

Tibs quietly approached the camp, along with the others.

His attempts at dealing with the bandits on his own had been thwarted by Jeremy, who has sat before Tibs's tent and never taken his eyes off it. He'd turned out to be a light sleeper, and even the rustling of pulling the flap open had been enough to wake him when he nodded off. It was like he was vengefully making sure Tibs didn't go 'play hero' unless he took the young man along.

Tibs had used air to take away the sound, but the motion had also woken him. Darkness hadn't worked, because even wrapping himself in it didn't keep the opening of the flaps from being noticed. When he'd been able to suffuse himself with Darkness, it had caused people to entirely ignore his actions unless they were broad. He had yet to be able to recreate the complexity of the etched sheath he'd made from studying Khumdar's. It confused and annoyed him. He had more than enough essence when he channeled darkness, and he knew how it was formed. But something about being brought down to Upsilon and having to work back to Rho had changed how it needed to be made.

Or there was another aspect of etching he hadn't worked out. One that needed him to be stronger than he was.

So, he'd given up and slept. Then spent the trek to the bandit's camp trying to think of a way he could break off and still deal with that, but even without getting the best sleep, Jeremy never let Tibs move away from him.

If he'd had gained mind as an element, he could have dealt with that, he was sure of it.

And now he watched two dozen or so, out of three times that much he could sense, go about the work of keeping a camp functioning while waiting for the signal to attack. It looked a lot like theirs when they broke for the night.

He was with three guards, including Jeremy, the size Graiden had broken them into, and five more were taking position, surrounding the camp. They'd dealt with the three sentries who had been patrolling the outskirt without them sounding the alert, and soon, they would be in place.

Graiden's group had the further position, ensuring that once he was ready, everyone else was too.

The orders were simple.

Kill them all.

Bandits were a scourge on anyone traveling by the roads and the only way to discourage them from trying was to make sure they felt it was too dangerous. If a kingdom acknowledged bandits were a thing within their border, it was by offering hefty rewards for their heads.

Tibs didn't know what this kingdom's position was. He didn't care about rewards, only keeping the caravan safe.

The signal came in the form of a bird call, but it was enough for three of the bandits to go alert as Tibs and his group broke from cover.

Tibs wrapped his arms from his hands to his shoulders with earth for strength and protection. It took the two reserves from his bracers he'd filled with that essence as part of preparing himself. Three had metal, which he had reinforcing his armor in vital areas.

Two were air for when he needed a boost of speed and one fire in case he needed something bigger to keep them alive. The biggest problem with that one was doing it in such a way it could be explained by something other than magic.

Fortunately for him, there were already fires burning, and some had cauldrons over or next to them. At least one had something that only had a small amount of water in it. Fat, possibly, to waterproof the tents. Regardless, it was something to blame if needed.

I barreled past the three already on the defensive and went for the group of six who were only now standing and reaching for weapons. A mix of sword, club, spears and axes. The spears and axes heads were stones, so, along with the swords, were not danger to him, and his added protection would keep the clubs from being a worry.

What he had to be careful of was that they damaged his armor in such a way he wouldn't be able to explain the lack of blood. He easily dispatched one before they were ready. He'd allocated a little metal to add sharpness to his blade, and blocked the clumsy attempt to bash in his head with his shield. Then he gutted that bandit and parried the next to attack him, sensing the sword coming before he saw it.

He spared his attention to the whole of the fight, sensing how the bandits were splitting up to deal with each group, while a few kept their distance from the fighting, probably waiting to see where they would be needed. There were a lot more bandits than there were guards, but Tibs wasn't worried; they had training.

He shifted to block the club as he stabbed the sword wielder, then sliced out of the body and into this attacker.

He turned to face another sword wielder when pain exploded in his side. He glanced down in surprise at the clean stone tip of an arrow, unable to understand how it had managed to hurt him, then was jolted back to the fight by a club hitting his sword hard enough to send it flying out of his hand.

He brought his shield in to take the next blow, stepping out of the way of the sword. He was moving essence around, weakening the protection, so he could make another sword when the club came down on his shield again, breaking his focus and the essence dispersed.

He shoved forward, pushing the bandit back, and pain lanced up his side from the arrow planted there.

He should have kept a reserve for purity.

He shoved the pain away as he faced the sword wielder and ducked under the swing, moving as much earth essence to his free arm as he could spare so the punch would end his opponent.

Except Tibs sent himself off balance when the swordman stepped out of the way. He barely brought his shield in place to stop the following slash, but the impact had him off his feet. His vision blurred as he fell, and the pain from the arrow became too much. He barely had the focus to know where the sword was as it kept coming down so he could keep his shield in the way.

