

Tibs watched the coming and going within the wagon coral, attentive for anyone out of place. Even this early, it was busy with merchants bringing back the good they didn't expect to sell during the day. None of them wanted to be dealing with this late in the night when Regil would have them on the road with sun-up.

He sensed no one with an element among them, so the guild either hadn't discovered Tyborg had arrived with this caravan, or hadn't put people in position yet. Either were as likely. He hadn't been asked how he'd come to the city as part of the forms to be a Runner, and he hadn't told anyone he'd encountered. The guild was also overconfident enough to believe that it didn't need to hurry in chasing him.

Tibs didn't know if the instructor had worked out what he has sensed, but even if he knew he was branded, Tyborg was an Omega Runner. Someone without an element. They wouldn't believe he was a threat, or so resourceful as to escape the city. Or that they would need to bother with the work.

And this was where things became complicated for Tibs. Guards were everywhere, and he had no way, other than experience, to tell if they were looking for him. The guards he'd avoided on his way hadn't acted as if they were searching for someone, and those stationed around the coral look bored more than anything, hardly glancing at the carts coming in, or questioning the occasional cart leaving with crates on it.

That lack of attention was why Graiden and the good caravan guard leaders never entirely relied on city guards for the safety of the merchant's goods.

Tibs stuck up a conversation with the young woman holding the donkey's reins and didn't pause as they passed the guard by the coral's entrance. He continued until they reached the wagon and helped the merchant's apprentice move the crates into their wagons, remaining aware for anyone paying him too much attention, but the guards looked outside, and everyone else was busy loading wagons.

Once they were done, Tibs headed for the caravan leader's wagon, and as he expected, he found Graiden with a line of potential caravan guards before his table. Tibs joined the line and by the time he reached the chief, the older man looked tired.

"I didn't think we'd see you back," he said as a form of greetings.

"Things didn't work out," Tibs replied. "Has anyone come asking for me?"

"No," the man said, his look turning suspicious, but the words having not light on them. "Should I expect them?" He studied Tibs. "Should I expect the guards to come asking for you?"

"No, they aren't who I'm in trouble with." Guards weren't subtle. If the guild had told them to find him and they know of his affiliation with the caravan, they would have already been here.

"Tell me you didn't have a dalliance with someone's special person. Those are always worse to deal with than guards."

"I wouldn't do that," Tibs stated.

"How confident are you that trouble isn't going to come looking for you before we leave tomorrow?"

Lying to the person in charge of keeping him safe was never a good idea. Caravans would protect people who most claim shouldn't be protected, but the leader being surprised by someone here to claim one of the person working for them tended to make

that protection difficult to maintain. His tiredness would be mainly caused by how much he needed to work out how to keep the new and returning guards from being discovered before they left.

“Has confident as I can be,” Tibs said. “I never mentioned the caravan, and I made sure no one followed me on the way back.” Mentioning the potential of magical tracking wouldn’t make Graiden amicable to the situation because magic meant the guild, and no one wanted to be on their bad side.

And the guard chief wouldn’t be able to do anything about it, anyway.

“Are you staying in the coral until we leave?”

“Yes.” He’d made it back. He wasn’t risking not managing it again.

Graiden added his name to the list. “Welcome back then. Rigel’s somewhere in there dealing with the new merchants that are joining us. Make my life better and go tell him you’ll be traveling with us. I don’t want him annoyed at me for not informing him before I knew you’d be back.”

With a nod, Tibs headed to wander among the wagons, helping where he could, until he found the caravan leader in a heated discussion with three merchants. Tibs kept his distance, not interested in listening in on arguments about pricing, planned routes, and the unreasonable inflexibility of caravan masters in not doing with the people paying for their protection wanted.

He’d listened in, in his early days of caravan life, curious about everything that went into managing something the large and he’d initially gotten headaches from trying to follow conversations to complex for him to understand. Then he’d learned enough to understand them, which only resulted in larger headaches.

The merchants left, throwing curses at Rigel in a variety of languages, but the caravan leader looked pleased.

