

## Stepping up-54

“I don’t like this,” Don said as he, his team, Tibs, and Jackal stayed close to the alley’s wall. “I shouldn’t be putting myself at risk like this. I’m the leader of this whole thing” Tibs preemptively glared Jackal silent. He’d agreed to let Tibs do the talking when it came to placating the sorcerer, but the man’s cowardliness rubbed the fighter raw.

Radcliff was the one who spoke. “They need to see you take part in this, Don.” He ignored the glare the sorcerer gave him. “You said it, you came up with the plan, but you think the others are going to have the guts to do anything without you showing them how it’s done?”

Don nodded and straightened. The rogue looked at Tibs and winked. Radcliff had been indispensable in keeping the sorcerer on point. He’d picked up early in the planning that Tibs and Jackal were the ones behind the ideas, while Don came up with the execution of them. All the while thinking he was the mastermind. It had gone well; until Tibs mentioned the need for Don to be on the front line.

It was then that Radcliff joined in the manipulation of his team leader, coaxing every one of Tibs’s or Jackal’s points in one demonstrating Don’s leadership abilities, his prowess with his essence, his talent at positioning their forces—that one wasn’t a lie. Don was skilled at putting the people they had where they would be the most useful, so long as it wasn’t himself.

The plan to destroy Sebastian’s home had been easy to push. Destroying the enemy’s base of operation made sense. That it meant getting close to it, instead of throwing essence from a distance, hadn’t pleased Don, but enough people had already tried it to point out how well protected against that it was. When Tibs explained his reasoning for using Corruption, Don wasn’t happy. He’d taken Tibs aside after the meeting and screamed it was a ploy to get him killed. He’d then swore he wouldn’t let that happen and stormed off.

“There’s a group just beyond the intersection,” Sawat said, returning to them. She was Don’s latest archer. Had graduated to Upsilon just before Sto closed. Her element was air. “I counted six.”

Tibs sensed seven, but he couldn’t correct her. And without elements, one extra person on their side wouldn’t change how this battle went.

“Jackal,” Don said. “You and Raonull rush them. Radcliff and Tibs. Use to roofs to get behind. Sawat, you and Omer take shots at them. Don’t worry about making them kill shots. Your job is to keep them distracted. If someone runs, then you take them down.”

Tibs was climbing, then across the roof. To the other house. He was aiming for the one after that, as the road narrowed there, but he realized Radcliff had gone the opposite way, and with no one watching him, he could cut this short. He ran for the edge, channeled air, and kept his glee to a chuckle as he threw himself off. He flung essence ahead of him, stepped, and jumped. He did a pirouette and then landed, extending his arm in victory.

Which his momentum cut short as he lost his balance and slid down the roof and into the alley. This was fun.

He let air go and used earth to harden himself before impact, then stayed there. The

ground was so comfortable. He had something to do, but he didn't have to hurry.

The sound of fighting made him sigh. Reluctantly, he let earth go. Then he was scrambling to his feet and running for the battle.

He threw a knife at the back of a woman fighting with Rao, and the pommel hit instead of the blade. Tibs really hated how bad he was at throwing.

The hit had the effect of causing the fighter to look over her shoulder, which Rao took full advantage of by planting his sword into her stomach.

Tibs had his short sword in hand and cut the back of one of the four men against Jackal. Then he was on his back as that backhand hit hard.

"Tibs," Radkliff called as he got to his feet. Tibs watched the rope go over his head, the loop slip over a fighter's sword and come down on the wrist before the rogue pulled. The loop closed, and the fighter staggered back toward Tibs, nearly falling. Tibs planted his sword in the side as deep as he could. When that wasn't enough to make the man stop breathing, he twisted it, wrenched it out, then planted it in the same hole.

The man fell, taking Tibs's sword with him. He pulled a knife and spun, prepared to attack whoever was closest, but the enemies were all down. Jackal landed a foot on the neck of the one at his feet.

