

Stepping up-77

The room was crowded. Don had convinced Harry to attend, but the sorcerer hadn't deigned to be here. The guard leader was not happy; not about having to be here, but about here being one of the rooms at the inn instead of in the guild building. Jackal had vanished the moment he'd found out Harry was on his way. This had wanted his whole team there, but Mez had said he didn't belong among leaders, and Khumdar was away in the town, rooting around for secrets.

So it was Tibs, Carina, Cross, Harry, Casper—the caravan rider, and the cleric who was looking after him, in the small room.

"Tell us what happened," Harry said.

Casper was still pale. On top of the injuries he'd suffered when Sebastian's people had attacked the caravan, he was malnourished and dehydrated. Neither of which the cleric could fix with her level of skill. He'd eaten some broth, along with bread. Tibs had provided the water, and now he was rested enough to talk.

"We were about halfway when they attacked. We had guards, of course, but they overwhelmed them. There were so many, enough to capture a city it felt like. They tied those who were still alive when it was over. They killed some to get the caravan master to work with them and within a day, we were moving again."

"Who gives the orders?" Harry asked.

Casper shrugged. "I was among the prisoners. I didn't get to see anyone other than who came to take someone away and who was gleeful about the prospect of getting to hurt them."

Tibs knew who gave the orders, even if Sebastian wasn't among the attackers. Harry knew too, so he didn't know why he'd asked.

"We'd been moving for less than a day when I had my chance to run. They had us walk along with the caravan, tied to it, but there were so many of us they didn't pay much attention and I was able to loosen my bonds. I rushed the guard when it was distracted, then took one of the horses. I got cut before I could calm her and get running, but they didn't chase me. I think they figured my wound would finish me for them. I pushed her as hard as I could and barely slept. I was able to find some berries and a stream, but I had nothing to hold supplies with, not even a saddle. Her back had to be raw."

"Your horse is being looked after," Cross said.

"You're sure about them being in green and black?" Harry asked.

Casper nodded.

"How far behind you are they?" Tibs asked.

"I don't know. We were a little more than a week out when they attacked, but with the prisoners, and some of the handlers dying in the attack, it's going to slow them down. We might also have lost some of the heavy horses to pull the carts."

"Why would they bother with the caravan?" Carina asked.

"My brother is planning on using it to get close before we have the time to prepare a

defense. That you were able to escape means he has too many people with him to have a strong chain of command. That plays in our favor, as is the fact we now know he's coming. We'll have the time to mount a proper defense."

"So you're going to protect the town?" Tibs asked, unable to keep the dismay from his voice.

"Of course I will defend the town," Harry snapped back.

Tibs rolled his eyes. "What can you tell us of the people who attacked? Did anyone use essence?"

"I didn't see anyone with the eyes. But the only people I saw were our guards. Anyone like you would be kept for more important duties, right?"

"Adventurers aren't cheap," Cross said. "It's why the caravans don't use them."

"Sebastian has a lot of coins," Tibs said.

"But he isn't going to spend it needlessly," Harry countered. "Not when he can have an army's worth of people with him."

"He can't think that's enough to win a fight against the guild," she said.

"He knows how the town is protected, or at least that the guards are ordinary people. He lived here, studied us. That is why my brother is aiming to take us by surprise, to keep the guild from calling in anyone who can take away his advantage."

"There's the Runners," Cross said.

"And he doesn't know we're organized now. There was a lot of luck in how we forced him out. He also knows the dungeon will have killed a lot of us while he was gathering his army."

"And you're all Omegas, Upsilon, some Rho, and no more than a handful Lambda, all with only early training. There is only so much you can do if you get involved in the fighting."

"Oh, we're getting involved. I'm not waiting on the guild to keep my town safe." Harry might say he'd protect them, but it was the guild who gave the orders. Tibs didn't see the man going against those, and the last time it had come down to it, the guild had let the town fend for itself.

Harry didn't protest.

"We need to know how close they are," Cross.

"Assume they're going to be here tomorrow," Carina added.

"No," Harry countered. "That will exhaust us needlessly. She's right. I'll see to it someone is sent to see where they are."

"A Runner would be faster," Tibs said.

"I'm not letting one of you out of the town. You'll just run off."

"My people aren't going to run. This is their town, too. You're just going to hide in your building like last time."

"This will not be like last time."

Tibs snorted.

"Tibs," Carina warned, "antagonizing an ally isn't a good thing to do."

The guild wasn't their ally.

He nodded, and they asked questions of Casper, trying to build the best picture of what they'd have to fight against.

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Tibs knew there had a problem before Jackal told him.

The inn was empty of townsfolk.

The Runners seated at the tables looked at him as he stepped into the main room from the hall. There was expectation in their eyes.

"We have a problem," Jackal said. "The town knows my father's on his way."

"How?"

"I'm giving you one guess as to who would go around telling everyone what's coming and that they don't have to worry because he is going to keep them safe."

Tibs sighed. "Where is he?"

