

## Chapter 64

Tibs tried to wrap his essence around the wound. But the pain made it hard to concentrate. Then he saw the archer on the roof of a house notching another arrow.

“What—” Carina started asking, but Tibs grabbed her arm as she crouched and pulled her off balance and on his other side.

“Archer,” Tibs said through gritted teeth. The motion had made the pain more intense. An arrow broke on the pillar behind where Carina had been standing.

Air essence accumulated around her hand, took a shape, but Tibs couldn’t focus on it. It had never been this hard to think, to concentrate. The shape adjusted around her moving hand, then she flung the weave at the archer. It continued to change, then it was out of his range.

The archer flew out of sight as if Jackal had punched him while fully stoned.

Tibs tried to grasp at the details through the increasing pain, but all he could get was archer and pain.

“Cover.”

There might be others.

Where were the attendants? Where was the one who had come with them? The people waiting to travel? Where was everyone?

Carina pulled him behind a pillar, and Tibs looked across the platforms to the houses on that side, they were one story, they were taller further back, but the ground sloped on the way to the mountain.

Maybe this was why every other city he’d traveled to had a market around the transportation platform. It made it harder for anyone to shoot at the arrivals.

“We can’t stay here,” Carina said, glancing around before focusing on the arrow in his shoulder. Tibs screamed as she pulled at the skin around it and she stopped.

“There’s something else. It hurts too much.”

“Can’t you wrap your essence around it? That helps with the pain.”

She shook his head and regretted it. “Mind’s fuzzy.”

“There’s poisons,” she mused.

“No corruption.” He could tell that, at least.

“There are other kinds.” She looked around. “We need to move.”

“The inn,” Tibs said. Whatever was going on, the answer would be at the inn. That’s where he’d find Jackal, and the fighter always knew what was going on.

She hesitated, then pulled him to his feet. He screamed again, it felt like the pain was spreading away from the wound. He looked around the pillar. The road was empty in all direction. The road to the platform was never empty.

A raid, he thought, the guards were raiding the Street.

He shook his head to clear it. No. He was no longer there. This was something else. Someone else.

“We shouldn’t have left,” he said. “We left the town to Sebastian.”

“This was your one chance at Purity, Tibs. And nearly every other Runner left. If the Conscript couldn’t keep this from happening, I doubt you would have made a difference.”

“It’s my town.” His growl came out as more of a whine to his ear.

“How do we get to the inn, Tibs? I’m thinking we want to stay off the streets, but I don’t know the alleys.”

He tried to focus on the alleys he could see and remember the layout. This part of the town hadn’t changed in months, but the fuzziness made it difficult.

“That one,” he pointed, then his hand dropped as if stones had been attached to it. “It’s like a maze, and there’s going to be creature, no, people there to stop us.”

“So this is like a run.”

But they weren’t in the dungeon. He looked at the sky to confirm it. “Jackal’s going to want loot.”

“Jackal can come get us if he want’s that loot so badly,” she muttered. “Ready?” She asked, but didn’t wait for his answer, pulling him along.

Tibs managed not to scream at the jostling, but he was sweating when they stopped by the entrance.

“I don’t see anyone,” she said, peering into the alley. When she looked at him, her expression turned concerned, then angry. “And Peolo just healed you.”

Right. He had purity.

He sensed the reserve, with its paltry quantity of essence, but he couldn’t grasp it. When he focused on pulling it out, his mind’s fingers turned numb. And what would he do with it, he realized. It wasn’t like he’d ever sense how a cleric healed.

“Hopefully there’s no one,” she whispered. She moved slower, supporting more of his weight. “Jackal’s going to be angry if you get anymore hurt.”

“Maybe the archer died when he fell and left loot behind.” The word came out without him intending to say them. He knew people didn’t leave loot behind.

They made it to another street without incident. There, Carina stopped. The street was empty again, but Tibs realized she was concentrating only in one direction, then he made out the sounds of fighting.

He stepped in that direction, but she pulled him back, causing him to scream again as the pain flashed. It seemed as if anything sudden motion caused the left side of his torso to scream in pain.

“We have to help,” Tibs said, when his panting subsided enough.

“You don’t have armor, or your bracers. Where’s the inn?”

Tibs looked around, then pointed across the road, away from the fighting.

“Then that’s where we’re going.”

They made past a few more alleys before coming across a man sprawled on the ground, his next bent in a deadly way. Next to him were a bow, a spilled quiver, and a ruptured purse with coppers spread on the ground next to it.

