

Chapter 72

Tibs rushed the closest guard, pulling out his short sword before the others. He slashed, but they stepped away, leaving an opening to the crystal block. Tibs slammed the end of the pommel down as hard as he could on it, to no visible effect. Don had been right. Crystal didn't have to mean fragile.

He dodged a sword, and it hit the crystal, chipping some of it. Was it because this thug was stronger than Tibs was, or the edge of the sword? Could crystal be cut?

"Careful!" someone yelled. "The boss' going to snap your neck if you break it."

He missed his parrying, and the cut burned his arm until he had it wrapped in his essence. Their attacks were coordinated now that the surprise had worn off, and only the large crystal block kept them from surrounding him. He dodged and was momentarily out of strike range from any of them.

This was a horrible situation. What he needed was strength and the only element that gave him that was Earth. It also made him tougher, but he had no idea how to get himself to take the kind of damage Jackal could. And while it gave him that, it would make him slow to react.

Standing still here meant his death.

He crouched under a swing and scored a cut deep enough to draw blood through the leather armor. Tibs threw himself to the side as he noticed someone behind him, and found himself pressed against the packed dirt wall, with four of the thugs between him and the block, and all of them between him and the only way out.

"Looks like our little intruder's taken on more than he can handle," the person who'd called the earlier warning said. The men before him parted to reveal a man much like the others. Nasty looking, wearing good leathers with black and green on them. "You think the boss' going to care if we hand him a corpse, instead of someone to question?"

Tibs stepped forward for an attack, and quicker than he understood, his sword was flying out of his hand, the man lowering his back to his side. Tibs pressed the attack, ducking around the man, and nearly ran into a sword's point. He stopped in time, but then flew back against the wall as someone pulled him by the collar. Before he reacted to that, a hand was around his neck.

The man leaned in with a vicious smile. "They've gotten desperate if they're sending kids now."

Tibs reached for a knife, but the man caught his wrist with his other hand.

"There's no need for that," the man said, as if he was conceding a point. "It'll just prolong this. Someone skewer him."

Tibs had his free hand on the man's face. "Fuck that." He pulled the essence into him.

The man staggered back in shock, but he was already pale from the little Tibs had drawn away, and he looked gaunt.

"What did you do?" the man asked, his voice raspy.

Barely anything, Tibs thought as he grinned menacingly at them. Pulling on the man's

essence had been as hard as it had been doing the same to Bardic. And as soon as he'd lost physical contact, he couldn't pull at it anymore with the crystal affecting him.

"They can't use magic," one of them said as they all took a step back.

"Who told you that?" Tibs asked. Not taking his eyes off them, he picked up his sword and sheathed it. "You think something like that's going to stop us? We're Runners. We go up against the dungeon, and you have nothing on him." He tried to make himself taller, and to his surprise, they took another step back.

"He's lying," another said. "If they could use magic, they'd have destroyed this place already." He stepped forward, raising his sword.

Tibs ran at him, taking a cut on his shoulder at the mistimed dodge, but not slowing. He jumped on the man as he wound back for another attack and took hold of his face. Pulling the essence in. It resisted, but he was stronger. The man dropped his sword and tried to dislodge Tibs, but the push was weak and getting weaker. When he fell back, and the last of his essence was ripped away from Tibs's control, he was an unmoving, gaunt version of who he had been.

Tibs stood and turned to the others. "Since I am definitely not able to use magic," he gave them the best maniacal grin he could. "Who's next to prove I'm lying?" He stepped toward them and as one they ran off, screaming.

He let them go, not bothering to watch the one he'd partially drained stumble his way up the stairs. The screams would bring others, and he needed to be done with the crystal before that.

He raised his fist and started a scream of his own as he made himself stronger with Earth.

The scream didn't come. There was no point in making himself angry. The red-brown that his essence turned into ensured that everything would be resolved, in good time. His fist moved down, but not with speed.

What was the point of speed? It only led to making mistakes. Even this decision, which had been rushed because he didn't think he had much time, could be a mistake. There might be another way to resolve this situation.

There most certainly was.

His fist continued to move down as he thought about other possibilities. He could stop it, but that involved making changes, and he had time to do that.

Inertia was a word Carina had told him about in one of her lessons. It meant that it was easier for something that moved to just keep on moving than it was to try to get it to stop. He hadn't understood what she'd meant, then. If a plate slid on the bar, it was simple enough to put his hand on it and stop it.

Now, he understood.

