

Stepping up-80

“Over there!” someone yelled, and Tibs looked up from the woman he dispatched in time to see green and black vanish round the corner.

He cursed. Of course, this had been a distraction. He should have realized it, with how easy it had been to spot this group of attackers. Sebastian hadn't been content to only attack from the bazaar field, his people had quickly spread and sought to enter the town by any of the alleys.

Fortunately for them, Quigly had expected it and positioned teams both at the entrances close to the bazaar and junctions where those alleys met. Unfortunately, it had spread their forces thin and after only half a day of fighting, keeping Sebastian's forces out of the town was impossible.

Their lone cleric couldn't keep up with the injured and Tibs was starting to wonder if his secret was worth the cost.

“After them!” Tibs yelled and ran. If they'd used a distraction, then this was important, and they had to be stopped.

“But my guy's not dead,” the fighter he was with yelled.

“Who cares!” the other fighter replied, falling into step with Tibs.

As much as Tibs wanted to be with his team, Quigly had been quick to point out that as some of the original Runners, and with the notoriety he and Jackal had, they were better used leading different teams and raising morale that way. The two fighters he had were Upsilon, both metal for their elements, not that they could do much with it at this point.

Tibs worked hard to remind himself he'd been there too, and unlike them, he'd done his training in the dungeon, not trying to save the town.

They crossed empty streets, barely keeping the invaders in sight, and the quality of the buildings increased. They were deep in the town this time. How many Runners had they lost for them to make it this far? What were they after?

Jackal had made it clear that after the defeat Sebastian had suffered, this was about hurting him personally, but he couldn't see what was in this part of town that would do that. The group ahead turned into an alley that led to the noble's area and were sent flying back.

Tibs and his two fighters slowed. Essence was the only way to cause that to happen, and with the Runners closer to the edge of the city, it meant the nobles were actively protecting their territory.

The invaders were on their feet, sword drawn, by the time Tibs reached the intersection and saw that instead of a noble, it was an adventurer with golden eyes in enchanted chain mail armor.

“Good,” she said. “Since you're here, you deal with that. This area is off limit.”

“Aren't you going to help?” the fighter who'd been quick to follow Tibs asked.

Tibs readied himself to take on the five invaders by forming his sword and a shield. An adventurer meant guild.

“You can't afford me, kid,” she replied.

“Ignored her,” the other fighter said, “we don’t need them.”

The other group was three women and two men, each in light leathers for mobility and armed with swords. By the smirk on their face, they thought little Tibs’s group. That was fine. Tibs liked being underestimated.

He ran at them. No essence gave him the advantage, but they were better trained. He used ice to slide through them, slashing at whatever was within reach, then was on attacking their backs. He got in a few hits before they were over the surprise. Then he had two to deal with, while the others focused on the two fighters.

In her alley, the adventurer leaned against a wall and watched.

Tibs quickly had to back and focus on defending himself. He iced patches of the ground, but they stepped and jumped around them.

He got one when she backed after he blocked her attack and he elongated his sword, piercing through her midsection. That cost him his ability to properly defend himself, and his other opponent took advantage of it, slicing into Tibs’s sword arm.

He lost hold of his sword, which started melting immediately, and Tibs filled the bleeding gap with ice to stop the blood. He dodged repeatedly, backing away. The man pushing him grinned until Tibs had a knife in his uninjured hand and threw it at him.

He didn’t expect to hit, but all he wanted was the surprise. Then he blasted the fighter with water and iced that. The man looked at him in horror as Tibs formed a sword and stabbed him with it.

The other two fighters with him had dealt with their opponents, although one now had to support the other, and were staring at him while he made another sword and dispatched his other opponent.

The adventurer was no longer leaning against the wall. She was staring, too.

The entire fight had cost him a quarter of his reserve. If, like he expected, each of his elements had increased his central reserve, it meant he’d used twice as much as he should have been able to. Her expression told him that even if she didn’t know who he was, she considered what he’d done unusual.

He’d deal with that if it came back.