“Loot,” Tibs said, then snickered until the pain stopped him. She leaned him against a wall and searched the man, gathering the coins.

“I think it’s the archer I hit.” She pulled a medallion from under his shirt and showed

it to Tibs. A rearing horse was etched on it. There was essence woven through it.

“It’s the thing that lets people lie to Harry, I think.” He couldn’t focus on the details of the weave to see if the essence he could tell about were the same. Of course, now that Sebastian was openly attacking would be when he’d be able to get his hand on the proof he needed to convince Harry. Why couldn’t it have been any of his actual attempts at stealing one of them from the guards.

“Tibs, it’s you.” She showed him a charcoal drawing of his face. There were words too, but that was too much effort.

“Sebastian,” Tibs said hatefully.

She looked at the drawing. “Could be Don.”

Tibs stared at her, then burst out laughing, then doubled over in pain.

She was next to him, holding him up. “Tibs?” she called. “I’m sorry, I didn’t try to make you laugh.”

The pain subsided again. He realized it didn’t last long. As soon as he stopped moving, it became manageable. If not for the danger of one of Sebastian’s people finding them, staying put until the poison passed would be the best thing to do.

“No one likes Don enough to take his coins to hurt me.” He paused. “And he doesn’t hate me that much anymore. Only when he thinks I’m trying to make people not like him.” Which did seem to be nearly all the time. Don had problems. Tibs just wished the sorcerer would stop thinking Tibs was the cause of them.

“Loot!” Tibs said. “Jackal’s going to be happy.”

“This isn’t even worthy of a first floor,” she replied, disappointed.

“Then this is the floor before the first one,” Tibs said, and immediately knew there was something wrong with that, but he couldn’t think what.

“Don’t even joke about that.” She shuddered. “I’d hate to think of the dungeon reaching this far.”

“Every house a room,” Tibs whispered. Peolo had said that. He was sad the cleric didn’t like him anymore. One day, Tibs would go and explain thing to him. When he no longer had to fear what the guild did to him if they learned about all his essences.

She put his arm around his shoulder and they made it to the other side.

“Hey, you!” someone yelled.

Tibs looked over his shoulder at a man in blood stained leathers carrying a chest under an arm.

“Stop!”

Carina hurried into the alley and Tibs did his best not to voice his pain.

“Get him!”

Who was the man talking to?

Partly through the alley, Carina dropped him. Before the pain passed enough he could voice his complaint, he felt the air essence around them shift and gather around. Thugs were shoved back where Carina pointed.

Tibs tried to count how many there were, but he mostly saw legs, and there were too many of those. Numbers above one and zero were just too hard right now.

Carina stepped across him. "This might hurt," she said, as essence gathers tighter around them, well, her. She continued pushing the approaching thugs away with a hand, while gathering more essence into a weave.

That was a lot of essence, Tibs thought in awe.

She closed her free hand into a fist and the weave compressed into a sheath around her. Was she making armor out of air? He so had to try that when he had his bracers.

She was sweating, and panting.

"Abyss, I hope this works," She whispered, then opened her hand.

The impact shoved the breath out of Tibs hard enough it was a pain apart from the injury. The walls in the alley cracked and broke as they bowed away. The thugs flew away, some through walls.

When the pain passed, Carina was leaning against a support beam that was all that was left of that wall. "You okay?" she asked.

He nodded in spite of the continuing pain. Wow, was all he could think. He;d never seen her break things unless it was with her air blades and those only did small damage.

She pushed herself away and pulled him up. It was a strain to do that now, Tibs noticed. The made it to the other end, past the street, and into more alleys. There were nearly to the inn, Tibs thought.

"You're done," someone growled.

Ahead of them two thug blocked their way. They were cut and one had a broken arm, but both held swords.

"You really shouldn't have pissed us off like that."

Behind them three more reached them, also injured.

"I guess I need more essence for it to kill anyone," Carina muttered.

"Down!" someone new ordered and Tibs screamed in pain as Carina was on top of him. There was fighting around them. Then, "Finish those three."

Someone was next to them an Tibs tried to grab any of the essences to defend Carina and him, but they all slipped through his mental fingers.

"Are you two okay?"

Carina moved and Tibs saw the man, his eyes were the red of fire, the woman there had essence the gray of metal. They were Runners.

The relief was almost enough to cancel out the pain.

"We're good," She said, helping Tibs to stand. "I don't know you."