It was the wanting, the changing, that was hard. The plate didn't want to stop. It wanted to keep sliding. It might have made it to the end of the bar and over the side if Tibs hadn't stopped it. His fist was moving, and it wanted to continue. Tibs was fine letting it do that. It gave him time to think.

And he knew it would come to a stop soon enough without him having to do anything.

It stopped once it connected, and something else Carina had told him came back. When something was forcefully stopped, that power transferred into what had stopped it. With a hand stopping a fist, it could manifest as getting hurt, or the palm stinging. Here, that power caused his fist to go into the crystal by two fingers' width at the impact and causing a crack to travel from there along the narrow width from end to end.

Now, instead of one crystal block, there were two, each pulsing at their own speed. He didn't feel a change in the essence, so maybe this had been a hasty decision after all.

Pain in his side interrupted his musing, and he sent essence there as he turned. His skin hardened as the thug's hand slipped off the pommel when he tried to yank it out. Tibs looked at the sword, then the man, whose eyes were growing wide and was backing away.

"They're right!" he yelled. "He's doing magic!"

"What's happening to his skin?" a woman at the bottom of the stairs asked.

Tibs didn't question what they meant. He'd have time to ponder that question once he was done working out if he should hit the crystal again. Jackal had told him it needed to be destroyed, and while his friend had a history of making bad decisions even when he thought things through, every decision he made was to help Tibs and the team and the town.

So, he could continue with that while he figured out something else to do. Raising his fist and bringing it down didn't require any thoughts after all. He brought it down again while trying to decide what he would do if the people arriving attacked him. It wasn't like they could hurt him, so he had plenty of that time to make that decision.

His fist impacted one half of the crystal, and then there were three parts, with flecks flying off too. Yes, this was definitely a rash—

His sense of the essence around him grew slightly, then lowered again. He used the opportunity to send essence through the ground to immobilize the people crowding the entrance before they made a rash decision of their own, but it was still ripped away from him. This shifting of the interference wasn't enough to let him use essence.

Yet.

Maybe this was one of the times Jackal made a good decision. Tibs didn't know how long he'd spent thinking about it, but Carina had to have been involved, and she always took her time deciding.

His fist rose.

"Don't let him break it any further!" the woman yelled.

He'd need more essence, and he was partially through shifting it out of his reserve and into his body by the time the first man collided with him. Tibs took a lone step back to maintain his balance.

It was enough to make his fist miss the crystal.

That was...perplexing. He couldn't remember where he'd heard that word. He had wanted to do what Jackal told him, and this man had kept that from happening. He had his hand around the man's throat before he realized it had moved.

He shouldn't be acting so quickly. He might make a mist—the man's head smashed into the crystal. The impact didn't have the focus his fist would have, so it didn't break, but a spiderweb of cracks spread from it.

Tibs flicked the body away, trying to understand what had come over him. It hadn't been a complete mistake, but he should have taken his time thinking about his actions.

The body hit the wall, shattering the planks there and making an indentation in the hard-packed dirt before sliding down and remaining on the floor.

He felt the impacts of the swords, but they didn't hurt him or even damage more than his armor. Darran would be annoyed and amused at him again. His entire body was filled with his essence now. There was nowhere for something like a sword to find a weakness.

So he had the time to do what Jackal had told him to.

"Stop him!" the same woman said, and his fist was high. There was added weight to his arm. Not that much, only enough for it to register. The man screamed as he came along as the fist punched through the larger piece of the crystals. The section shattered, and the man let go of his arm, his heat cut to the bone and with shards embedded into his face.

Every piece pulsed at its own speed, and the disruption fluctuated more.

He sent essence out and earth climbed over a man's foot, stopping his momentum, and making him fall in Tibs's hand before the essence was ripped away again.

Up the stairs, over the sound of approaching boots, Sebastian was giving orders. He sounded rushed, so ordering his men to kill Tibs was a mistake.

The man Tibs held crashed into a large crystal, shattering both as shards exploded from the impact through the man's chest.

As he let the body drop, he sensed Don running toward the house. There were now enough pieces, each pulsating at a different speed, that the light in the room seemed to settle into a softer version of what it had been, and the disruption could hardly be felt.

Tibs pushed people away to make space. With Don approaching, he had to move on to the next step, too. Bones shattered as he sent them flying away.

More entered the cellar. Sebastian was mixing threats with rewards to get them to come down. Tibs had been right. Sebastian wasn't thinking things through.

Anytime they piled onto him, to keep him from walking toward the stairs, Tibs moved them out of his way with a slow sweep of his arm, but more arrived, and walking through them was becoming an impediment even as he forced them out of his way.

