

Chapter 68

“Are you sure we can’t get closer?” Carina asked.

Tibs sensed ahead at all the people there, and on the roofs. He had no idea how many people Sebastian had, but it seemed like they all had to be here.

Tibs had found out the dog was in the inn this morning when Jackal shrieked and jumped on the bar, pointing at whatever had touched his leg. Tibs had never seen this dog, and he had no idea how Serba had trained it to go to Jackal when she hadn’t been near the inn, but it was one of hers. The collar made that clear, as did the message tucked under it.

It’s happening today.

So they had pulled anyone they could spare from the patrol, in case it was a diversion, and had taken position to intercept what Sebastian was bringing in.

Now, Tibs wasn’t certain they could do it.

“There’s people, four thick between us and the platform at every road and alleys I can sense. There aren’t as many archers on the roofs, but there’s still too many.”

“Then it’s got to be important.”

Tibs nodded. That was why everyone agreed Sebastian couldn’t keep it. But was it worth sacrificing Runners for? Tibs was happy he wasn’t the one making that decision. Jackal and Quigly were the ones who’d make it. All Tibs and Carina had to do was wait for the signal, like everyone else.

“I’m going to the roofs to get a view of the platform.”

“Is that safe?” she asked. “You said there’s a lot of archers.”

He rolled his eyes. “They’re on my roofs. They aren’t going to see me.” He was two stories up the wall before she voiced further objections.

They were far enough none of the archers noticed him crawl along the roof until he was behind the chimney. When he checked, he noticed that even though they were on the roofs; they were only looking down at the ground. Typical.

He found a handful of rogues who’d taken position and were scanning the rooftops. Two gave him an acknowledgment signal, and he returned it before moving closer to the platform.

By the time he could see it, in the valley of a roof between two of Sebastian’s archers who’d been so focussed on the street under their house, Tibs knew it was arriving. The essence shifted over the empty platform and people appeared. A lot of people. At least three and zero of them and at least that same number of those guarding the platform taking position by the steps.

Those in the center bent down as those around formed into a mirror of those by the stairs, weapons drawn, lined up on each side. And now he saw the long crate eight of them held between them.

It was as long as two Jackal’s height, as broad as three of him. And thick enough, two of them could fit. He sensed it, to have an idea of what was inside, and frowned as what he got was muddled. Blurred as if he was looking at it through many windows, each distorting

the image further.

There was Earth in the crate, he could tell that. There was air and water and fire, but he couldn't figure out which had more of, and after that he couldn't tell what the essences were through the distortions.

He watched them walk down, waiting for the signal to come and relieved when it didn't. He didn't want his people to die needlessly.

He watched as most of Sebastian's people followed after the crate, trying to work out what could cause essence to be distorted. He sensed Runners follow at a distance. Maybe they'd have a chance along the way, but Tibs didn't think so. Sebastian wasn't taking a chance with this.

He waited until there were only two archers left, both watching the platform instead of the streets, before crawling back to the edge of the roof. Without the thugs on the streets, getting back to the inn would—

The essence over the platform shifted and Tibs ran for the front, throwing himself off the roof. He hoped someone stayed behind to deal with the archers. He rolled and wrapped his essence over the bruises and ran.

The people took form as he reached the steps, one wearing the golden robe of the attendants, and the other in dark purples sorcerer's robes.

Tibs's heart sank.

He was never going to hear the end of those.

A yell came from a small building to the side of the platform, just beyond the column. It was where the attendants went when they weren't needed.

An archer stood on a roof as the attendant and Don looked in the direction of the person yelling. The sorcerer's head snapped in Tibs's direction and the annoyance turned into anger, then Tibs collided with him and the attendant. The attendant screamed in pain before they were on the ground.

"Get off me!" Don ordered, shoving Tibs off.

"There are archers shooting at anyone who arrives," Tibs said. "The arrows have a poison on them that makes it hard to focus."

"Do you take me for a—" his expression turned into shock, then he raised a hand. Tibs sensed the corruption form, then weave into a mesh over them.

Something splashed on Tibs's back, something being eaten away by corruption.

Don's expression of superiority went away as he looked at Tibs's back. "I did not just save your life," he cursed.

