

Stepping up-81

Tibs stood, trying to make out what could cause the increase in illumination at the back of Sebastian's camp. There had been activities all night long, distant sounds of construction, but the wagons had been arranged in such a way that Tibs couldn't find a roof that gave him a view of what they were doing. Now, in the pre-dawn, it looked like Sebastian's people had lit a bonfire.

There was a distant clunk, then Tibs stood there, stunned as a large ball of fire arched over him and fell on a building, splashing over the others, the smell of tar finally catching up to him. He ran and jumped down from the roof, uncaring of who saw him. He needed to put the fire out before it spread.

Runners were already around the buildings when he got there. Fire users pulled the flames away from unaffected buildings. Air users were pulling at the air, trying to suffocate it, but they weren't managing it. With so many people around, Tibs pulled water around him.

"Don't!" someone yelled, as Tibs was about to throw it on the closest burning house.

Cross ran at him. "That stuff's everburn, water's just going to make it burn hotter."

"Magic?" How else could water help fire burn?

"Alchemy. Sort of like magic, I guess, but it doesn't need people to be able to have essence."

He stared at her. "Why hasn't the guild told us that's a thing?"

She snorted. "You're going to have to ask them. I just know about it because one of the caravans I guarded, years ago, had an alchemist traveling with them. She couldn't make everburn, her stuff was oils to keep infections from setting in, to soothe stomachs, and help skin glow. But she knows about a lot more than that. Like you, I like to ask questions."

"How do we stop this, then?"

She shook her head. "Any houses with everburn on it are done for. The only thing we can do is keep the flames from spreading."

Tibs cursed and looked at the burning house. "Sebastian sent this flying from his camp. Can an alchemist make that happen?"

"I have no idea."

"A Catapult can," Quigly said, joining them. "It's usually used to send boulders at castle walls, but anything that can be put in its bowl will be launched."

"It's going to burn his own things down," She said. "Everburn doesn't care whose stuff it burns."

"He's going to have kept that in mind," the fighter said. "I talked with some of the more advanced wood users. Essence can be used with wood to make it more resistant to fire."

"That means he has adventurers," Tibs said miserably.

"Or he had the wood treated before coming here."

"There could be woods naturally resistant," Cross mused.

"Then we need to go destroy that thing." Tibs headed toward the bazaar ground.

“Tibs, stop! You can’t just march in there.”

“I can’t let Sebastian burn down my town!”

“At least wait until you can have a team. You’re not going to survive going by yourself. They’ll be looking for exactly that.”

“They aren’t going to see me!” He couldn’t pull Bardik’s trick of vanishing from sight, but suffusing himself with darkness made him harder to see. All he’d have to do was move slowly and keep to shadows.

Quigly stooped him by grabbing his shoulder. “I’m not letting you commit suicide.”

“I’m not letting him burn my town!”

“Look, the fact he hasn’t sent a second one of those tells me he only has one catapult. Cross, how would Sebastian go about putting this everburn out?”

“Smothering the flame is the only way the alchemist said worked. But we can’t do it and we have air users. I don’t see how he’d do it.”

Quigly closed his eyes. “Those we have aren’t strong. And they’re working on large areas with air all around the fire. Don’s managed to put out one house with the help of an air sorcerer, but that left him exhausted. The catapult’s bowl is a contained area. If he fills it with sand, it would smother it, then he just flings the sand at us and he can safely refill it with this stuff.

Tibs and Cross stared at him, and he rolled his eyes when he noticed. “I tried to depose a tyrant king. I had to learn about the weapons he could use against me. I’m glad everburn isn’t something he had access to, now that I know about it.”

“Fine, I’m still going there to destroy that catapult.”

“No, you aren’t.”

“You don’t get to tell me what I—”

“You put me in charge!” Quigly helped. “I just offered to give you advice. You’re the one who insisted I give the orders on top of making the plans. We’ve already lost too many people. I am not losing you needlessly.”

“So you’re going to let Sebastian send more of those at the town?”

“Not if I can help it. We have other, better ways to stop this.”

“How?”

“For one thing,” the fighter said, smirking, “we have essence.”

* * * * *

Tibs fumed as the archers assembled on the rooftop with him. He was angry that Quigly had been right, that Tibs had been so focused on avenging the destruction that had happened he hadn’t thought beyond acting; doing anything that gave his anger an outlet.

They had three wood archers, one who was Rho. Four fire archers, Amelia was Lambda, Mez Rho while the others were Omega. They would still be able to return the favor to Sebastian.

The distant thunk made him curse. Then he watched the ball of fire fly over them.

“Don’t rush,” Amelia instructed while Tibs watched it. “There’s nothing we can do for this one. Our goal is to make sure they can’t send another one.”

The direction was different, and the arc looked higher. Tibs guessed where it would

hit, and he had mixed feelings. The guild would have to respond to an attack on them, wouldn't they? And winning was all that mattered, right, no matter who helped that happen.

He noticed people on the roof of the guild building. Did they think they could—the ball of fire dropped suddenly; as if someone had smacked it out of the air and hit buildings blocks away from the guild. Unlike the first one, Tibs saw the fire spread as the everburn flew in all directions from the impact.

To protect itself, the guild had sacrificed a large part of the town. Tibs ground his teeth, wishing they would all throw themselves in the pool of corruption, and focused on the archers. He was there, supposedly, to protect the archers. He was skilled enough with his water to block any attack sent their way short of another ball of everburn. But he suspected Quigly had placed him here so Tibs could see progress was being made.

“Wood archers,” Amelia called. “Charge your arrows.”

Tibs felt essence shift. Richard was the Rho Archer, and he's spent the last hour instructing the other two on how to create one specific effect he promised would bring the catapult attacks to a halt.

“Fire archers, ready your attacks.”

Fire essence filled arrows or the space where the arrow would go. They hadn't learned any specific attacks. Fire was devastating enough, even in its simplest form.

“When ready, Fire!”

Richard was the first to let his arrow go, and Tibs was distracted enough watching it, that one of Sebastian's archers got an arrow halfway through Tibs's mist before it registered and he stopped it by icing it. Then he focused on the return volley.

The mist's effect was limited because of how difficult it was to set in place. It couldn't just be essence in the air as shifting that took too long compared to the speed of an arrow, so he'd had to work on making the water small enough it could easily suspend there on the essence.

He was amused that he now knew how Alistair had made a ball of water float in the air all those months ago, even if he couldn't imagine how much essence it took.

He flicked water jets at the arrows, deflecting them. His archers kept firing, the fire ones faster than the wood. Tibs was getting worried about how nothing was happening. He'd be angry at the empty promises; if he wasn't so busy keeping everyone alive.

The youngest of the wood archers stumbled with a gasp, lost her footing, and with a glance, Tibs had a bank of snow under her before she hit the ground. The action registered only after she hit, and he was too busy with the arrows to question how he'd done it.

Fire was spreading within the walls formed by the stacked wagons, but Tibs still couldn't see anything that would stop the catapult. They had time, but he didn't think they'd get a second chance at this.

He heard it before seeing it.

The cracking of wood. It was much louder than he'd expected, considering the distance. Then he made out screams. After that he saw the trees grow; a lot of them, growing fast.

“I don't expect they'll be able to use that thing through those trees, even if it isn't

destroyed,” Richard said with pride.

“Don’t let pride be your downfall,” Amelia said, firing steadily. “You may have taken out their largest weapon, but there are still more of them than us. Go back to firing.”

“That used up all the essence I had.”

“Then fire regular arrows. This isn’t won until the enemy is no more.”

Things were desperate indeed when Tibs was starting to like a noble.