“Are they joining us?” Tibs asked.

“Of course.”

Tibs chuckled. He’d given up trying to understand merchants a long time ago. “Gray wanted me to tell you was back. Something about you expecting him to have foreseen it and being annoyed he didn’t tell you otherwise. Does he have void?”

Rigel laughed. “He’s simply being melodramatic. I keep telling him he should become a bard, with how he turns everything into something larger than it is.”

“I think there are enough of them around already.”

“Hardly. Everyone needs more entertainment in their lives.”

“I can do with fewer of them being lies.” Tibs shook the mood away as Rigel looked at him in surprise. “Where can I help? I have nowhere to be for the day and night.”

“Other than helping the merchants move their wares to their wagons, there won’t be much to do until well into dark. Harnessing the horses will start once Torus is three fingers above the tree line.”

Tibs looked to his left, at the forest in the distance. At this time of the year, Torus appeared a few fingers’ width before the sun rose, then vanished within its brightness, with Claria not even appearing. He, like most people, had thought that on those days Claria didn’t come. She had given up, too exhausted from the chase. It was only by

accident that Tibs had learned from a scholar that Claria was always there, trailing after Torus, but where there was too much of the sun, its light hid her from view.

He'd spend days after that peering at the sun, trying to find a sign she was still there, but he couldn't. He'd almost dismissed what the scholar had told him as one of the many things they seemed to believe that might not be true, but on that last day, Claria had been there for a few moments before the sun rose and rendered her hidden.

"I'll be ready, but what can I do until then?"

"Help the merchants and get some sleep. Once you wake, it will be an entire day before you have the chance to do that again."

Tibs didn't expect that to happen. He'd only managed the occasional fitful nap through the night, and those had been in well-hidden holes with no guards in sight. Here, he was surrounded by them with no way to know if they were going to rush in to arrest him. The best thing he could do was keep busy.

It wouldn't be appreciated, but he could nap on his horse once they were moving.

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The coral's stable was chaos of sounds and horses protesting being harnessed. Tibs figured the usually docile animals had grown used to days of standing and being walked, brushed, and simply looked after, and didn't like the idea they had to go back to earning their keep.

He worked with one of the stable hands, keeping the horse steady while she attached a harness to the animal. Once done, he led it to the wagon it belonged to. He had no idea how the stable hands were able to keep track of which horse belonged to which merchants, but in the years of this, it was rare there were mistakes.

He returned, and they harnessed another, then more. Half the horses were with their wagons when a horse whinnied and someone screamed in fear and pain. Tibs turned in time to see the horse come down from rearing up, then it was galloping away from its handlers, forcing everyone to focus on keeping their horse calm.

As it approached, Tibs saw its wide and wild eyes. There was little that could be done with a spooked horse other than letting it calm itself down, but within the wide space of the stable, with all the people here, someone could get hurt. Someone tried to catch the horse's rein and ended up with a hoof in the stomach.

Tibs ran as it kept going. He'd have to be careful not to give away any of how he'd do this, but he couldn't risk anymore injuries. Rigel would have to pay for them if it was a stable hand that had been hurt, or if it was a merchant, it might cause delays the caravan might not be able to make up.

He ran at the horse, and when it reared, he stepped aside to avoid the hooves; he used earth to keep his foot from sliding when it landed in the loose dirt and pushed himself up at the horse's neck as it came down. He had a hand closed on the leather strap of the incompletely secured harness, but as he pulled on it to land on its back, the horse bucked, and only by using earth to keep his hand closed did he keep from losing his grip, falling to its side as it started galloping again.

Tibs pulled to lift himself as he was dragged along and tried to get his feet under him. An etching of air would easily send him up, but with everyone watching, there would be questions he couldn't answer. So he did this the harder way. When he managed

to plant a foot down, he used earth to have something solid to push against, then grabbed the leather harness with his other hand. Earth kept his hand locked in place as he reached further with the other, and that way pulled himself onto the horse's back.

