

“Rigel!” the older man who was chief of the caravan guards called loud enough to be overheard over the guards setting up camp at the front of the line of stopped wagons.

Tibs paused in hammering in stakes in the hard earth and looked in the speaker’s direction. It was only their first day out of the Arteron and Tibs didn’t know what to expect from such a call to the caravan master.

“Yes, Gray?” the caravan master called in return from a few wagons back. Tibs expected the man was speaking with some of the merchants. From what he’s seen of the man, he was easy with smiles and enjoyed speaking with anyone. Tibs thought there was amusement in the reply, but wasn’t sure why.

“I’m taking the newbie and the same numbers of the veterans. Summoron is in charge until we’re done.”

The sigh was loud. “Very well. I’ll do my best not to pester her. I’m sure I can hold it in for after you’re done putting them to the test.”

Tibs exchange a look with the three others who were setting up their tents near him. Four more who had joined the caravan at Arteron were clustered next to them and they, too, had paused. He was the youngest, at least by appearance, but they all looked as confused as he felt.

Shouldn’t testing them have come before they were hired on? It was how it had been with every other caravan Tibs had hired on. A quick exchange of blows, so the guard master knew he could hold his own when needed.

“You heard me. Newbies, grab your sword and come to me!”

Tibs unhooked the scabbard from his pack and attached it to his belt as he walked. The chief of the guard, Graiden, who everyone Tibs had heard called Gray, was older, graying, and looked to have survived many fights. He was solidly built. With him were eight of the guards, plus his right-hand woman, Summoron. She was tall and muscular. Her skin so dark as to be nearly the black of Darkness. It made her blue eyes stand out so much that when Tibs had first seen her, he’d sensed for her element. She had none.

Gray looked them over, not seeming impressed. Tibs hadn’t seen him be impressed by anyone in the day of travel, but he hadn’t complained either. It seemed to be his natural expression.

“Follow me.” He turned and Tibs followed, along with the others. When the eight veterans fell in steps behind them, blocking a quick retreat, Tibs sensed ahead for more people. He’d never been on a caravan that mistreated the new guards, but stories always circulated. When he didn’t sense anyone waiting for them, he relaxed slightly. If this turned ugly, Tibs would be able to hold his own. It was only a day’s ride back to the city and, with his essence, he could make it there faster.

“Alright,” Graiden said, coming to a stop and turning to face them. “Each and everyone of you told me you know how to fight. Some of you were abysmally brazen about it, too. So, I want to see exactly what you are able to do. I’m going to put you up against one of my veterans. You want to impress me, you better be able to disarm them. Leyimen, step forward.”

The man next to Tibs took three steps and drew his sword. It was thick and heavy-looking. Designs were etched along the flat of the blade, and by how the natural metal essence within the sword wove over and under itself, it was a quality sword. Leyimen had

the muscles to yield such a sword.

The woman who took position was slightly shorter, but otherwise matched him. Her sword was thinner, unadorned, but also made of good quality.

“Listen well, because I’m not saying this twice. Whoever disarm the other wins and it stops. You cut your opponent and you are walking back to Arteron. Yes, Loren, that applies to you too. If you haven’t learned to keep your temper under control, I don’t want you here.”

“Don’t worry, Gray, I won’t cut any of them,” the man replies. He was of a height with Tibs, leaner, his blond hair was short and he held himself like nothing worried him. “I might bruise one or two, though. I hope that’s okay.”

“Fists are fine,” Graiden said. “Kicks aren’t. The only thing you need to prove here is that you’re as good as you led me to think.” The chief stepped back. “Start.”

The exchange was quick, and ended with Leyimen’s sword sliding away and him with a befuddled expression, looking at his empty hand.

“She didn’t—”

“You lost,” Graiden cut him off. “You want to give excuses? Got back to your parents. I don’t have time for them. Get your sword and step back in line. Normey, forward.”

The woman was slender; her armor more clothing than protection. A woman stepped before her, petite, in thick leather armor. With a short, but wide, sword Tibs had commonly seen while traveling through the kingdom of Emilion. The exchange was just as quick, but instead of a series of sword strike, Normey danced around her opponent’s attacks until with a quick motion, she sent the sword flying. She stepped back, did a salute with her sword and stepped to to the line without being told.

“Tyborg.”

Tibs stepped forward, taking his sword from his scabbard, and Loren joined him, smirking.

“You know the rule about not cutting you doesn’t mean I can’t break that blade of yours.” The sword he pulled wasn’t as thick as Leyimen’s, but close. Tibs’s sword was a Surilian Noratu. He’d chosen it because the thin blade made the way he willed its quick movements more believable. The normal ones did suffer from being easily broken when struck directly, but metal was Tibs’s element, and he could will it as hard as he needed it to be.

Loren attacked with wide swipes Tibs easily avoided. When he returned the attack, it wasn’t his body that moved his sword, but the sword that moved him.

He’d tried learning to wield sword the ordinary way, but he’d been small and not using his essence to hold one meant he was limited to smaller blades. Using earth to make himself stronger let him wield any sword, but then had come learning the movements. Repeating them over and over. It had been exhausting in a way Purity did little against.

He’s started wielding his sword with his will only slightly at first, but this way moving his sword came easily, remembering how took little work. So he’d switched to training that, instead of how to physically lift his sword.

The hardest part had been to hold himself in the expected position while being loose enough to flow with his sword.

Loren parried his attack and followed it with a punch.

Tibs raised his arm, coating it with earth and intercepted it.

Loren cursed in a language Tibs didn't know as he stepped back, opening and closing his hand. "He has some armor under there."

"Good," Graiden said. "Means he's smarter than most. Are you out?"

"Abyss not." The man charged, and Tibs parried. As soon as the sword touched, his essence flow over the other one and he willed it to move along, then he pulled it away and waited for Loren to regain his balance. "I don't know how you managed that, but aren't doing it twice." He came again, sword high.

Tibs stepped away, put his sword under the Loren's and took control of it, so that as he twisted, it, too, moved and wrenched itself out of the other man's hands and slid on the ground.

"How?" Loren looked at his empty hand.

"By keeping a cool head," Graiden said. "Which is something you should learn to do." He motioned for Tibs to step back. "Stephano."

The man who stepped forward had a deep tan and a rapier. Tibs didn't catch much more than that. He was busy keeping his eyes on Loren, who glared at him.

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"Alright," Graiden said, once the last had fought. "None of you are particularly horrible. I guess I'm going to need a better reason to send you back. But keep in mind that if you give it to me, it's going to be a much longer walk back to the city. I don't know where you come from or why you needed to get out of the city. If you're here to cause trouble, I will find out, and I will deal with you. So if that's your plan, you're going to want to head in the opposite direction from us come morning. Otherwise, welcome to Rigel's caravan. Don't make me regret hiring you."