

Chapter 74

Tibs groaned as he came awake, but that was interrupted by a sharp pain in his jaw. He reached for his essence and found his reserve was empty.

How? He forced himself the rest of the way to wakefulness and sat. He was in Kroseph's bed, it was daylight outside, and Jackal was seated facing the bed, his feet propped up on the end of it. He was glaring at Tibs.

"What was that?" the fighter demanded, tone hard.

Tibs opened his mouth, and the eyes narrowed.

Instead, he tried to figure out why Jackal was angry.

"I'm sorry I ran off. But you and Rao were more than enough to deal with those thugs, and I couldn't do anything to help since I can't control how I act when I use an element." He bit his lower lip. "Did Rao die? That would explain the anger.

"No. Neither did Don." That the answer was flat and didn't have any added comments about Don worried Tibs. "You think you running off is why I'm pissed?"

What else could it be?

"The plan was to chase my father out of town. Don't try to tell me one of the elements made you run off to kill him. I saw your eyes."

That was what Jackal was angry about? "He got Radkliff killed!"

Jackal snorted. "You think he's the only one?"

"No, and your father had to pay for all of them!" Tibs wanted to stand and get in Jackal's face, but now that he was awake, his entire body ached. What had he done with his essence for it to be just about empty? That reserve was so deep Tibs thought it never ended. Now he could barely make out the sliver of essence in it.

"Oh, so now he's my father and no longer Sebastian," Jackal spat. "Do you have any idea what's going to fall on the town if you killed him? I told you he has plans in place."

"We'll deal with that."

Jackal was on his feet. "No, we won't! With my father dead, all his coins go to destroying those responsible! You think having him here was bad? He wanted to town for himself. Now, if he's dead, there might not be a town left a few sunrises from now."

"You don't sound sure he's dead."

"I fucking up he isn't, but you didn't leave much for anyone to know."

"What do you mean?"

Jackal looked at Tibs suspiciously, and he tried to remember. The house and the chase were clear, even if his thinking didn't always make sense. Then he'd crashed and ran to the platform. Sebastian had been on it, about to escape and Tibs had been angry and he wasn't going to let that happen. He'd called fire and then...

Then it was heat and roaring and screams. He touched his jaw. Someone had punched him and knocked him out. He looked at Jackal.

"Don't even think to ask me to apologize. What I'm sorry for is not getting there sooner."

“What...” Tibs swallowed, putting some things together in what Jackal said. “What did I do?” That the fighter didn’t immediately answer worried Tibs. What had he done with all that fire?

“Possible more damage than my father managed in the time he was laying siege to us. Other than the platform, there is nothing left standing for three blocks around it, Tibs. It’s all been burned to ashes.”

Tibs pulled his knees to himself. “Did I kill any of the townsfolk?” He barely heard himself asking as he wrapped his arms around his knees.

Again, Jackal was slow in responding, and Tibs tightened his hold.

“I don’t know.” Jackal sounded tired. “We tried to evacuate as many as we could from the area, but with my father’s archers always there, we never confirmed if it was clear. You didn’t leave much for us to be able to tell. Even my father’s people were nothing more than ash by the time I knocked you out and they were in the open. If there was someone in a house you burned down, there’ll be no way to tell what is them and what is the burned house.”

“I’m sorry,” He mumbled in his knees, tears falling.

“I know you are, Tibs. But abyss, I was there to keep you in control and you just left.”

“I was angry.” That sounded like suck a bad reason now.

“That doesn’t make it better,” Jackal snapped. His breathing was harsh. “The only good thing I can see out of this is that no one knows you did it.”

“How is that good?” Tibs demanded, glaring and wiping his eyes.

“You really want the guild to know you can do that?”

Tibs swallowed and looked away. “I might have killed some of the townsfolk.”

Jackal started to wave it away and stopped. “You’re going to have to figure out how to deal with that.”

“Where there any Runners there?”

Jackal snorted. “Only the dumbest ones would have gotten close to that kind of heat.” He paused and frowned, then muttered. “Abyss.”

Tibs couldn’t help the smile.

Jackal sighed. “Well, now Carina won’t be able to claim I’m not the dumbest one in the town.”

“Are you okay?”

Jackal shrugged. “Stone doesn’t burn easily. But you owe me an armor. As far as anyone knows, I went in to rescue you, and your water, as little of it as you have, saved us. How did you manage to keep your armor from burning?”

