

Stepping up-79

“Are we sure the caravan’s been taken over?” Tandy asked. She had her hands in front of her, two hand-spans apart, framing a space where essence did something Tibs couldn’t discern. It was void essence, so he couldn’t make out the details he’d need to understand it. Or had the experience to know what those details would mean.

But he could see the effect.

When he looked between her palms, distances changed. He could see the horizon as if it was only a few paces before him. He was watching a procession of caravans approaching. He, Tandy, and Quigly stood on a roof for the better vantage point, and only the fighter looked like he’d rather be elsewhere.

“Wouldn’t that be a kicker?” Quigly said. “We do all that and that rider was setting us up to destroy an innocent caravan.”

“You care?” Tandy asked.

“Of course I care. I didn’t end up here butchering innocent. I killed a tyrant’s army. I killed his soldiers. If I’d won, bards would be singing of my heroism. Fuck, if I’d died, they would have done that too. But I couldn’t be allowed to be a martyr, so I was made a butcher.”

“He didn’t lie,” Tibs said. “Harry would have known.” Jackal was adamant there were ways to lie to Harry, and the events that led to Sebastian trying to take control of the town supported that, but Harry had learned. He’d asked direct questions with only yes or no as their answers, and the rider answered them plainly. The only way Tibs could think of tricking Harry with those would be to use magic, and Tibs would know if essence was being used. The rider had been ordinary and had nothing on him with essence.

“I’d still like to see confirmation,” Quigly said. “There’s nothing easier to do than turn the protectors into monsters with care and planning on your opponent’s part.”

“I wish Cross was up here with us,” Tandy said. “She knows some of those people. She could tell us if someone looks out of place.”

“I couldn’t offer her enough coins to climb up with us,” Tibs replied.

“You didn’t offer me any money,” Quigly said.

Tibs grinned. “You never asked.”

“Well, next time you want me this high, give me stairs and a level surface.”

“I’m not seeing any black and green,” Tandy said, searching what she could see.

“Can you move it, show us a different angle?”

She glanced at the fighter. “This isn’t the far sight you’re thinking of. I’m not that strong. I can only show you what’s in front of me.” She moved her hands to demonstrate, panning over the horizon, and what they saw moved. “One of the Attendants would have been able to give us a look anywhere along the caravan, from any directions we needed.”

“But not one of them stuck around, did they?” the fighter said in disgust. “We could have used that kind of power.”

“We could have used anyone the guild would have been willing to lend us.” Tibs echoed the disgust. At least the townsfolk would be safe.

Few had offered to help, once it was clear more than anyone thought possible would fit in the dungeon, and Quigly had positioned those who had at the rear, within the town, acting mostly as support due to their lack of fighting experience. Tibs was curious what Harry thought of the entryway being so much larger, but not enough to ask and risk having to answer the Light Essence guard's questions.

"I see green," Tandy exclaimed. Tibs looked, but didn't see anyone wearing green. Cursing, she stepped to the side. "There, behind the driver. She's hunched down."

Tibs saw her. Surreptitiously looking over the driver's shoulder. She couldn't know anyone who saw her, but she was still careful. He wished he knew for certain Sebastian was there. Handing him over to Harry would be satisfying.

"Go take position," Quigly instructed.

With a nod, Tibs slid down the roof, then dropped the three stories, switching to air to create a cushion under him. Quigly had arranged every Runner who could use their essence at range at the periphery of the bazaar space and once the first wagons were all the way in. They were to attack with everything they had. It wouldn't be enough to destroy them all, or even those in range, but they had the element of surprise for the moment and they were going to take advantage of it.

After that, the close-range fighters would get involved.

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The level of excitement as the caravan drove onto the bazaar ground must have made Sebastian's people think everyone was rejoicing at the soon-to-be-available good for sales. They thought they were about to spring a trap, instead of driving into an ambush.

Carina grinned at Tibs and Mez. Then the call came, and they unleashed.

Mez destroyed half the wagon before them, Tibs and Carina the rest. The survivors screamed as they tried to avoid being targeted as they fled. Instructions were to allow anyone not in black and green to go. Some of them would work for Sebastian, but they could deal with them later.

With the wagons on the bazaar ground reduced to a variety of kindling, they moved on to the ones still outside. Without any of Harry's guards around, it had been agreed that the town's limit would be ignored. Breaking the guild's rules would be dealt with after the town was safe. Until then, anything went.

Tibs ran with the surrounding Runners, hoping this could be ended easily, but by the time they were close enough to attack the next wagon, people in black and green were taking position before it, planting large metal shields before them.

Essence attacks that hit them were deflected around them.

"I really wish they hadn't thought about those kinds of defenses," Carina muttered and used air to pick up burning debris and fling them at the shield bearers. One fell from the assault, but the shield was quickly up.

Tibs sent an 'x' attack at them, but it was also deflected.

"It won't work," She yelled. "Those shields are enchanted to repel essence. None of us are strong enough to overwhelm them.