“You could have helped!” the fighter supporting the other yelled at the adventurer.

“Don’t bother,” Tibs told him. “She’s guild.” He looked at the injured man. His leg was cut deeply, and he covered it with ice before adding a wrap of his essence to keep it from getting worse. At least that he could use without anyone realizing it, so long as he provided an alternate reason they could support their weight or stopped bleeding.

“You’re guild too,” she said.

“I’m not,” he replied.

“Don’t lie to yourself.”

He glared at her. “I’m a Runner. I care about the people in this town. I look after them and the other Runners. I thought the guild would too.”

“We all start like that, but don’t worry, it’s going to get beaten out of you.”

“I will never let the guild turn me into someone like you.”

She snorted. “A lot of us think that, at first. Don’t worry, they’ll take care of that

too.”

Tibs kept himself from replying. He had more pressing things to do, like get his fighter back to the inn so the cleric could look after him.

* * * * *

Carina dropped into the chair next to him and rested her head on her arms. “I hate Jackal’s father.”

“You aren’t alone,” he said between bites. Kroseph hadn’t taken no for an answer this time and Tibs had needed something to take his mind off that adventurer who’d been willing to watch them be massacred.

“Did you lose anyone in the group you were with?” She accepted the tankard Kroseph brought her.

Tibs shook his head. “But we’ve lost too many overall.”

She sighed. “I guess the guild’s going to have to do another emptying of the cell to have enough Runners to go through the dungeon.”

“That’s what I don’t get,” Mez said, joining them. “I can understand them not defending the town. I don’t like it,” he hurried to say, “but I can understand it. But they’re leaving us to die with it. I thought they wanted us to survive at this point.”

“They wish for us to become stronger,” Khumdar said, taking his seat. “This battle is no different on that front than us going through the dungeon.”

“It might even be better for some of us,” Mez mumbled in his tankard. “Since they’re actually in danger here.”

Tibs shrugged. He’d take any advantage he could anywhere when it came to surviving. Even if that was Sto being sweet on him. “Anyone seen Jackal?”

“He’s probably fighting somewhere,” Mez said.

“I know that, but has anyone seen him?”

“Kroseph would be the one who would know.”

Tibs nodded. He wasn’t worried yet, but he’d like to know that his friend was okay.

* * * * *

Tibs stood on the roof, watching the caravans that had been turned into walls around Sebastian’s camp while he was keeping the Runners busy during the day. Maybe that had been the point of the incursions, as Quigly called them, to keep them occupied while they fortified their position.

Tibs expected there was more than one reason for everything Sebastian did. He was smart.

The incursions had stopped with the setting of the sun, which had surprised Quigly. The surviving Runners were either hurt or tired. The tactical thing to do was press the advantage, as far as he was concerned. Which made him wonder what else could motivate their opponent.

Tibs hadn’t told him what Jackal had. It wasn’t like knowing this was about hurting Tibs would help defend the town. And even thinking about it made Tibs feel like he was making himself too important. How could someone like Sebastian want to hurt him? He wasn’t like he knew Tibs had destroyed his house. As far as anyone knew, Don was the only

one with Corruption as his essence, and the sorcerer had been happy to take the credit.

Sure, Tibs had been the one to hold the merchant together, persuade them not to give into Sebastian's bullying tactics, but it wasn't like that had to have hurt the man all that much.

He knew that for whatever reason, Sebastian held him personally responsible for his defeat—every spy Khumdar had uncovered had, among their orders, finding out what they could about Tibs—but he simply didn't understand why.

He watched the torch glow on the other side of the barricade and considered going there in the night. Maybe he'd be able to find Sebastian and end this quickly. Or, more likely, like Jackal said, his father was counting on that to lure Tibs into a trap. Getting himself killed wasn't part of what Tibs planned on doing.

He idly wondered if he could channel enough fire essence to throw at the camp and destroy it. Then, at the questions that would raise from the guild. It would definitely get Harry to ask him about it.

With a sigh, Tibs settled for making sure Sebastian didn't try anything in the night.