Tibs shrugged. He remembered turning his armor to air along with him and keeping the corruption from melting it, but he’d just willed it.

“You’re lucky you didn’t do with Fire what you did with Earth. I don’t know what I could have done to stop you if you had.”

Tibs tried to remember what he’d done while channeling Earth, but he didn’t recall anything unusual.

“The story that’s spreading is that my father had a plan in place to cover his escape.”

Tibs raised an eyebrow.

“I didn’t hide that my father’s always making plans. The fire probably covered what he used, if he had time to activate it.”

Tibs wiped at his eyes again. It hurt that he’d damaged the town, maybe killed townsfolk, but he couldn’t make that right by sitting here and crying. With Sebastian dead, he needed to know what he had to work with to help. And, if Jackal was right, prepare for a dead man’s revenge.

“The Attendants?”

Jackal looked at him in surprise, then was serious. “No idea. They didn’t drop by the inn and no one’s been in a mood to chase them down.”

And if they didn’t want to be found, Tibs didn’t think there was anything that could be done about it. “The clerics?”

“By the time we got back, they were gone. Someone came to collect them from the guild building. Some higher-up who could order them around. According to Quigly, there was a lot of arguing, but in the end, they had to do what they were told.”

That explained why no one had healed him. Unless Jackal had considered that punishment for what he’d done. Tibs wouldn’t argue with it. He put his feet on the floor and winced and the all-encompassing pain.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Jackal asked.

“I need to go see what I can do to help fix things.”

“Sit your ass down,” Jackal ordered as Tibs stood. “You are not getting off that bed until we’ve come to an understanding. We can’t risk you causing that kind of damage again, ever.”

Tibs sat. “It’s not like I can do anything right now. I don’t have any essence in my reserve, and outside of the dungeon I don’t know how long it’s going to take before it’s refilled.”

“I don’t care. Going forward, you’re only using water. I’d rather deal with you wanting to hug everyone than more destruction that can’t be blamed on my father this time. If you somehow cause this kind of destruction with water, you at least have what you did to put the fire of the shop to partially explain it.”

Tibs nodded.

“Promise it, Tibs. I want your word.”

“I swear.” When he looked up, Jackal was studying him, suspicion in his red-brown eyes. He wanted to insist he was being truthful, but Tibs, like Jackal, wasn’t above lying when it served him.

With a sigh, Jackal stood. “Come on. Kro made sure there’d be what’s passing as stew left. It’s going to be a while still before we have good food unless the dungeon opens today”

Tibs looked at the gray shirt and pants he wore. They were made of rough canvas and they weren’t his.

“I told Kro you don’t care if you sleep in your skin, but my man’s got ideas as to what can and can’t be done that way.”

“Not sleeping I take it?” Tibs stood and let the aches settle.

“No alone.”

Tibs chuckled. “So he considers it okay for those in the common room to sleep in their skin?”

Jackal rolled his eyes. “I meant with your special person, and you know it. It’s easier when it’s only skin to go and do—”

“I really don’t want to know.” Tibs had meant to sound amused, but it had come out harsh.

“One day, Tibs, you’re going to think differently.” Then Jackal grinned. “And on that day, you can ask me all the best tricks.”

Tibs batted the hand that was about to ruffle his hair away.

Tibs heard the celebration as soon as Jackal opened the door as an indistinct din in the distance. How quiet the third floor was always impressed Tibs since no essence was used to make it happen.

The voices became distinct as they walked down the stairs.

“...poured everything I had.” Don’s voice was louder than anyone’s. “I didn’t think it would be enough. The enchantments were so strong, but I wasn’t going to let any of you down. So I dug deep, I found every scrap of essence hiding away in my reserve and my amulets and I shoved everything at them as hard as I could, as sharp as I could make it and I won!” the final word was a snarl.

Don was standing on a table, turning and soaking in the cheers.

“We won!” he yelled and the cheers increased. Tibs looked around, worried it would shake the walls hard enough to bring the inn down.

Jackal leaned closer as he maneuvered Tibs through the crowd. “He’s been telling the story over and over. I think the Hero of Kragle Rock might be outdoing the Savior of the Dungeon.”

Don was welcome to the popularity. Tibs didn’t deserve it.