A Runner screamed as an arrow hit them.

“And they’re going on the offensive,” Mez stated, shooting down arrows. Other archers joined it and arrows made of all kinds of essence flew at the incoming barrage. Tibs was amazed. The dungeon didn’t lend itself to that show of skill.

“Tibs!” someone yelled, and he saw the archer lose the arrow in his direction. He suffused himself with his essence and tried to step out of the way. He felt the arrow hit his shoulder, but by the time he looked, it was passed. His armor shimmered slightly as his essence returned into his reserve.

Carina stared at him before returning to using air to deflect arrows.

He added a layer of ice to his armor, then did his best to join in deflecting the arrows, but his aim was horrible.

A rumble announced a change in their attacker’s tactics.

“Scatter!” came the order as fighters ran around the shield bearers and archers. A lot of fighters.

As much as he hated to do it, it was time to take the battle to the town’s streets and alley.

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Tibs ran because he had people after him. A lot more than he had expected. He kicked off a wall to make the turn, throwing water and icing it where he landed, using the slide to get to his feet and run again. He left the ice there and smiled at the yelps of surprise and pain.

He switched to corruption and threw some at a column holding a balcony as he ran by it. That column weakened silently, but the other one screamed in protest as it was pulled down by the falling balcony. He’d clean up that mess once this was over.

When the screams came, he looked over his shoulder. Those who hadn’t been caught under the falling balcony were busy dealing with the splashed corruption. That was a definite oops.

He went back to running. He knew whoever he came across next would also chase him. It seemed that Sebastian had given instructions Tibs was the main target. So he ran.

He changed direction as he noticed the smoke. Another thing Sebastian’s people did was set fire to a lot of buildings. As Jackal said, this was no longer about taking over the town anymore for his father. It was about hurting Tibs. He switched to fire and absorbed the flames, refilling some of his reserves.

He came on the group attacking Runners and joined in, his vicious-looking ice sword in one hand, ice shield on his arm, and ice armor over his leathers. He was quick, precise, and deadly, using his ability to extend his blade to surprise one of his attackers.

Three Runners were dead, and he buried that pain. He didn’t have the time for it. Four were injured, as were the two women they had been protecting. They carried quivers.

They had one cleric, back at the inn. That’s was all. This time, the rest of them had been quick to barricade themselves in the guild building. Not all of them had wanted to, she’d told him, but they hadn’t been willing to disobey orders.

“Can you move? We need to go to the inn.”

The trek was slow, and Tibs had to deal with the attacks. But while he had to limit

himself to water, he still had his element, and this day was giving him ample chances to practice with it. He didn't mind if he drained so much of someone set on hurting his people, his town, that it left them dead.

All he needed now was to get within striking distance, and he had enough control to stagger his opponent with weakness. The one issue he had was that he couldn't put that essence into his reserve while he channeled another one, and while people who didn't even rack as Omegas had little in the way of essence, it was starting to accumulate in his body uncomfortably.

When that battle finally ended, he used the excuse of catching his breath to let go of water so he could stop suffusing his body with his essence. The only time he'd done it was when he'd drained Bardik, and he didn't know what it had done to him, since he'd been busy suffering from corruption poisoning right after that. In the middle of a battle for his town was not the time to experiment with that.

On the way to the inn, Tibs was given another reason to be angry at the guild. As they were fighting off another attack, a group of adventurers escorting noble-dressed people didn't even slow. Tibs used his anger on his attackers, but still lost another Runner.

The inn was busy. The tables were used as beds for the injured who couldn't stand or sit. Kroseph and his brothers were running around passing boiled clothes to those who cleaned the wounds. The cleric looked up from where she sat, looking exhausted, and stood.

She looked at the injured he brought over, healed the worst one enough she wasn't worried he'd die, then returned to her chair.

This was the price of his secret. He couldn't heal anyone without revealing it. Purity didn't heal discretely. You knew it when it was used on you. Any Runner with one run could identify the sensation. And the townsfolk would still realize something was happening, and he'd be the only explanation. He wanted to believe they'd keep his secret, but it only took one to let it slip for the guild to find out.

A bowl of stew was pushed in his hand. "Eat," Kroseph said.

"I'm fine, keep it for one of them."

"You have to eat Tibs. You're out there fighting. If you die because you were faint from hunger, Jackal is not going to forgive me."

"I don't need to."

The server opened his mouth and Tibs raised an eyebrow. He closed it and leaned in. "You don't have to eat?"

"Not right now, and not for a while." When he suffused his body with Purity, it did more than heal his injuries. It healed his other conditions as well. Doing it when he was tired left him fully away. Hungry, fully sated.

There were limits. He'd tested it with sleep. After the fifth day, no matter how long he suffused himself. Only a long night of sleep helped. He figured it was the same with food, so others could get his portion for now. If this battle lasted more than five days, they had bigger problems than him going hungry.

He mentally cursed himself. Why had he gone and thought that?