"Where our second problem is. As soon as they heard what's coming, the attendants left. The only way out of the town is on foot, with a mountain on one side, my father on the other, I have no idea what is in the other two directions, and no one in this town is really equipped to be in the wilderness for any amount of time."

Tibs left the inn with the Runners in tow. He heard the crowd well before he saw the back of it, and it wasn't a good sound. From his direction, there were enough people he couldn't see the people on the platform, only the top of the six pillars around it. They were going to have to push their way through, and that was bound to start a riot.

He felt Carina work essence and only had the time to glance at what she was doing before the thunderclap sounded over their heads.

"Abyss, warn me next time." Jackal had his hands over his ears. Tibs's ears rang loud enough the fighter's words sounded distant, but he focused on the crowd, who was looking in their direction and parting.

A warning would have been nice, but effectiveness made up for it.

Tibs marched to the front, and Don stood on the platform with his team. He'd put on something more regal looking since he'd caught Casper falling off his horse. The sorcerer had used his fame at being the Hero of Kragle Rock and influence with the guild to get himself clothing more appropriate to his newfound station.

Tibs grabbed Don's arm as soon as he was next to him and pulled him to the center of the platform. The sorcerer's team stepped to follow, but Jackal stopped them.

"Why don't we let them talk, and make sure the crowd doesn't see how heated it's getting between them? They don't need to see dissension among us, do they?"

"Let go of me, Tibs," Don said, tone hard, but all smiles, until he realized they were blocked from the crowd. He pulled his arm out of the grip.

"What do you think you're doing, telling them there's an attack coming?"

"What did you want? For them to be unprepared when it came?"

"No, I wanted to arrange for them to leave. Only now, because you couldn't stop yourself from grabbing more fame, we don't have a way to send anyone away."

"That isn't why I told anyone. They saw me leading Harry to the inn and started asking

questions. I told them we were going to be discussing the strategy for the coming battle.”

“Which you didn’t bother coming.”

“Did you want them to just start spouting rumors on the little I said? I did what I could to stop them, but the story spread too fast. So I decided that gathering everyone and explaining things properly was the best way to handle this.”

Tibs decided not to point out the man had taken the time to change into something useless instead of continuing to try to control the spread of the information. “And you decided to have that here? Scaring the attendants in the process?”

“No, the platform was already getting rushed. A few of the people managed to leave, but then there weren’t any attendants left. When I got here, there was about to be a riot, so I took them in hand, and made sure they knew they didn’t have anything to worry about because the guild and I are going to make sure everyone is safe.”

Tibs stared. “You don’t actually believe that, do you?”

“I can keep them safe,” Don stated, his tone hardening. “I’m the Hero of Kragle Rock.”

“Can you do that without the guild? Because you know they’re going to hide in their building just like last time.”

“Last time, they were taken by surprise. This time, they know the attack is coming. They’ll probably recall the attendants to assure them they’re going to be safe, then we can evacuate the town so no one will get hurt.”

“A lot of people will get hurt even if they do that. Unless you think you can convince them to send us away too.”

Don snorted. “I didn’t think you were too scared to face them. I thought this was your town.”

“I’m thinking on the Omegas and the Upsilons and those who can barely handle the dungeon.”

“Even they’re going to be more of a match for that tyrant.”

Tibs bit back the reply. Arguing wouldn’t help. “Okay. Let’s focus on the current problem. Can you get them to go back to their homes?”

“What did you learn from the rider?”

“Sebastian was hoping to use the caravan to catch us unawares. He has enough people to take over the town. Casper didn’t see anyone with essence. They might be as close to a day away or a few of them. Harry is going to send spotters so we’ll get some warning.”

Don nodded. “Okay. You stand by me and you keep your mouth shut. Look competent and control your team.” He stepped forward, through the wall of Runners, and raised a hand.

Tibs followed him. “Don’t react to anything he says,” he told Jackal and Carina.

Jackal motioned for the other Runners to stay behind.

The crowd grew quiet, and Tibs was impressed.

“Citizens of Kragle Rock. Today we have learned that the bandit who tried to take over our town once and who we forced out is returning.” Fearful murmurs spread and Don waited a handful of seconds before raising his hand again. “We beat him once. We can beat him again. Not only that, but this time we will have the guild to help us. And we know of his

attack. We will be ready for it this time. I know it is scary news. I know that most of you would rather be away from here and I'm sure that once the guild has contacted the attendants, they will return and we will start an orderly evacuation of the city. But even if that does not happen. We will keep you safe. I will make sure that not one of you suffers this time. This will not be a repeat of the previous attack. Like then, Tibs will work with me, and so will the other Runners and we will keep you all safe."

The cheer was slow in starting, but once it did, it grew, and Don soaked it in. Tibs watched the man close his eyes and straighten.

"Am I the only one," Jackal whispered in his ear, "who's wondering what Don did to end up here? Because he's way too good at this to have been just some would-be sorcerer caught for stealing a book."

Tibs nodded. The man could almost be a noble, or a confidence artist, with the way he'd used the words to calm and control the crowd. He'd made promises Tibs didn't think he could hold, but that was for later. And Tibs hoped he could have something arranged by the time the guild let them all down again.