Then he could think through the pain and kicked the man's legs out from under him. Rolling caused stars in his sight, but he pushed through that and got to his feet. He bent to pick up the sword he sensed on the ground, but a club hit him in the shoulder

and he was staggering away. He'd lost the essence he'd been using and didn't have much in those reserves.

There was plenty of earth around him, but pain kept stealing his focus as he had to move to avoid getting hit again.

Steeling himself, he took a blow on his shield that hurt all the way to his shoulder, and added a burst of air as he pushed to send the woman far enough he could try to think. Get a sense of the situation. He could hear and see the fighting all around, but couldn't make out the people.

Then she was on him again and he swung, only for her to step out of the way. Then the club impacted his leg and he couldn't see anymore. He felt the ground, had trouble breathing.

"I'm here," Someone said, then Tibs pushed through the pain again. Forms were fighting next to him, one lean and smaller, limping as he stepped around the more muscular woman. He knew the young man, but he couldn't think of the name.

He tried to move and pain in his side had him yell.

Panting, he reached back, but there was no arrow left there. He grabbed the stone head and pulled. He screamed as he threw the wooden shaft a way, then panted as the lowering of pain felt like pleasure.

A shadow fell over him and Tibs raised his arm, surprised at the lightness, until he realized his shield was no longer there.

The young man, Jeremy, looked down at him. "Shouldn't you do something?"

Tibs laughed, then nearly bent over from the pain. He should channel fire and bring all this to a definitive end, but the pain kept him from focusing, and as it ebbed, he knew killing everyone here wasn't how to end the fight.

At this point, ending it wasn't even on him.

He couldn't heal everything without raising questions, and what he could wouldn't put him back into the fight in time to do any good. His leg was broken and his shoulder shattered. Those he could deal with now. He used his essence to form a sheath around both and hardened them. He closed his eyes and channeled metal, removing what was left in his bracers then purity to refill them.

He gritted his teeth as Jeremy shook him. "Don't fall asleep. It's dangerous when you're hurt."

"I'm not asleep," he said, panting. He let go of the element and glared at the young man. He made etchings of purity and applied them to his leg and shoulders. He couldn't do anything for the arrow wound other than grab one of the bandit's shirt and pull on it.

Jeremy helped, visibly in pain from the arrow in his leg. They made a bandage from it while the fighting wound down. Twice, Jeremy had to take on a bandit, and once Tibs was able to help by grabbing a dropped weapon and throwing it at his opponent. He missed, but it was enough of a distraction. The young man was able to finish the fight.

Then Graiden was looking down on Tibs. "Considering how eager you were to venture along, I expected you to do better."

"He did okay," Jeremy said, offended.

"Until he lost his sword," someone said. "Then the glimpses I saw were as painful

as watching the hits he was getting.”

“Don’t you know how to fight without a sword?” Graiden asked.

“I don’t make a habit of losing it,” Tibs defended.

The chief shook his head, muttering, “Kids.” He turned. “Okay, anyone without serious injuries, help the injured to the road, then setup camp and see to them. The caravan is a full day behind us, and there’s bound to be a few of these assholes who ran, so be on your guard.”

“What about the dead bandits?” someone asked.

“If you think they deserved to be sent to the elements, you deal with burning them. As far as I’m concerned, they can rot and be lost forever.”

The responses weren’t loud, but the tone wasn’t pleased. Tibs couldn’t tell who wanted to burn them and who felt like Graiden.

“How about the heads, then?” another asked. “We can get a silver for each bandit’s head we bring in.”

“They’re not going to be more than skulls by the time we get to a city, but if you think you can still convince them where they came from, you go ahead and cut them off. Just make sure no one comes complaining about the smell.”

Graiden turned and offered Tibs his hand. He could read the grin as the man being ready to comment on his injured state, but Tibs reached for it with his injured arm, the pain from the shoulder more a deep ache. And when he was on his feet, Tibs made sure to only limp.

“I could have sworn it would be broken,” the woman said in awe.

“I was already dealing with this.” He indicated the bloody bandage. “It felt worse than it actually is.”

“Then you can help with the injured,” Graiden said. “And start with your defender. The way his leg’s bleeding, I won’t be surprised if he loses all of it before long.”

“Sorry,” Jeremy said, looking sheepish. “I’m fine, really. I know better than to pull an arrow out.”

He wasn’t. His essence was thinner than it should be, and he was still losing some. The arrow had missed the bone, but touched the channel in the legs that was more important than the others. He’d asked a scholar about that one time, and the headaches he’d gotten from listening to him go on about all the intricacies of the essence system within people had been enough to never bother again.

“Doesn’t matter how fine you are,” Tibs said. “I’m not disobeying Gray. Sit down and we’re going to see to your leg, then you get to rest while watching the rest of us work.”