The man was older; that made him one of the conscript. Tibs tried to remember his name, but like everything else in his mind, the information kept slipping away.

"Garrett," the man answered. "That's Kaylie, and over there's Army."

"Arnstein," the man corrected. He didn't have an element. "If you call me Army one more time, Garr, I will pull your tongue out." There was none of the friendliness in the banter Tibs was used to with his teammates.

"What is going on?" Carina asked, and Tibs was happy for it. He too wanted to know, but words were too difficult right now.

“Not long after the dungeon closed and you guys left there was an influx of people. After that there were archers set up to shoot anyone arriving. We’ve removed a lot of them, but there’s always more.” He nodded to Tibs. “You two are lucky you survived.”

“No luck,” Tibs muttered. Luck wasn’t a thing.

“I removed the one that shot Tibs,” Carina said, “but the arrow poisoned him.”

Garrett nodded.

“You’re lucky you didn’t pull the arrow out,” Kaylie said. “Nasty things with barbed heads. He would have bled out if you did.”

“The poison’s something to keep you bunch from using essence,” Arnstein said. “We have someone at the inn who can deal with it, if she isn’t exhausted from all the healing she’s been doing.”

“Where is everyone?” Carina asked.

“If you mean right now,” Kaylie said with a snort, “all around town. If you mean when were not patrolling, then the inn is where we regroup. We control the buildings around it and we’re sheltering as many of the townsfolk as can find. I’m sure there are a lot of them in other parts, there isn’t enough of us to search the entire town. I can’t wait for the dungeon to recall everyone so we can kick their ass finally.”

“Jackal?” Tibs managed to say.

Garrett shrugged. “Probably out there, kicking every one of their ass he comes across. I think he’s the only one actually enjoying this.”

“What about the guards?” Carina asked. “They can’t all have been working for Sebastian. What are they doing to help?”

Arnstein snorted. “Those that are left are posted around the guild building and aren’t moving from there. They aren’t even guarding the dungeon. Those asshole only care about their asses.”

“Can’t get in,” Tibs muttered, “until Sto lowered the door.”

“Until the stone door opens,” Carina said. “As you can tell, he’s out of it. How about you lead us to the inn and explain what happened on the way?”

Tibs muttered protests as Kaylie picked him up and she chuckled, then grew serious. “Whey this started,” Kaylie said as they walked, “the guards turned on each other. I don’t know who won, but like Arnstein said, those who are left don’t leave the guild building. We only see them if we manage to make an excursion on that direction. The thugs aren’t bothering them as far as we can tell.”

“What about adventurers? Surely the guild has called in help.”

“Can they do that?” Garrett asked.

“They have to,” Carina replied. “They’re top level adventures, one of them must be strong enough to send a call, if they don’t have something to do it for them.”

They did, Tibs was sure of it, but he couldn’t remember what it was.

“No one’s come to help,” Arnstein said. “I told you, those guild assholes don’t care about us.”

They were attacked once, so close to the inn Tibs thought he could smell the food. Garrett and his team took them down easily. Carina tried to help, but she barely had any

essence left after that blast. The thugs fled moments after the fight started and it was clear they were on the losing side.

Other Runners joined them on the last stretch, then they were inside the inn.

“Injuries!” Kaylie yelled and the crowd parted around a blood stained table. She placed Tibs on it, and a woman, well, a girl, stepped to him. She was tiny, and her pale skin was sunk in. Even without her robes, Tibs suddenly knew who she was. She was the cleric who had tried to clear the pool of corruption by herself.

“You’re back!” Jackal yelled, but stopped steps away from the table as the cleric glared at him.

She looked at Tibs and worry crossed her face. Her expression grew resolute and she placed a hand on him.

“It’s alright, Libby,” an older man said. “You need to rest.” He wore cleric’s robes, but they were stained and torn.

“I can do this, Senior,” she whispered.

“Your determination is admirable, but you must learn to see the future. These people will need you tomorrow and the day after. If you push yourself into Purity’s embrace now, how will you help them then?”

“Yes, Senior.” The resignation seemed forced to Tibs.

“May I heal you?” the man asked Tibs, who nodded. “The poison has spread far into your body, when did you arrive?”

Tibs’s answer was wrenched away as the man pulled the arrow out, then the pain soothed and Tibs was able to glare at him. “Are all of you clerics this cruel?”

“All of us?” The man smiled. “You’ve dealt with many?”

