

Stepping up-78

Tibs looked over the map of the town, along with Jackal. He hadn't known there was a map for the town until Darran had brought it to him. Tibs had mentioned to the merchant the difficulty in figuring out what areas to use in the coming battle because he couldn't easily tell people, since few of the Runners knew the town as well as he did. A few hours later Darran was at the inn with a rolled paper, which Tibs thought would be for him to draw what he knew on; instead, the merchant unrolled a map of the town. There was a group of people, Planners, who had done it, and kept it updated, as well as worked to help set up new areas.

It had been more complete than Tibs's knowledge and had shown avenues of defenses and attacks within the alleyways and the streets.

Quigly entered and Tibs sighed. Another useless interruption. He'd lost count of how many it had been, but they amounted to: I can't be fighting, to I need to be fighting, to I have to leave before the attack started. All of which were out of his hands.

"I can't get the guild to bring the attendants back," he said preemptively. "Not that they'd let one of us leave even if I could."

"That's not surprising," the fighter replied. "There is a war coming, and my understanding is that they plan on using us as fodder."

"I don't know that word, but I expect it doesn't mean anything good."

Quigly nodded and looked at the map. Noting the places where he and Jackal had marked ambushes and blockades.

"You're going to lose."

"I'm not giving Sebastian the town!"

"You are." The fighter indicated the map. "You're waiting for his army to be in the town before fighting it. That's as much as handing it to him."

"We did it before," Jackal replied.

"Yes, because we didn't have a choice. How costly was that? How many people did our enemy have at his disposal? How many does he have now?"

"Enough to take over a town," Tibs said.

"Which you had handed to him."

"Did you come here to tell us to give up?" Jackal snapped. "Or is there something useful in there?"

"In a few days, you're going to be fighting a war." Quigly looked at them. "So why haven't you asked for the one person in this town who had fought one already for his help?"

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"He said he'd help!" Don nearly threw the tankard he held.

"The guild doesn't care about the town," Tibs replied.

"You knew," the sorcerer snarled. "You knew, and you let me waste my time. You counted on it. You wanted me out of your way so you could set yourself up as the town's hero again. You've been jealous of me since the start."

Tibs rolled his eyes. "I let you do it because you wouldn't listen to me. I used that

time to prepare the town because I knew the guild wasn't going to help. You're welcome to go out there and claim all the plans are your ideas. You want to be the Hero of Kragle Rock when this is over? You're welcome to it. You've seen how little help that is, no matter how well the guild treats you for it."

He waited for Don to calm down. Tibs wasn't worried. The sorcerer wouldn't do anything while in the inn and, for as much screaming as he did, once he calmed, he'd focus on the important stuff. The coming battle.

It was when Don had nothing to focus on that he became a problem.

"I thought I'd do good with that title."

"You did. You kept the town from panicking. I can deal with the merchants, but I'm Street. The common folk aren't people I'm used to dealing with."

"I made promises. I told them the guild would help. You think they're going to listen to me once they find out I can't keep them safe?"

"What if you still can? Or at least some of them?" Tibs added. He needed to remember he wasn't supposed to have been able to make plans with Sto for the dungeon to assist as well as he could.

"What are you talking about?" Don eyed him suspiciously.

"The dungeon can protect some of them."

"No. The traps and creatures will kill anyone who sets foot in one of the rooms."

"But the entry all is long enough we can pack people there. Not everyone, but at least some. You're going to have to convince the townsfolk that's enough." And it would be. Unlike the guild, Sto liked the town, even if all he knew about it was what he overheard from the Runners. And even Ganny had agreed to bend the rules as far as they could.

"They aren't going to be happy with only some of them being saved," Don said, then turned pensive. "But if it's worded properly, it can become about saving their loved ones, not them hiding away while they are in danger. And if I tell them the guild supports the idea, it's going to go a long way toward making them accept that."

"Jackal should be able to get Harry to let them in." The guild had already increased the guards at the dungeon's entrance, although they allowed the scheduled teams in. Tibs was curious to see their reaction tomorrow when the door didn't open. Once Sebastian's army was in sight, Tibs expected the guards to be there in force, especially once Harry got wind of the plan to include the dungeon in the town's defense.

"Oh, I have to be there for that." Don smiled. "It's going to be worth disappointing everyone to get to see that fighter of yours be fully put in his place."

Well, at least one person would be disappointed now, that was for sure.

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"The caravan is half a day away," the runner said, panting.

"Were you able to get details from the spotter Knuckles sent?" Jackal asked.

The runner took the offered tankard. "Just how far they are. The guards sent a dozen sentry, we should be able to get one of them to tell us more when they get here."

"Should we get everyone in position now?" Tibs asked Quigly.

"Get them to their assigned areas," the fighter answered, "but make sure they stick to

the plan. As far as anyone spying on us, they have to look like they're just waiting for the caravan. We're not supposed to know this is a coming attack."