"Injuries?" the fighter asked.

"The bastard sliced my armor!" Rao complained. "I just got the thing too." He was looking at his bleeding side.

"Good here," Radkliff said.

"Me too." Tibs picked up his knife.

"You still need work with those," the rogue commented.

"It's why I'm using that now." Tibs raised the sword before sheathing it.

"We should have brought a cleric," Jackal said as he motioned for the other to join him.

"I'm fine," Rao said.

"You're injured. That's not being fine."

"It's a scratch."

It looked to be more than that, but as Tibs sense the way the fighter's essence behaved around the wound, that wasn't reacting as strongly as expected, it was forming around the cut, instead of being dispersed by it. Rao had metal as his element, so that wasn't it. And—Tibs stopped himself. Was that even worth trying to understand while on their way to take down Sebastian?

Was it worth worrying about at all?

"Good fighting," Don said. He handed a clean cloth to the fighter. "Plug that. I don't want you bleeding out before we're done. I wish we could have brought one of those cowards to heal us as we went. Or used an attendant to just get to the house, melt it down and leave."

Tibs nodded.

That had been his idea, but Sebastian had something in place that kept the attendants from reaching the house. The closest one had made it was three full blocks, and he'd

returned gravely injured. Sebastian had that line well guarded. It had been decided that if they couldn't appear when they needed to be, attacking on as many fronts as possible was the best way.

Once Rao had stuffed the cloth in the cut in his armor, they were moving. After another battle, Tibs felt... something. He couldn't work out what it was, but essence was different past that point.

"Can you feel that?" Radcliff asked. They were stopped on the other side of the street, where the essence changed.

"I think it's what's stopping the attendant from going in," Sawat said.

"Then why am I feeling it?" the rogue asked. "I'm fire, not void."

"I'm air." The archer said.

"Water," Tibs added.

"I can't feel something that far," Jackal said.

Don looked at Tibs. "You can sense that? I thought you couldn't do anything?"

Tibs rolled his eyes. "I don't have a lot of reserve. The rest of my abilities are fine." Better than fine, he wanted to add as the sorcerer smirked.

"If it's going to affect all our elements, I think it's best we head back and come up with a different strategy," Don said.

"We can't," Jackals replied.

"I'm—"

"Come off it, Don, you know as well as—"

"Everyone's committed," Radcliff said, cutting the fighter off. "If we don't do this now, we aren't going to be in any shape to deal with the counter-attack. Don, do you really want to be known as the guy who bailed on his town?"

Tibs worried Radcliff had gone too far as he felt the essence coalesce around the sorcerer. He hadn't seen Don fight with Corruption. He had no idea what he could do with it, but on the little he saw and experienced, none of it would be pleasant.

Don made fists, and the essence accumulated there. Tibs readied himself to disrupt it, but the sorcerer absorbed it, instead of unleashing it. When he opened his hands, Radcliff relaxed.

"I am not a coward," Don stated.

"Never said you were," Jackal said.

"Jackal, stop talking," Tibs ordered as Don rounded on the fighter.

"I—"

"Stop talking."

Jackal closed his mouth and Don turned the glare on Tibs. "You better keep him under control, or I'm going to turn him into a puddle."

Tibs nodded.

"If this affects all the elements," Don said, looking ahead determinedly, "I'm going to need you to protect me. Since I'm the only one who can take down the house," he added forcefully, as if he expected someone to call him out on it. That he didn't specifically look

at Tibs or Jackal told him Don knew what his teammates thought of him. "Since the protection on the house is essence based, whatever is disrupting it is going to have to stop before we reach it."

Tibs hoped so, because as deep as his reserve was, if using his essence was hard, once he channeled Corruption, he would start looking for something else to do, and he couldn't guess what he'd think was an easy thing under those circumstances.

"Me and Rao in the front," Jackal said. "Tibs and Radkliff on each side of Don, behind us. Omer and Sawat far enough behind us, you can shoot anyone we miss. How are you for normal arrows?"

