

Chapter 108

Tibs stalked the group of thugs in green and black.

They knew he was there and kept trying to lose him, splitting up and rejoining. They seemed to think that if he had to pick one group, it would make him hesitate and cause him to lose their trail. He didn't, even when they were out of his sight. They never strayed far from each other, so they remained within the range of his sense. And he also knew what they were trying to do.

It was unfair for them, really, Tibs thought every so often, how easy it was for him to dispatch them. He thought that when he was so focused that he forgot about the damage Sebastian's people caused his town, the number of Runners they'd killed. Half the town was on fire or burned down already. Anyone with essence that helped control the fire was busy doing that, which had left the rest at the thugs' mercy.

There were no Omega Runner's left, and fer Upsilon's.

Now, Tibs wanted any thugs still in his town dead, even if he had to be the one to kill them all.

These weren't the first Tibs had stalked since his enforced meal a few hours before, and by the time the sun set, there would be no one in green and black left alive if Tibs had his way. He wanted Sebastian without protection. He wanted the man to fear the moment Tibs would stalk in his camp and bring him down.

Tibs would take his time, make the man suffer for everything he'd done, for each person who had lost or been lost. He would cut him slowly, but he'd keep him alive. He also had a lesson to teach Harry, and he would do that by giving him what he'd been unwilling to help get.

He would be—

The group of thugs rejoined in a courtyard and stopped moving. So, this was where they'd make their move against him.

Tibs walked around the courtyard, using the alleys, sensing the seven there in the center. Their backs to one another. Looking for every way, he could spring out on them. It felt too much like a trap for him to barge in. He hadn't come across anyone with the green stones, but their nature made them hard to sense unless he knew to focus on them.

Did they think seven thugs without elements were enough to capture him? After two days of this, they had to know how deadly he was. The seven there were no more than an annoyance to him.

Or the bait in a trap.

He sensed for the Everburn, but they didn't have any. Few did anymore. Sebastian might be out of the stuff. But it meant he couldn't do as he'd done with previous groups. Ignite it, watch them burn and move on.

Tibs widened his sense. In the direction of the transportation platform, at the edge of his range, a fight was happening. It was too far for him to get details, but he sensed the essence being used. He sensed people with elements to his left, far, but closer than he'd expected. He hadn't realized they were this close to the nobles' neighborhood. Those were

the adventurers they had guarding the alleys leading in.

And Tibs almost missed the trap's poison. Would have missed them entirely if the green stone hadn't made him keenly aware of how it distorted his essence. They were on a roof, three buildings back.

Tibs considered the building's layout. That position would give them a view of anything happening in the courtyard. He thought about going for the assassin, but decided to have fun instead. Give that person something to consider when they were then running for their life, trying to get back to Sebastian and report what they were about to see.

He strode into the courtyard, and instead of attacking him, or goading him into position for the assassin to take him out, they gawked. Hadn't Sebastian told them who Tibs was? Or were the stories told so extraordinary they expected him to be since warrior like Jackal or Quigly? Maybe an archer or a sorcerer?

Was it that someone as small and unimpressive, but no longer skinny, as he was couldn't be the terror that was roaming this town, killing anyone in green and black he encountered? Time to educate them about the folly of making assumptions when it came to Runners.

He channeled Air, and sent a gale to shove them back, then switched to Earth, intending to have it grow over them to encase them, but he misjudged his level of control over that distance and couldn't harden it before they stood and separated.

"He's not alone!" the woman in the lead yelled.

"Fuck that," a man replied, turning to run. "That's not what I agreed to." The ball of fire Tibs sent caught him as he reached the alley. No one was leaving this courtyard.

They stared at him again. Tibs had formed the ball in his hand and thrown it, making it clear he was the one with the fire. One peered at him, and seemed surprised, then apprehensive. Tibs's eyes were now blue. Had any of them noticed how they changed color with the element he channeled? They were normally quite distinctive.

Tibs remained aware of the distortion that was moving down from the roof they'd been standing on as a fighter ran at him, sword high and belting a battle cry. Tibs channeled Earth and suffused himself with it. Her eyes widened as his skin turned to stone, but she didn't slow. He blocked the sword with his arm, making the motion lazy, then hit her hard enough she flew back and landed before the group. She didn't get up.

Tibs released the essence.

"Hold!" the leader ordered as two stepped forward. "Remember your orders."

Something to the effect of 'keep Tibs in the distracted and in the courtyard until the assassin got him'. Assassin had to be the wrong term. Unless the orders had changed, they were looking to capture him, not kill him. Said assassin was now creeping toward the courtyard behind Tibs. Which meant they couldn't tell he was the one doing all this.

He channeled corruption and flung some at a sword. He sent a blade of light at the leader, but the essence unraveled and, and she only glowed slightly. He wrapped the thug's head next to her in darkness, and he clawed at his face, trying to remove it.

He channeled Purity and... let it go. He had no idea how he could use that one to hurt or scare them.

The leader looked from him to the people around her. Her determination cracking. She seemed unsure if she should believe what she saw him do. Tibs helped her. He channeled water, making a ball of it in one hand, then pulled fire essence from his bracer's reserve to make a ball of that in his other hand, smiling at her.

She stared at him. Everyone knew the stories. Only sorcerers could do things with more than one element, and even if she thought he was a sorcerer. He was a kid. He shouldn't be this strong yet.

She turned and ran. A man that had looked ready to bolt used that as his signal. He got the fireball in the back. She got the quick 'x' attack Tibs etched with his finger. It wasn't as strong as he'd intended, but it showed he didn't need a blade to etch it.