"Don, that means it's time for you to get the townsfolk to the dungeon," Jackal said. "I'll be there before Knuckles can get all worked up about it."

"You better," the sorcerer said, "because I'm not taking the blame if this plan fails."

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Tibs walked through the crowd as it parted to let him and Jackal through. The feeling was tense. At least half of the town was there already. The news of the impending attack hadn't remained secret. At the front of the crowd, Don waited, and at the top of the stairs, Harry and guards blocked the door, as well as spread along the cliff face.

"You're up," Don said, falling into step with them. "This should be amusing."

Harry glowered at them as they approached. "I knew you were involved in this."

"Hey, it's not like anyone here expected you to protect the good people of this town," Jackal said, smiling. "Yet again. So why are you surprised we took it on ourselves to do it?"

"You lied to me," Don said, loud enough his voice carried to the crowd. "You promised you'd look after them. That your guild would keep everyone safe."

"You ready?" Tibs whispered.

"I tried to convince Tirania," Harry growled.

"All set," Sto replied. "But remember, I can't turn the traps off. I've removed some of the triggers and anymore and I'm breaking rules and no longer bending them. If they step in there, I can't do anything."

"Then do the right thing and help these people anyway," Don demanded.

"I can't," Harry replied through clenched teeth.

Jackal snorted. "So, you are a Wells after all. Nothing more than a thug taking someone else's orders."

"I am nothing like you."

Jackal smiled. "Oh, Knuckles, there's never been any doubt about that. I make my own decisions. They haven't all been the right ones, but they've all been mine. When's the last time you made one? The day you betrayed your family for a new master? How's that working out? Feeling better about all the neck you've broken because it wasn't criminals who got you to do it?"

"You think I want to stand here, protecting this thing?" Harry stepped toward Jackal. "You think I don't want to be out there, getting ready to stop my brother? To wipe the stain that is the Wells from this world?"

"Why don't you?" Jackal asked calmly. "Leave your guards here, walk down those steps and through the town. You know your presence can save lives, Runners, and others. You know a lot of my father's people are only fighting for him because he convinced them there's nothing here that can stand up to them. Almost as if he knows the guild isn't going to lift a finger. They see you, Harry Hard Knuckles, on the front line, and they are going to fold. Anyone who's worked for my father has heard of you. How no one stands in your way. How you never lose a fight. This town can use a protector like you."

“I can’t.” Harry looked like he wanted to hit Jackal. “I have my orders.”

Jackal nodded. “And a Wells never disobeys his master’s orders, does he?” Harry’s anger cracked a little, and Jackal nodded. “Then do something for these people, Uncle. Let them into the dungeon. Protect them while you protect it from my father.”

Harry looked miserable. “I can’t. The door’s closed, we can’t—”

The rumble of stone on stone had the guard’s head snap up.

“What do you know,” Jackal said smugly, “the dungeon’s not closed anymore.”

Harry looked from the door to Jackal and seemed unable to formulate his question.

“How the fuck did you arrange that?” Don demanded.

Jackal smiled. “I have my ways.”

“Having me listen in and wait for the perfect moment to open my door goes a long way toward making him look awesome, doesn’t it?”

“Are you planning on gawking at me all day?” Jackal asked. “I don’t mind, I’ve been waiting a while for it, from both of you, actually, but you, Don, I thought wanted to grab all the glory of protecting the townsfolk, the longer you look at me like I’m the best thing in the world, the tougher it’s going to be for you to sell it.” He looked at Harry. “And you Knuckles, are you going to let in defenseless people in, or do you actually have ordered against that?”

“I… I’ll let them in.”

“Your turn, Don.” Jackal stepped aside and turned to face the crowd.

Don shook himself and took position, looking to make sure he was in the center of the step, and looked over the assembled people. “People of Kragle Rock, today will be a hard day. An enemy approaches, and those we looked to for protection have denied us, but fear not. I, Jackal, and Tibs have secured safety for some of you.”

Jackal looked at Tibs. He, too, was surprised at being included.

“The dungeon has opened its door to you, but the space is limited. I’ve convinced the guards to go against their orders and let in as many as will fit. It will be uncomfortable, but it will be safe.” Instead of the protest Tibs expected, the crowd waited quietly. “Children and their caretakers will go in first, then the elderly and the sick. If there is still space, then the able-bodied. If you want to fight with us, if you want to play your part in keeping your town safe, in protecting your loved ones, we will welcome you, but so long as there is space no one will fault you for seeking whatever safety is to be found within the dungeon.”

The crowd shifted, families with children moving to the front. The town didn’t have many elderly, but those who’d made it to the gathering were assisted to the front.

“You will be in the entryway,” Don said as people moved. “It is the only safe place in the dungeon. The traps in the first room have killed many. Do not step into it. The dungeon will eat you if you do.

The warning given, Don stepped aside and motioned for people to come up the stairs.