“How are you feeling?” Kroseph asked as they reached their table. Carina had her arms around him, then immediately let go as Tibs winced and mouthed a ‘sorry’.

They were far enough from Don that the crowd muffled the cheers. The server placed a bowl of thin stew before each of them along with a tankard.

“I ache.” He rubbed his jaws, but Carina was the one to look apologetic, not Jackal.

“You’re lucky that’s all you’re feeling.” There was restrained anger in Kroseph’s voice.

“I didn’t mean to,” Tibs mumbled before starting to eat.

“Maybe not,” the server said and Tibs was surprised he heard him over the noise. “But you should have known better, Tibs.”

“Maybe we should do this once Tibs has had time to rest and heal?” she said.

The server ran a hand over his face and looked in Don’s direction. “Did you know he could be such a show-boaster?”

Tibs paid attention to what Don said. He was retelling the story, and from when he made out, it was surprisingly accurate to the events. Don made himself seem more

important, of course, and hardly mentioned Tibs or Jackal, but he didn't make anything up, and when he spoke of Radcliff, the respect in his tone sounded genuine.

"He thinks he's the best one around," Tibs said, looking for meat in what was more broth than stew. "Now it's true."

Kroseph lowered his voice. "But he isn't the one who brought the house down."

Tibs shrugged. "It doesn't matter. Sebastian's dead. That's what I wanted. I'd rather he get the popularity than me. Let him deal with the guild." Tibs didn't look up, but he saw the worried look Kroseph exchanged with Jackal. He hoped it was about if Sebastian was actually dead or not because Tibs didn't want to deal with them encouraging him to be the face of their victory.

"You think Don's going to last long as the hero?" Jackal asked. "Or is he going to shatter the illusion by being an asshole again?"

Tibs chewed what he wasn't sure was meat or some stringy vegetable. "He's smart enough to make it last longer than you think."

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Tibs straightened in his chair, tankard to his lips, as he felt the group step into his senses. He looked at the door, trying to discern the elements in the group, but except for the two strongest, they were too far and close together to tell apart.

"What's wrong?" Jackal asked.

"The guild's coming," he whispered. The inn was quieter now. Don had stopped telling the story and was at his team's table, speaking with those who sat with him. He smiled like Sto had opened his door and handed the sorcerer all the riches he could make.

"Maybe we should leave," Carina suggested. "We have no idea what they'll think of what we had to do to fight Sebastian."

"I'm not moving from here for them," Jackal said, slamming the tankard on the table. "We fought for the town. If they wanted it done nicely, they should have acted."

The door opened and silence fell as Tirania entered with Harry at her side. The Runner's expressions weren't pleased, but no one voiced their resentments. As she stepped forward, the Runners moved aside and she headed for Don's table. The sorcerer stood and smoothed his robe. He looked uncertain.

"I am here," she said in a firm tone, "to carry the guild and the town's thanks to you, Don Arabis, for saving so many people and chasing the troubles away." She inclined her head.

Tibs couldn't tell how she really felt. As with any time she addressed them as a group, she only portrayed confidence.

"Thank you," Don stuttered, then regained control. "I only did what was called of me. What honor requires of me when trouble comes for the people who took me in and gave me a home. As soon as I heard about what was happening, I came."

Too much, Tibs thought. He wasn't talking to one of his teammates or another Runner. Tirania would see through his bluster and maybe even call him out on it. Tibs didn't think she took kindly to—

Her nod was almost a small bow, then she turned away.

“But,” Don added, “this victory isn’t mine.” She stopped and face him again, expression neutral. “We won. Those here in this inn, those now in their home who can finally sleep soundly. We came together to protect our town.” Don was looking at her, and there was an edge to his voice. “We didn’t abandon one another, we stood strong and that is how *we* defeated the monsters that sought to destroy us.”

They watched one another, then Tirania smiled.

“But a crowd can only be as effective as its leader. You were that leader, Don Arabis, you guided and shaped the people of Kragle Rock as a force that could defeat that criminal. Take the praise that is being bestowed onto you, because without you, this town would have been destroyed.

Don’s expression went from confused to beaming with pride.

Tibs watched Tirania walk away. She knew the point Don had tried to make, and she’d turned it around and used it to feed the sorcerer’s ego.

Noble, popped into his mind as she reached the door and turned to face them. “All of you have my thanks.” She gave the Runners in the inn a nod.

