

Chapter 71

They had to leave Sawat behind when an archer managed an arrow in the calf. By then, Don was vicious with what he did to their attackers any time he was about to get a hand on them. He'd left enough half-melted corpses in his wake Tibs thought *he'd* have trouble sleeping once this was over.

Unlike what Don had predicted, the interference didn't end as they reached the road on the other side of which stood Sebastian's house. Surprised at the lack of visible guards, Jackal and Tibs went in separate directions around the property to check where they might be, leaving Rao to protect Don.

The house stood in the middle of the block, with only grass and a path leading to an ornamental gate at the front and back around it. There was the occasional tree, but they were young and thin, unable to hide anyone.

When the fighter rejoined them he shook his head.

"I didn't see any guards either, Tibs confirmed."

"Why would your father leave himself unguarded like that?" Don asked. He leaned against the wall but straightened as Tibs looked in his direction in the process of scanning for approaching thugs.

Jackal took his time considering the house. "It's possible he's finally running low on people. If that's the case, he's going to have a force inside the house, and the others are out there, preventing anyone from getting this close." He paused. "It's also possible he thinks that whatever this is that's making it hard to use essence is enough to prevent anyone from causing him trouble that way."

"Well, he's right with that," Don replied. "I can't do anything to the house's enchantments with this in the way."

"You're going to have to try," Jackal said. "We have to force him to—"

"Don't tell me what I have to do," Don snapped. "This is my plan, remember?"

"You're plan?" Jackal replied. "The only thing you did was sit there and repeat the stuff Tibs and Quig told you to and—"

"Don," Tibs said as the sorcerer stepped to the fighter. Roa looked scared of getting in the way.

"If you think I'm going to take your insulting too," Don replied, glaring at him.

"Is this affecting the enchantments?" Tibs asked, not looking away.

"How the fuck would I know? You think I've read everything there is to know about essence?"

"Yes," Tibs replied. "You're a sorcerer." It was part flattery, part truth. Sorcerers were always reading."

"Well, I don't."

"But you know more about essence than any of us. If this doesn't stop before the house, can Sebastian protect the enchantments on it from being disrupted?"

The sorcerer visibly took hold of his temper, and after a few seconds, he nodded. "He

can.” He looked thoughtful. “But it’s easy to test if it reaches the house.” He straightened his shoulders. “Rao, you’re with me. You two keep an eye out for anyone trying to take me out.” Don hurried to the other side of the road, then over the decorative fence and onto the property.

Jackal stepped next to Tibs. “What’s your plan?”

Tibs stared at the fighter.

“That’s why you sent him off, right? So you could share your plan with me and not have him bitch?”

“I just asked a question. I didn’t know he’d leave us alone.” He looked at the roof line for any changes.

“Come on, Tibs. I know you, you have a plan.”

Tibs shook his head. “It’s not a plan, just that if the house isn’t protected, then it’s just a normal house and—”

Don hurried back. “The enchantments aren’t working.”

“How—” Jackal started, sounding unconvinced.

“Then,” Tibs said, cutting him off. They didn’t have time for pointless arguing. “Do you think it means that whatever is causing this is inside the house?” Quigly had confirmed that the long crate had been delivered here.

“You really expect me to know something like that?” Don demanded, exasperated.

Tibs swallowed his own. “You’re the smartest person here, Don. If there’s someone who can work out how it works, it’s you.”

Don ground his teeth, and Tibs thought he saw worry in his eyes before they closed. When they opened, all he saw there was determination.

“What we know,” Don said, turning to look at the house, “is that this field got stronger as we approached until it leveled off when our essence was basically useless. That speaks to a radius of effect. We don’t have the time to go around and test where it starts so we can figure out where the epicenter is, but except for one detail, it would make tactical sense for the house to be the center, since if the intensity continues to get stronger as we approach, and we are simply too low in rank to notice that, it would ensure this is the hardest place for essence to be used.”

“What’s the one detail?” Jackal asked, tone serious.

“I can’t figure out why he wouldn’t ensure his house was protected from that effect.”

