of some, it flew away.

"Tibs," Jackal called, having continued to walk. "Later."

Tibs was the only one still stopped. The others had gotten over the surprise already.

Sawat made a face as she reached him, eyes distant, and he hurried to rejoin the others.

The next fight was harder.

They hit the nine thugs together, and immediately, they were on the defensive as only Tibs didn't reflexively reach for essence, and only Jackal was able to do anything with his, his body turning gray as it hardened.

Tibs attacked with his sword but was at a disadvantage against the larger and stronger fighters until Rao was there to help him. Then the fighter's sword broke, he used the pommel to bludgeon a thug, then took one of theirs.

Tibs gave the fighter space and went to help Radkliff take down his opponent.

Once the fight was done, even Jackal had injuries.

Tibs was cut and bruised.

"Looks like whatever this is," Jackal said, "our body counters it like it does in the dungeon."

"No," Don replied. "In the dungeon, our presence will create a space around us that's safe from the dungeon influence. Raonull would have been able to use his essence on his sword there."

Tibs wrapped his essence around his injuries. The bruises reacted normally to it, but the cuts didn't stop bleeding as the essence was ripped away as it reached the surface of his skin.

Sawat won them the next fight as she took down six of the thugs by the time Jackal reached them. Tibs took a sword in the side for Don, and the sorcerer grabbed the sword arm as the attacker swung again, melting it into a purple mass as Radkliff sliced the swordman's throat.

"I'll be fine," Tibs said as Don helped him to his feet. He couldn't stop the bleeding, but wrapping his essence over the injury within his body, slowed it.

"Don't bleed to death." Don handed him a clean cloth, then raised his voice. "We can move essence into someone else through touch."

"I guess a cleric would have been useful after all," Jackal said.

Tibs winced as he used his armor to hold the cloth pressed against his injuries.

Don snorted. "They'd have run off at the first battle. Cowards the lot of them."

They continued, slowed by their injuries.

The next fight was nearly their last, even if they were only fighting six thugs. Sawat only injured one with the two arrows she had left, and while Jackal and Rao kept three busy two rushed Tibs, Radkliff, and Don. The rogues took them down, and Tibs only got another cut from the fight, but as Radkliff pushed his opponent off him, he had a sworn in his gut.

Cursing, Tibs dropped next to him and put his hand over the wound, pushing his essence in, covering the internal injuries, but the blood escaping Radkliff's body didn't slow. "He took the cloth Don gave him and put that over, and immediately it was soaked.

"Fuck." Radkliff chuckled, then groaned. "I really thought the dungeon was what would get me."

"You're not dying," Tibs said as blood started dripping off the cloth.

"You better pull this off," Radkliff said, "because it's going to suck if I died for nothing."

"No dying," Tibs ordered. Pushing more and more essence in. Why wasn't this working?

"You better help him."

Tibs glared at the other rogue. "I said, no dying. You aren't allowed to die outside the dungeon."

"That's true," Radkliff said, his voice growing softer. "So I'm just going to nap. Wake me when..." his body sagged.

Tibs pushed more essence in. This couldn't happen. They were Runners. The dungeon was where they died. They tried to beat Sto and when they failed they died. The town was where they went to rest, to be safe.

Fighting wasn't allowed in the town!

He fought back the tears as his essence was ripped away from him inside Radkliff's body. He wasn't going to cry this time.

He got up.

This time, he was going to get even.

"I'm going to kill him," he told Jackal as he walked by him.