"We're even then." Tibs got to his feet and pulled the attendant up, making a wrap around the wound. "We need to get to safety before they shoot again." The weave of corruption stayed between them and the archer, and something splashed on the ground next to Tibs. Metal melting away, the wooden shaft was already destroyed.

"I'm not saving you," Don said. "I'm protecting her."

Tibs didn't care.

As they reached the building, two attendants grabbed her, and Tibs and Don followed them inside.

“What are you doing here?” Tibs demanded. The two attendants were the only ones in the room. There was a table with dice on it, half a dozen cots and chairs. “Have you been staying here since Sebastian started shooting anyone arriving?” how did they feed themselves? The few chests by the cots couldn’t have contained enough food to last them this long. They were normal.

He felt the essence shift and turned in time to see the arrow in the attendant’s shoulder vanish in a golden glow.

“We’re here to make sure returning attendants aren’t killed.” The one standing said, handing a bottle to the one seeing to the injured.

“Shouldn’t you be more worried about the person they’re bringing?” Don demanded, by the partially opened door, maintaining his weave. “We’re the ones paying you, after all.”

“You’re not paying us anything.”

Tibs undid the wrap. By the purity in the bottle, it would heal her.

“Any of us who die weakens our organization, so we rotate who is on watch so we’re ready to act.”

“You call yelling something we couldn’t understand acting?” Don said with a snort. “If not for me, she’d be dead.”

“What do you mean, rotate?” Tibs asked.

The man looked at Tibs as if he was an idiot. “Do you think the two of us are the only ones here; and that we’ve been staying here?”

Listening wasn’t what this man was good at, Tibs decided, but didn’t comment. “Then how do you come and go without getting shot?”

“Void is our element. Space means nothing to us. All we need to do is think ourselves somewhere.”

“Then why is that thing here then?” Don demanded.

“Because it’s one thing to think myself around this town. It’s another to think myself across the world, with passengers. The Platform links to all the other ones and gives us a template to use for where we need to go.”

“So, for you to go from here to somewhere in the town is the same as you going to another town, except that the distance means you need the platform?” Tibs asked, hoping he was understanding this correctly.

“Didn’t you listen? I just said that the platform—”

“Yes, I did listen.”

He ignored what the fact the Jackal hadn’t told him about this implied of the attendants’ actions since this started. Seemed anyone with power over others wasn’t interested in helping them.

“You said passengers when you first talked about the platform. Is that because you can’t move people with you without it, or also because of the distances?”

Tibs was going to change that.

“You do not listen, do you? Of course, I can move people without it, the platform— why are you grinning like that?”

“Because you just saved my town.”

Whether the attendants wanted it or not.

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Don preened under the congratulations of how he'd convinced the attendants to help in taking townsfolk still trapped out of those dangerous areas. He'd proclaimed it the instant they stepped into the inn and as smiled at Tibs, defying him to call him out.

He hadn't.

Tibs had figured having the sorcerer listen in while he convinced the attendant in charge there to help meant Don would seek to claim the credit. Tibs was okay with that part. The one he wasn't sure of, was that if people thought Don was that good, they would seek him out for advice on how to deal with the rest of the situation.

And it wasn't like Don had simply stood there while Tibs talked.

The only thing Tibs was able to do was get the attendant to summon their local leader, who was the person Tibs had to convince if he wanted their help. The three there wanted to help. They made that clear. So clear Tibs had trouble believing them, but the organization as a whole had to come first.

The leader was a woman with a hard face and demanded golden eyes who scoffed at any mention of the greater good for the town, instead referring to what the Runners did as 'playing hero' and that the only thing that came of that was death. And she couldn't afford to lose anyone if the attendants were to remain independent.

"And what will the attendants letting the town be taken over will do for your reputation?" Don had asked so casually it reminded Tibs of Old Grangston. "What will anyone think when they find out the attendant can't keep the people they bring to a town safe? Or do you think no one will mention how you're willing to let us be shot in favor of covering your asses?"

Tibs had moved next to him and whispered a few pieces of information he now realized were relevant.