“My father doesn’t have adventurers in his employ as far as I know.”

“But he had magic,” Don said. “I’ve seen what he wears. If the house is defenseless, all that is also useless in this field. He has money, so why didn’t he arrange to have a protection crafted?”

“How long do you think it would take to craft something like that?” Jackal asked.

“I have no way to know. It would depend on factors like, is this something previously unknown? How complex is the interference, what kind of sorcerer he can pay to do the work.”

“If you didn’t know about it, then...”

Don shook his head. “I’m not all-knowing. There are more books I haven’t read than

are grains of sand on a beach. I have read about essence being disrupted. It is a battle technique, and I have read about items with essence woven into them in such a way it can disrupt one of the elements, but nothing on this scale, or affecting all our elements.”

“If the enchantments aren’t working, I can get in the house,” Tibs said. “They were the only thing that was stopping me. How do I stop the item that’s causing this.”

Don glared at Tibs. “I don’t know.”

“Smash it,” Jackal said.

“Are you insane?” the sorcerer demanded.

“It works for me and anything that’s in my way,” the fighter said with a shrug.

“You don’t destroy something you’ve never encountered before. You capture it. You study it. You figure out how to use it against your enemies, fuck, you figure out who’s willing to pay for it and get rich.”

“Would smashing it make it stop?” Tibs asked.

“Haven’t you heard what I said?” Don demanded.

“He’s the greedy one,” Tibs pointed out, “and he didn’t change his mind when you talked about getting rich. All I care about is protecting the town. If I break it, will it stop this and let you rot the house.”

Don swallowed his protest. “Possibly. Most weaves need to be intact to work. But there’s no guarantee you can break this. It’s going to be a crystal, since they take best to weaves, but some crystals can withstand an incredible amount of damage.”

“What size is it? The size of the crate they brought in, or was that to fool us into thinking we’re looking for something big?”

Don ground his teeth. “It might be either. That will depend entirely on who made it. The more powerful and skilled a sorcerer is, the tighter the weave they can create.” He paused. “But for something to create this large of an effect, it won’t be something that can be held in your hands.” He looked at Jackal. “And I don’t care how rich or influential your father is. He couldn’t afford the sorcerers with that kind of power. No one can. So if I am to guess, it’s going to be something on the larger size. Maybe as big as that crate I never saw, you mentioned.”

“That makes it simpler, he can’t put something like that in a safe.”

“It can still be under guard,” Don said. “And this one said his father would have people inside with him.”

“Then a guarded room.”

“That’s an assumption,” Don said as if the word itself was painful. “But it is a reasonable one.”

Jackal placed a hand on Tibs’s shoulder as he studied the third-floor windows for the best one.

“Tibs, this isn’t the dungeon. My father doesn’t fight with any kind of rules. The only thing he cares about is getting his way.”

Tibs smiled at him. “I’m a rogue. I know about cheating.”

Jackal’s serious expression didn’t change. “But my father is a master at it.

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The yard around the house put nearly every rooftop too far to be able to make the jump. The previous times, Tibs had used water to extend the roofs enough to make it, but he'd also taken the time to find which of the roofs was the closest. Which one he might be able to make a jump from without help from his essence.

He'd meant to test it multiple times before. But he'd always ended up preferring using his time looking for a way to bypass the enchantments on the windows. This time, he didn't have that luxury. He couldn't even call on earth to make himself stronger and jump further.

He considered climbing the house itself, but the odd of someone stepping out and seeing him was too great. Sebastian had made sure there was nowhere along the walls where he could hide while a guard passed and looked up. And he didn't think anyone working for that man would forget to look up looking for intruders.

It was only three stories. He'd fallen from higher and only had bruised himself. Of course, those times he hadn't landed in the yard of someone who wanted him dead and had guards ready to carry if order.

If he missed this jump, Tibs would have more than bruises to worry about.

Starting from the peak, Tibs ran down the incline, pushing himself as hard as he could. He sailed over the gap and made it onto the roof with paces to spare, but before he could rejoice, he was sliding down, his feet unable to find purchase.