It didn’t have the effect on them her praise had had on Don, and it seemed to make Don realize how he’d reacted.

“I—” Jackal said, but Tibs shook his head, nodding to Harry who, unlike Tirania’s entourage was approaching, instead of leaving the inn.

“Well, if it isn’t the high and mighty leader of the guards,’ Jackal said disdainfully, raising his tankard to the man. “How proud you must feel.”

“I’m not here to get into an argument,” Harry replied. “I’m here to say thank you. I know you three had more to do in saving the town than he did.”

Jackal was on his feet. “We wouldn’t have had to do any saving if you’d done your job! I told you what my father was here to do! I warned you but you are so abyss full of that light you brushed me aside like one of those girls you like to bed.”

“He didn’t—”

“I told you he had something that let him lie to you,” Tibs said, trying to keep his town even.

“I had a sorcerer verify that he didn’t,” Harry replied through clenched teeth.

“Oh, like my father doesn’t have enough coins to bribe anyone you’d hire, because I’m going to guess the guild didn’t simply hand you one to use.”

The flash of anger in the guard leader’s face told Tibs Jackal was right.

“All this,” Jackal said, “happened because you didn’t do your job, Knuckles.”

“I did everything I was expected to.”

“Except listen to the people who knew what was going on!”

The inn fell silent.

The table legs scraping on the floor as Harry walked into it were loud and he stopped, looking at it as if he was surprised it was there. Then he looked around. Everyone in the inn was looking at them.

“Watch how you speak to me, Jackie-boy,” Harry threatened.

“Or what? Knuckles? You’re going to do to me what you should have done to my

father the moment he appeared on that platform?”

“I am the authority, here. Not you.”

“Then fucking act like it! Where were you during the siege? Where were those few guards who were still loyal to you? I didn’t see you help anyone. Isn’t that your job? Keeping the town safe, enforcing order? Oh no, how stupid of me. You don’t give a fuck about the town. It’s the dungeon you care about. It’s the dungeon you rushed to protect, too late, by the way when I sent one of my teammates to tell you. Whatever part of the town my father destroyed can be rebuilt after all.”

The two glared as Jackal caught his breath.

Harry opened his mouth.

“Or were you going to be the one destroying it,” Jackal asked, a smile forming, “if we didn’t manage to stop him?”

The guard leader’s mouth snapped close.

Tibs stared. “You wouldn’t have,” he said in disbelief.

Harry hadn’t acted to protect the town, but he wouldn’t have acted against it. He was its guard. Harry glanced in Tibs’s direction before turning and leaving. The pain in those eyes left Tibs shocked, and then angry.

Jackal had been right.

“Why?” Tibs asked in a whisper, looking at Jackal. “How could you think that?” he wanted to scream at his friend for shattering the belief Tibs had had in Harry. But Jackal had done nothing more than shining a light on a lie. Something Harry should have been the one doing.

Jackal sighed as he dropped in his chair. “If a house is infested with rot beetle, you barricade it before anyone can leave and you burn it down with them in it, because if only one of those things survives, they’ll be spreading again in days and before you know it, an entire neighborhood is falling and taking the city with it.” He picked up his tankard. “Of course, my father would have escaped, beetle that he is, and it would have been for nothing. But I doubt the guild would have cared what he got up to once he was gone. And they would have had ground to sell to people who wanted the privilege of living right next to a dungeon.” He down the tankard’s content.

“Sebastian’s dead,” Tibs said.

“I really hope you’re wrong Tibs.”

“How can you say that?” Carina asked.

“I told you, my father had plans for how to be avenged. So long as he’s alive, he’s going to take it personally and target only the person responsible.”

“The whole town beat him,” Tibs said.

Jackal snorted. “My father’s not that stupid. He knows who’s behind it, and it isn’t Don. That a kid beat him is going to make it worse for him, because if that story spreads no one’s going to fear him anymore.”

“You’re speaking as if he did escape,” Carina said.

“I know him. If Tibs had killed him, one of his things would have tried to take any immediate revenge.”

“But the fire was pure essence,” she countered. “It could have disrupted whatever that item did.”

Jackal nodded. “How about we hope that’s not the case and we prepare for an attack on Tibs, instead of something that is going to erase Kragle Rock from the world's memory?” He raised his tankard and took a drink, cursing when it was empty.