Tibs almost told the man about Val and Craren, but stopped himself from revealing he’d been in the dungeon. Then realized that he could have said they were clerics he’d met and they had taken pleasure in torturing him, but the healing had taken away his anger.

The cleric pulled his hand away, leaving behind a lack of injuries on Tibs’s body and a clarity of mind that made Tibs realize he should have paid attention to what the cleric did when he healed him.

Tibs sat carefully, wary of the pain the poison had caused, but that was gone too. “How many clerics are in Kragle Rock?” The clarity wouldn’t last, so he wanted to take advantage of it.

“Six, including me.”

“Only six? Where are they all?” Tibs frowned. “Or did they go home since they weren’t needed?”

We are always needed,” the cleric replied, “but yes, with the dungeon closed, many took the time to focus on themselves.” His face darkened. “But, many took refuge within the guild when the chaos started. Too many have forgotten that our work means we must be where trouble and danger are, not where comfort is.”

Tibs looked around. There were a lot of people in the inn. More than even when they served meats and good vegetables again. Everyone looked tired, and some were injured, but no one had serious injuries.

“I’m glad you and your group are here to help.”

Jackal was looking at him warily.

“I’m fine, and Carina has loot for you, from our run to the inn.”

She handed the fighter the few coppers the archer had had.

“You thought of me in the middle of being hurt?” Jackal said in awe, then frown. “You do know I’m with Kro, right? I love you, but as a brother. If this is an attempt at—”

Carina slapped his shoulder hard enough she winced. “I handed you the coins and you act like Tibs is the one making the advance?”

“He’s the one who said I had loot,” Jackal replied, “and I know you’re not interested in me, I’m way to dumb. You like men who like reading.” He flashed her a smile and she blushed.

Tibs made his way to the bar. “What happened?” he asked the trailing fighter. The tankard appeared as soon as Tibs was there, and he thanked Russel. It was watered, but it was home.

“Just my father and his big to take over the city while its strongest protectors are away.”

“I should have realized he’d do that and stayed.”

“I should have thought about it,” Jackal grumbled. “I grew up under him. I should have known things being quiet was just him waiting for the right moment.”

“Quiet?” Tibs asked. “He had thieves creating trouble we barely kept in check.”

“That’s just normal business for him.” Jackal looked at the counter. “It’s my fault. I’ve grown so comfortable here that I expected Knuckles to deal with my father when he made his move.”

“Harry’s a good man,” Tibs replied reflexively. Then had to wonder if that was true, where was he when the town was in trouble?

“He’s a guard!” Jackal snapped. “You never trust a guard!”

The crowd cheered.

Tibs nodded. He’d known that too, once. Not trusting guard when just after not trusting nobles. There was also a time, not too long ago when he didn’t trust the guild either. What did it say about him that he was surprised two of the three had betrayed his trust in them?

“What about the nobles?” not that he cared, but he needed to know where they stood in all this.

Jackal snorted. “They’re playing my father’s game, most of them. They have enough coins and he’s smart enough to know to only ask for a pittance. Those who aren’t, have hired their own guards to keep anyone from approaching, and I mean anyone. We tried to get to them and offer to help them and they barely made it back to be healed.” He paused. “There are four nobles who have been helping.”

“What are they after?” Tibs demanded suspiciously.

“Best I figure, nothing.” Jackal raised a hand. “I know, they’re nobles. One of them is that friend of Mez, the one that’s a fire archer too. The other is her brother. She vouched for the other two. They haven’t argued about orders I’ve given them. They even offered helpful

suggestions,” he added in exasperation. “They’ve taken in the townsfolk in that part of the town.” He looked at Tibs. “I know how you feel about nobles, but if they’re after anything, they’re being awfully sneaky about it, even for nobles.”

Tibs bit back his reply. They were nobles. Anytime one of them offered something, they took a lot more in return. Still, if they helped now, he’d deal with the problem they caused later.

“The team?”

“You and Carina are the only ones back. I don’t expect Mez or Khumdar to return before the recall.” He lowered his voice. “Can you get the dungeon to open now?”

“I don’t know. But before I venture in that direction, I need my bracers. My armor would be nice too.” He looked at Jackal expectantly.

The fighter sighed. “The first thing my father did was put people around the rooming houses. A lot of people. Enough that the few attempts we’ve made couldn’t make it past them.” He smiled. “But until now, it isn’t like we had a real motivation to get in, so I’ll get people and we will do it again.”