He grabbed onto the end of the dormer and kept himself from falling, but his fingers were already slipping. He planted a knife in the roof to prevent that and, holding on to that, rubbed the fingers of his other hand together.

Oil.

Sebastian had impregnated the roof tiles with oil.

Jackal was right; his father cheated.

Tibs looked at the window he was hanging next to. It wasn't the window he'd intended, but he'd have to make due. There was no one inside as far as he could tell. If there had been, they'd be at the window and Tibs would be in trouble. The latch was set, but he saw nothing else trapping it. Tibs wiped the oil off his hand and pulled the shim out from his bracer. He had to hope Sebastian had relied entirely on the enchantments for protection.

He was in a precarious position to force the shim under the jam, and it finally went in. Then getting the leverage to force the latch to give nearly had him losing grip on his knife. It would go so much easier if he was holding onto the window sill, but after the roof, he didn't trust that to be able to hold him.

As soon as he saw Darran, he was buying a pouch of fine sand.

The latch gave, and he pulled on the window, then he had a foot on the sill and confirmed he'd been right. That too was oiled. With one leg inside the house, and holding onto the edge of the window as best as he could, he let go of his knife and pulled himself in.

He stayed on the floor catching his breath, then stood and located Jackal on the other side of the road. A thumbs-up and Tibs closed the window.

The room contained crates. Those that were open were empty or still had a few weapons in them, swords and arrows. Those that weren't open Tibs couldn't shift, so they

were still full. He looked at the room. Even if this was the only room with such crates. It showed Sebastian had been ready for this siege.

The door didn't open when he tested it. The keyhole went through it, and Tibs studied it as he pulled picks. It was well made. The kind Tibs had only thought existed in stories until he came here and the nobles moved in and he had those kinds of locks to train with.

He took his time, but then it turned and he cracked the door, listening.

With no sounds other than far indistinct voices, he opened it further and looked in the hall. At one end were the stairs. Opposite him were two doors, the furthest from him and the stair guarded by a woman in leathers seated next to it and seemingly asleep.

Tibs pulled a knife and hoped she didn't notice him. He didn't want to have to rely on throwing it. He had a hand over her mouth before she reacted, and the knife in her side, between the ribs and stilling her. The opening eyes fluttered back shut. He left the knife in and made sure she didn't slump over as he let her go.

A search didn't produce keys but gave a spare set of picks and seven silvers. He picked the lock and slipped inside. More crates, all unopened, as well as a metal safe in the center of the room with a dial on its door. Tibs rolled his eyes. Even if he thought what he was after fit in that. It was too obviously a decoy.

At the stairs, he still couldn't make out the conversations, but he thought they came from the ground floor. If they were on the floor below him, then they'd be in the rooms with the doors closed. Sebastian's office was on that floor but at the other end.

He stepped down them until he could sneak a peek at the corridor. Two doors on each wall, with one thug walking the length. On of the far door would be the office, on the left, the thought, placing the chimney he'd listened in from. He timed the thug's walk from one end to the other. He couldn't pick these kinds of locks in the time his back was to Tibs, but he could...

As soon as the guard turned and walked away from the stairs, Tibs was at the closest door, testing it. It opened and he slipped in.

He froze as someone snorted. When no cry of alarm came he cautiously turned. The room was dark, heavy cloths had been thrown over the window, but he made out six cots against that wall. With for of them occupied. One shifted, turning on his side. On and around one chest was clothing. Tibs pulled a shirt and pants and quietly put them on. He had to roll the sleeves and pant legs, but now he looked like one of the thugs instead of an armored rogue. All he had to do was make sure no one looked at him too closely so they didn't notice how his armor defined the shirt.

When the sound of the walking thug moved away from the stairs again, Tibs slipped out and confidently walked to the ground floor. If he didn't find what he was after, he'd have to come back and figure out how to go about searching the other rooms. Hopefully, other than Sebastian's office, the floor was all sleeping quarters.