"Or how you never bothered verifying the intent of the people you bring to a town, or what they're bringing that will end up causing trouble? Or are you going to claim we weren't complicit when the criminals who paid you to come here to gain control of our town are exposed?"

Tibs was going to ask Carina what 'complicit' meant as soon as he saw her, because that had been the word that caused the leader to give in.

He left Don to his now adoring public and headed for his table, where Jackal and Quigly were glaring at each other.

"Tell him," Jackal said on seeing Tibs.

"Tell him what?"

"Tell that over piss filled, good-for-nothing coward we could have taken them."

"I didn't hear you giving the signal," Quigly replied.

"The deal was we have to both agree," Jackal snapped. "And I respect my deals."

Tibs could see Quigly didn't believe that any more than Tibs knew it to be false. Which meant this was about pride. Or the impression of pride. With Jackal, Tibs didn't always know which part was an act and which was really who his friend was.

Sometimes he wondered if Jackal knew either.

"I don't think we could win," he said. "Especially not after all those people arrived."

"Didn't any of them have essence?" Jackal asked.

"I doubt it, unless Sebastian can afford adventurers willing to take on the guild."

The guilty look Jackal gave Tibs wasn't missed by Quigly either, but the warrior didn't bring it up. Then Jackal looked away, and he was angry again.

"What lies as he told to get that treatment?" He demanded, pointing to the sorcerer, who had people laughing around him and keeping him from noticing Jackal.

Tibs told the fighter what had happened after everyone left the platform, but the new Don wasn't actually lying when he said he'd convinced the attendant did nothing to make Jackal feel better.

"You realize that before the day's over, he'd going to think he's in charge, right?"

"Is that a bad thing?" Quigly asked. He raised a hand to keep Jackal from yelling his protest. "Take it from me, a guy who was in charge of a big battle and lost. Having your enemy think someone else is in charge can be a good thing."

"My father's never going to believe he's in charge," Jackal said. "He isn't that dumb. And Don's going to get more people killed than my father has. He doesn't give a fuck about anyone in the town."

"He cares," Tibs said. "But he wants people to know he helped them."

"And keeping someone like that from causing problems just means being there to advise him when needed," the warrior said.

"You realize that means being within touching range of the guy with corruption at his fingertip," Jackal replied. "You do remember what that feels like, right? Wait before answering." He headed to the bar and returned with three tankards.

"I thought they were out?" Quigly said, making a face after taking a sip.

"My man has his reserve." Jackal looked in the tankard. "Not that there's any of the good stuff left there, either."

Tibs missed good ale. "I think we can guide him to help us make Sebastian leave," he said. The statement causes the two others to stare at him. "He has the one element that can get us through all the protection Sebastian has on his house."

Jackal looked at the sorcerer speculatively, while Quigly simply looked confused.

"Corruption affects the other essences," Tibs said. "That's how those who tried to kill him got into the dungeon. The corruption ate through the door, which is supposed to be impossible to damage."

"My father's got all sorts of enchantments on his house because he's paranoid about his safety." Jackal took a long swallow. "You know that plan is going to make Don unbearable to be around."

"The man's a coward," Quigly state. "He will never agree to put himself in danger like that."

Jackal snorted. "You have no idea the stupid shit someone will do for pride." He looked at Tibs. "But that isn't the entirety of your plan, is it?"

Tibs shook his head but didn't elaborate.

“You realize that getting there might be more impossible than convincing Don lending that charge will mean he’s the Hero of Kragle Rock now.”

Tibs nodded.

“What if you can’t manage it?”

“Do you two want me to leave so you don’t have to be cryptic?” Quigly asked, annoyed.

“Would you?” Jackal replied sweetly.

“We can talk about the rest later, Jackal,” Tibs said. “One thing we need to figure out is how much of the townsfolk still live around your Sebastian’s house. We can’t ask the attendants to just go around without knowing what to expect.”

Jackal looked at the warrior.

Quigly sighed. “I can have people get that information. You two do know that keeping stuff from your allies is rarely a good thing.”

“This falls in the ‘we don’t have much of a choice’ category, Quig,” Jackal said.

“Yeah.” The warrior stood. “I get that, but trust me when I tell you if you aren’t careful, those secrets can turn into knives planted in your back.”