“Where’s Kroseph? I keep expecting him to scold me for getting hurt.”

Russel gave Jackal a look and Tibs worried.

“He’s alive,” the fighter hurried to say, and glared at the barman, mouthing ‘really?’

Russel shrugged and moved on.

“My father tried to burn the inn down this morning. A lot of people are staying here, so if it had worked it would have been a blow to the town’s morale even if no one had been hurt. It was before sun up, and my Kro was up. You know him, I can never keep him in bed when there’s work to do.” He motioned to himself. “You have seen me, right? Explain to me how anyone could resist being in bed with me?”

Russel snorted.

“I pass on that all the time,” Tibs said.

“You’re my brother, you don’t count.” Jackal sighed. “Kro smelled the smoke and the idiot ran out instead of getting me. He found three of my father’s people there. He yelled to get people to come, but I wasn’t fast enough. They gave him a solid beating before I could stop them.” He accepted the tankard Russel placed before him. “There’s nothing left of them, Tibs. I made sure of it.”

“Good.” Tibs wasn’t sure what he’d have done if one of them had escaped.

“Kro’s healed, but he’s never been beaten up. Never been in a real fight. The inn doesn’t count,” he told Russel as the barman opened his mouth. “The people who come in here respect him and no matter how drunk they are, they aren’t going to try to kill him. This... what those bastards put him through took something away from my man.” The tankard shattered in his hand.

“Will he be okay?” Tibs asked when Jackal didn’t react, not even to bemoan the loss of ale.

Jackal hesitated. “I hope so. I’m sorry Russel.” He grabbed a rag and cleaned the mess he made. “I’ve seen it happen, but it’s never the same. And before I didn’t...” he let out a breath. “I hope he’s going to be okay. He hasn’t gotten out of bed since, Tibs.” He forced a



smile. "And I know one thing that will make him feel better. Come on, I'll take you to him."

The common room up the stairs was packed with people sleeping on the large beds and even the floor. The next floor had the rooms for Jrosep's family, as well as a few for those with coins to afford a bed to themselves.

Jackal hesitated, then knocked on a door. "Kro? It's me."

"Come in," came the reply.

Tibs was through before the door was fully open and hugging Kroseph, who was seated on the bed. The server was too stunned to react immediately, then wrapped his arms around Tibs.

"Are you okay?" Tibs asked.

"I'm fine," Kroseph said dismissively. "I'm just tired. Did you just arrive?"

Tibs nodded and studied Kroseph's face. Jackal was right, there was something gone, some of the fire in his eyes.

"Yes," Tibs said, then had an idea. "And Jackal nearly ripped my shoulder when he hugged me."

"He did what?" the server Demanded, glaring at the fighter.

"He's lying," Jackal replied, terrified. "I didn't touch him, that cleric was there, glaring at me."

"I had an arrow poking out and he just squeezed me. It hurt a lot."

Kroseph got off the bed and stalked to the fighter. "How dare you hurt him! What is wrong with you?"

"Tibs?" Jackal pleaded.

Tibs thought about letting this go one a while longer. It wasn't often he got to see Jackal on the defensive. But he had accomplished his goal. Kroseph was out of bed, and by the sound of it, had regained his fire.

"I did lie."

"What?" Kroseph rounded on Tibs. "Why would *you* do something like that? Him I get doing something stupid, but you?"

"How are you feeling?"

"How do you think? I'm pissed. I'm pissed that you did this to me. I'm pissed that someone tried to burn my inn, I'm pissed that I'm scared to leave my room!"

Tibs hugged him. "It'll get better."

Again, it was a few seconds before Kroseph had his arms around him. "What just happen?"

"Magic, I think," Jackal replied. "Don't ask me, Tibs can do too much stuff I don't understand." He kissed Kroseph's temple. "I'm just glad you're back."

"Oh, don't think a kiss is going to make me forget," the server warned. "Why did it take a cleric to stop you from hugging Tibs when he was injured?"

Jackal sighed. "Can we go over my punishment when we get back?"

"Back?" the server asked fearfully. "From where? Why are you leaving?" he tightened his hold on Tibs.

“Tibs?” there was pleading in Jackal’s voice again.

Tibs looked up. “I need to get my equipment from our room. I’m useless without it.”

The fire was back in Kroseph’s eyes. “Don’t you dare say that, Tibs. You are never useless. If not for you, this town would have fallen to that one’s father already.”

Tibs frowned. “I wasn’t even here.”

“Exactly!”