The last two remained frozen in place as Tibs approached. One dropped his sword and raised his hands in surrender. Tibs shook his head, and he summoned the knife to his hand to etch the 'x' attack. It was too late for any of them. He willed the beam of water thin, and it hit him in the eye, exiting at the back of the head.

He grew the ground over the last one's boots as she tried to turn. She crossed his arms over his chest as she tried to pull them out in a building panic.

"Now, what should I do with you?" he asked calmly, keeping track of the approaching distortion. He could make out someone now, but he couldn't sense much of the essence that should be there, even if they had no element. If she noticed them as she trashed, she didn't give an indication. Maybe she was too far gone, or what the assassin had did more than mask them to his senses.

"How about I cut you up, put what will fit into a pouch and send that to Sebastian? Do you think it would be enough to make him stop? Would he even care you died carrying his orders? Was this worth the coins you'll never get to see?"

The assassin was only a few paces behind Tibs, and he couldn't hear their steps on the hard earth. Was that another effect of the distortion, or were they simply that good? It didn't matter. This meant he wouldn't have to chase them across the town. That would be fun, but would let other thugs go about their business until he caught them.

He spun and planted the knife in the assassin's chest. The man was older, his face scarred. The look of surprise was satisfying. The man gasped. Tibs purposely missed the heart. The green stone was around his neck, and Tibs snapped the leather cord and flung it away.

The man greeted his teeth and raised his knife. He screamed at what Tibs tried worked.

He coated the knife planted in the man's chest with water all the water and had that explode in frozen spikes. The man dropped the knife and grabbed onto the knife Tibs let go off to turn and lob the head off the last thug, now that she's outlive her usefulness.

The man was on his back, screaming as he tried to pull the knife out. He sensed the way the man's essence was unraveling and used purity on him. He was not letting him die.

"I hope you speak Pursatian," Tibs said as he crouched, "or that Sebastian paid for that magic that lets us understand each other, because we need to talk." The man snapped his mouth shut, no longer pulling on the knife. "Just tell me you can understand me," Tibs said

with a sigh, melting the sword down to the size of a knife.

“I can.” His accent was thick. “You are a dungeon-made monster.”

Maybe the man had seen more than Tibs thought. “That sounds like you want it to be an insult, but I know the dungeon, so it isn’t.” He looked at the knife, could now sense the corruption coating it. “Were you supposed to kill me?”

“Yes.” A bark followed that he might have intended to be a laugh, but he was choking on blood.

“Oh no, you don’t.” Tibs channel purity and pushed more in to the man as he moved home to his side so the blood could flow out of his mouth. “Did Sebastian think you could do it?” if the man was no longer interested in capturing Tibs, didn’t that mean something had changed? Had he killed so many of his thugs he’d made Sebastian afraid?

“No,” the man rasped. “But I am the best and he paid me enough to buy a duchy, so I was going to do it, anyway.” He reached for his throat. “He gave me this to help.”

His fingers searched, and didn’t find what he was looking for.

“If it’s the stone, it didn’t help you.”

“It does not matter. All he wanted me to do was keep you from helping her. I would have liked to be a duke, but my son will enjoy the honor.”

“Help who?” Tibs demanded.

The man laughed until Tibs grew a new spike through his chest and he screamed. The essence healed the damage, but didn’t prevent the pain.

“Tell me who? I can do this for a long time. I’ll make sure you don’t die from any of this, but it will hurt.”

“Pain is an old friend.” Then he screamed, and Tibs screamed his question over and over, growing desperate. He didn’t know many women, but if he ran to help the wrong one, he’d leave another to—

The thunderclap shattered the air.

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Tibs ran into what remained of Market Place. Bodies littered the ground, most in green and black, but too many not. The damage was mainly from swords, but there were burns and a metal spike growing out of the ground, and people with their heads wrapped in earth, unmoving fingers still trying to pull it off.

And there was sand everywhere.

Not sand the way Earth Runners used it, but the way it was flung about with picked up by the winds. Bodies looked to be sliced by hundreds of blades.

Tibs knew how hard air could hit, and if all that sand was floating in it as it struck? Carina could have killed most of them on her own that way.

He sensed as he ran through the battlefield. She’d been fighting the fires with others. He recognized a few of the Fire Sorcerers lying dead. Too many Runners were dead here. How many thugs had Sebastian sent on this attack? And why hadn’t they all come after Tibs? He was the one Sebastian wanted to hurt.

Tibs knew the answer even as he fought to ignore it.

Someone coughed, and ran there, hoping it was a Runner he could save, that it was a

thug he could heal so he could make them hurt all over again.

The sorcerer tried to stand, only to fall again.

Tibs sent Purity through them, then channeled water again and he helped them on their back. He had no idea if they'd be able to tell, and he didn't care.

"Where is she?" he demanded. "Carina," he added as the man's confusion, "was she here? Where did she escape to?" She had to have escaped. She was strong, she was smart. She wouldn't have pulled a Jackal and tried to fight them all.

"They got her," the man said, then turned on his side, coughing.

"How?" Tibs looked around at the devastation her sand born wind had caused. How had anyone survived this?

"The green stones," the sorcerer said, sounding stronger. "A few of them had them and our attacks did little to stop them. They were after her, Tibs. I'm sorry. We didn't realize it quickly enough. Then they were overwhelming her. I thought she'd broken their hold when she shattered the air, but I saw them take her away before darkness claimed me."

Tibs stood.

"Tibs," the man called as he walked away. "What are you doing?"

He was going to rescue Carina.

He was going to destroy Sebastian.

Then he was going to burn anyone wearing green and black down to ash.