"I still have my quiver," Omer said.

Sawat counted hers. "Half of mine. There hasn't been a lot of archers on the way here."

"That might change. If my father can send word to the archers he has at the platform, expect them to shoot us in the back. So stay alert." He looked at Don. "It's the best protection I can offer with who we have here. Does that work?"

The sorcerer nodded curtly after thinking, and they took positions.

"Our goal is to get to the house," Don said. "Once one of them is down, move on. It doesn't matter if they live or die, so long as we destroy their leader."

"That means no stopping to collect the loot," Tibs told Jackal.

The fighter's eyes went wide. "I'm hurt. You know the loot collecting takes place after the fighting's done, not on the way to it." He looked forward. "Anyway. I'm looking forward to taking the loot of my father's body. You guys can have the rest." He checked the street, then motioned, and they ran.

They staggered as they crossed the strange line. Tibs's senses stopped making sense. There was essence around him, but it was shaking. When he tried to mentally grab some, it flew away from him.

"Tibs," Jackal called, "Later." The others had gotten over the strange sensation quickly and were moving again. He stopped sensing essence, and he felt better.

The next fight was harder.

They hit the thugs, nine of them, and as one, Tibs's allies reached for their essence. Jackal was the only one to accomplish anything with it, hardening himself and taking the brunt of the blows. Rao regained his footing and joined in the assault. When he broke his sword, he used the pommel to bludgeon the next thug. Then he had another sword in hand.

Tibs and Radkliff took on the one that made it around the two fighters, and both suffered injuries before finally bringing her down. Wrapping his essence around his injury was easy, but the part that was at the surface of his skin flew apart.

"Looks like our body offered the same kind of protection against this as it does in the dungeon," Jackal said.

"Not the same," Don corrected. "In the dungeon, our presence will prevent our equipment from melting a few paces away. Raonull would have been able to use essence on his sword."

They moved ahead. In the distance, they heard more fighting.

The next fight was won because of their archers. They reduced the assault down to six before they reached them. Tibs took a sword to the side for Don, and the sorcerer grabbed his attacker's sword arm and withered it into a gray mass before Radkliff cut the thug's throat.

"I'll be fine," Tibs said as the sorcerer helped him to his feet. He couldn't stop the bleeding, but he had his essence wrapped around his insides.

"Don't bleed to death," Don said, handing him a clean cloth. "We can move essence through touch."

"So a cleric would have been useful." Tibs winced as he wedged the cloth under his armor and over his injury.

"I doubt that. They're all cowards. Would have left us to run back to the guild for protection."

They moved again. Slowed by their injuries.

The next fight nearly saw them ended, even if there were only five thugs before them. Two focused on Jackal, their only uninjured fighter while one kept Rao busy. The archers could do little from the back and with the few arrows they had left, so it came down to Tibs and Radkliff. Tibs avoided major injuries, but Radkliff got a sword in the gut in the process of killing the thug.

Cursing, Tibs was next to him, hand on the wound, pushing his essence through the contact. "Give me a cloth," he ordered Don and used it to slow the blood.

"Fuck," Radkliff said with a chuckle, then groaned. "I really thought it was the dungeon that was going to be the death of me."

"You're not dying," Tibs said as the cloth became wet with blood.

"You better pull this off," the rogue said. "I'm going to be pissed if I died for nothing."

"I will," Don said resolutely.

Radkliff grinned. "You better help him," he told Tibs.

"There's no dying," Tibs said through clenched teeth. "Not outside the dungeon."

"I guess you're right," Radkliff said, closing his eyes. "I'm just going to take a nap then. Come wake me when..."

They were Runners. The dungeon was where they were supposed to die. They tried to beat Sto and if they failed, then they died. The town was supposed to be safe. Fighting wasn't allowed.

Where was Harry? Why were they letting this happen?

He stood, looked at Jackal. "I'm going to kill him." And started walking toward Sebastian's house.