Corruption washed over part of the house and the now freed enchantments fought against it. Don was strong, even comparing the density of his essence to that of the other Runners. Only Jackal had a dense essence, but that strength was nothing compared to the enchantments.

Don needed help, and Earth wasn't what could do that, so Tibs switched to another element.

"Sebastian!" He called tauntingly as the red-brown in his body was replaced with resplendent purple. The people holding on to him let out beautiful screams as they let go, skin and armor melting off them. He took a deep breath and sighed at the wonderful aroma.

Acting brought about such amazing results.

"Sebastian," he called again, "I'm coming for you."

He'd considered joining forces with the man at one point. He remembered that. But that wasn't what he wanted anymore. Now, he wanted a good helping of revenge for the

damage Sebastian had caused to his town, his people.

Tibs stepped toward the stairs, the people recoiling away from him. He smiled at one, and she stepped back before bending over and throwing up. Tibs decided to be merciful and ended her misery permanently.

Making his enemies pay felt so good.

He reached to pull a dying man out of the stairs and noticed his armor was melting off. Even the leather of his bracers was flaking.

“No!” he yelled in horror. It was his. He wasn’t losing that.

The deterioration stopped.

“That’s better.” He wished he could repair the damage, but that wasn’t what he. Explaining this to Darran was going to be... interesting. But the man would do what Tibs wanted. He probably wouldn’t even have to threaten him, either. The merchant was good that way.

With that resolved, he raised a foot to start up the stairs and froze at the sight of the rotted steps.

“Well, that’s inconvenient.” He might have been pushing his essence too far if it was keeping *him* from getting what he wanted. He looked up as a woman pointed a bow at him. But when they locked eyes, and before Tibs thought to focus his essence on her, her pale skin took a sickly green color before she hurried out of the way.

That was a shame. That color had looked good on her.

That long gap to the ground floor needed to be dealt with. He quickly considered his options. Earth would let him mold the ground into stairs, but that would take an eternity to make happen. Water could do the same with ice, but he’d get distracted by looking for the injured and helping them. Well, the plan was to take the house down, so Fire would do that, but the plan was also for Don to take the blame. None of the other elements would work here.

He smiled. “It’s always best to just do it yourself, isn’t it?” he asked the corpse next to him before pulling the corruption from it. It had always done the work, anyway. All the corruption he’d unleashed in the cellar had done its work.

He stared at the crystal shards.

“How are you still there?”

He diverted a little of the essence he was accumulating to destroy the crystal, but the essence ripped apart as it was about to make contact.

“Fine,” Tibs said, looking at the gap to the door again. “I don’t even care about you, anyway.”

The essence formed into a ball, floating before him. Corruption and nothing else. “Why did Harry say this was difficult to make?” he looked at the corpse but got no answer. He had enough there that even Sto wouldn’t be able to protect himself.

He smiled. Yes, without a dungeon, the guild wouldn’t have reason to hold—

The essence nearly hit the floor before he got hold of it again.

What had that been?

He hadn’t felt an attack. He’d simply... didn’t he want his freedom anymore?

Was there a limit to what he'd do to get it? "Don't be ridiculous." He'd deal with that later. Right now, he wanted Sebastian dead. So that was what he would work on.

He pushed the ball where the stairs had been, and it stretched, going from the floor to the door, molding itself into iridescent purple steps. He didn't let it eat away at the bottom of the door. Not until he was up there.

He walked up. The stair gave slightly under his weight, but he had enough will to keep them from falling through.

He stepped into an empty room. Voices and screams told him where the running was happening. He couldn't make out Sebastian's voice, but he'd be with them. Tibs turned in that direction, but paused as something tugged at his mind.

Right, Jackal wanted him to help Don.

That wasn't what Tibs wanted.

He looked in the voices' direction. He wanted Sebastian.

Jackal wanted him too, but he wanted him to help Don first.

"Why do I even listen to him?" He demanded of the empty room, calling the essence that made the stairs to him. Well, if he was going to do this, he should make it quick so he could get back to chasing after Sebastian.

He slammed his hand against the wall and the concentrated essence hit it a second later. He instantly broke the enchantment it touched and spread through the wall, chasing more essence to eat.

Quickly the walls darkened and rotted away, exposing darkening beams. Wood was so nice to watch rot. He'd never noticed that before. The way the layers peeled as they died their last death. By the time his beam rotted through, the wall was darkening to the ceiling, and he felt the walls on each side of the room also rotting.

The ceiling groaned and shifted.

He looked up as pieces began falling on him.

"Well, that's going to be inconvenient."

Then the entire first floor fell on his head.