He held on, panting from the physical exertion and lack of sleep, then reached for the rein. After missing them too many times, he used air to pull it to his hand, then took control of the horse, letting it run within the paddock one end of the stable opened onto, before slowing it and guiding it back. Graiden stood next to a stable hand, not looking happy.

"What were you thinking?" the guard chief demanded.

"That people might get hurt," Tibs replied, wincing as getting off the horse sent pain up his arm.

"And what about you?"

"I'll be fine."

"I don't have a use for a guard who can't hold his sword if there's fighting to be done."

"I'll be—" Tibs bit back the pain as Graiden grabbed his arm.

"That isn't fine," the man said. "They have people to deal with things like this."

"Gray," Rigel said, "Let the man go before you rip his arm off and it can't be tended to."

"Rigel, I can't have—"

"Good men more interested in keeping other safe than themselves?" the caravan leader smiled. "I seem to remember patching a certain someone more time than I should have because he jumped into trouble that wasn't his to resolve."

"And I learned my lesson."

Rigel rolled his eyes.

Graiden let go of Tibs, who carefully pulled his arm to his chest. The shoulder was damaged from holding on while being thrown about. He hadn't thought to wrap more than the hand in earth. The essence along his arm had breaks in it, telling him there was further damage there, and because Graiden had gotten him to show how much pain he was in, Tibs couldn't simply heal it.

"Come Tyborg," Rigel motioned for Tibs to follow. "Let's get Sarnita to look at your arm. She should, at the very least, have something for the pain."

Sarnita was a merchant who specialized in herbs and extracting effects from them that resembled what purity could do. It wasn't quite alchemy the way the books and scholars described it, where the right combination of things could get essence to be pulled out and stored, but close.

The woman's skin was darker than Tibs, and her hair curlier. She dressed in light, colorful fabric and always had a smile and laugh at the ready unless, like now, she saw someone injured.

"What happened?" she asked, expression serious.

"Tyborg kept a spooked horse from running rampant," Rigel explained.

"Pulled my shoulder," Tibs added. "It's happened before," he explained as she looked at him suspiciously.

"You're in the habit of trying to catch running horses?" she asked, opening the

back of her wagon. "Sit. Rigel, help him take his jerkin and shirt off. I need to see the skin, to know what needs to be done."

Tibs wanted to protest. Wanted a way to tell both of them this wasn't as bad as it looked, but all it would do was make him sound like he didn't want to be looked after. And if he did anything to heal himself. There would be questions. Many and prodding too deeply for his liking.

He considered giving them the slip, but the only place he'd have to go then was the city, which meant the guild. It would be months before another caravan, and Tibs didn't feel like braving the wilderness on his own.

So he endured Sarnita's gentle ministrations, noting that while the poultice she applied to his shoulder did nothing to the damaged essence, the pain was diminished. She soaked the bandage in a warm bath that smelled of tree sap before applying it around his shoulder and arm, holding it against his chest. As it cooled, it hardened until Tibs couldn't move his arm.

"Don't force it," she advised. "It will break. It's just to hold your arm and shoulder still while it heals."

"How long?" Tibs asked.

"It'll be healed before we reach the next city."

He stared at her. He couldn't wait that long. "Gray isn't going to keep me on the roster if I can't do my job the entire time."

Rigel patted Tibs' uninjured shoulder. "I'll talk to my man. I'll make him see you aren't only good to swing a sword around."

"How long until it's healed, Sarnita?"

"How long did it take to heal the last time you pulled it like this?"

Not long, he wanted to say. He'd applied an etching of purity and it had dealt with the damage. "I don't remember."

"If you take care not to strain it at all," she said in a tone that made it clear she doubted he'd do that, "I've seen injuries like this go away in a couple of weeks."

Keeping his nod from showing his terror was difficult. Weeks. He'd have to endure this for weeks. Why hadn't he encased his entire arm? It wasn't like that took more essence than his bracer had. It would have been easy to shrug off his lack of injury to luck, since people tended to always attribute events to the non-existing element.

"I'll keep Gray off your back while you heal," Rigel promised.