"We're running low on people," were the first words Tibs made out, from a woman Tibs recognized the voice of. Harry's first lieutenant. With it came the smell of cooking and Tibs's stomach rumbled. He'd eaten only a few hours ago, he told it. He couldn't be hungry already.

He remembered the hunger as he walked through Val's halls and chastised himself for that too. He'd known hunger, he had grown up with it.

"They'll be fine," Sebastian replied.

"Sir, they have magic."

"They're children." His tone was dismissive. "And they barely have any training. If any of them had the kind of strength that could cause us trouble, the guild wouldn't let them get involved. That is the one thing you can always count on. The guild doesn't waste what it has. It hoards power, instead of using it."

"They still managed to take out half the people we had here. Nearly all the archers."

"Then we'll send for more. They're low on food, so it's only a question of days before the town turns on them, on their so-called protectors."

Tibs continued. He might learn something valuable from their conversation, but until they could use essence again, it wouldn't be useful.

A sitting room had thugs looking outside, searching for anyone approaching. A table had three playing a dice game. More thugs at the window in the next room. At the door to the outside was guarded.

Each window in the room had someone looking out, so Tibs was happy they were so bored they hadn't noticed them on the other side of the street. None of the rooms had the crate or something resembling a large crystal, so Tibs turn back the way he came. The kitchen was beyond the stairs, and with that would be the eating room, which would have the kind of space needed for a large crystal. The pantry would be large in a house like this, and it might fit in that if it was standing.

"With them trying to reach us," the woman said. "We have no one watching the platform. Now would be the best time for their reinforcement to arrive."

"And how did they let anyone outside the town know, they'd be attacking us?" Sebastian replied. "Unless you're implying your archers let someone leave by the platform." The threat was heavy in his tone.

"No one left."

"Then we don't have to worry about that."

"The guild could have—"

"The guild could have crushed me the moment I stepped off that platform and my brother was there to greet me. He might have believed everything I told him about being here only to see Jackie, but he will have told the guild. If they gave a damned about what I can do, I'd be dead."

Another room on the way, more people looking out windows. More still sitting and looking bored.

"This is the perfect opportunity for them to get someone out," She said.

"They have everyone focused on this assault. And they'd need one of the attendants to leave. Not one of them will risk going to the platform after how many we injured. They're going to realize this is a waste of time, and as they are licking their wounds, we'll mount our own assault on them, and then the town will be mine."

Sebastian was standing by the table, looking at papers on it. Out of her guard's armor,

the woman looked less intimidating. Tibs continued on. The kitchen had a few people preparing food, and the only other room had more people looking out the windows.

There had been nothing like a crystal or the crate that had been carried here in any of the rooms. Could he get in the kitchen to check the pantry? Could it be small enough to be in that safe? Maybe having it look like a decoy was part of what made it work? There was Sebastian's office and the other two rooms on the floor above.

Tibs turned as someone stepped out of a door in the room that was partially obscured by a tall plant and stopped halfway to the stairs as the location of that door registered. It should have opened onto the hall he'd been in. Only there was no door there.

In fact, the hall was short, now that he considered it. The door leading outside by in the kitchen, and the hall was... short.

That did create a space large enough the crate would fit in, standing.

Tibs returned to the room. The glances he attracted were, like the previous ones, uninterested. Standing here again, he knew how he'd missed the door. There was none. Beyond the plant was just more of the wall, except it was slid aside, revealing an opening. Tibs headed to it, nodding at the woman doing needlework by it.

Instead of a room, the opening had stairs going down.

The cellar was a hurried construction. The walls were rough with boards across the packed dirt, to hold it in place. Beams kept the ceiling from crashing down, and dust or flour fell through the floorboards from the kitchen.

In the middle of the dug-out space, lying on top of what was left of the crate it had been brought here in, was a crystal that emanated a soft green glow. While it was not as large as the crate had been, would only just fit in the opening in the wall to be brought down here.

Around it, eight muscular men in armor turned to face him.

"Who the fuck are you?" one of them demanded.