

Stepping up-53

Don preened under the congratulations of how he'd convinced the attendants to help move the people in danger to safe places. He'd proclaimed it the instant they had entered the tavern and smiled at Tibs, defying to call him out on it.

He hadn't. He'd already suspected Don would do it and had considered the ramifications. The only downside he saw was that he'd have to remain close to the sorcerer to advise him, in case he couldn't live up to the claims he was now making.

Convincing the attendants to help save the town hadn't been easy. Like the guild people, they were primarily self-centered. Their safety came first. Individually, some wanted to help, but they needed to do what their leader said. And said leader, a man with a hard face and demanding golden eyes, had no interest in "Playing Hero" to a bunch of people who couldn't even afford to pay them.

And Don had come to Tibs's rescue there; he had been the one to point out how losing this town would affect the attendant's reputation. After all, wasn't it obvious the people now attacking had used the platform to arrive? That the attendants had never bothered checking the intention of the people they moved. Would they also help the next town be taken over? Had they been complicit in this attack?

Whatever the complicit word meant—Tibs hadn't had a chance to ask Carina yet—the leader of the attendant had given it after hearing it.

The return to the inn had been uneventful. The archers had been dealt with by then, and Tibs had led them to a group of Runners to use as an escort. The biggest issue had been convincing those Runners to help despite Don being with them.

The sorcerer was good at making people hate him.

But now, if the man could be smart about it, he might finally make himself a few allies among the Runners.

Carina returned with Jackal, who looked ready to rip the sorcerer apart, but turned his glare on Tibs instead. "How can you let him take the credit?" Tibs had had time while they walked back to explain what had happened, and she'd now told the fighter.

Fortunately, Don was loud enough, and they were far enough that no one heard. Tibs motioned for Jackal to lower his voice.

"We need him—"

"No, we don't," Jackal countered. "He's going to start acting like he's in charge, ordering us about into getting everyone killed."

"Then we stick close to make sure he doesn't do that," Tibs said. Jackal stared at him in horror, then left. He returned with two tankards and two bottles of something strong. He pours a bottle in the two tankards and drank out of the other.

"You better have a really good reason to have us stay within touching distance of that man."

Tibs nodded. "Sebastian's house is protected by a lot of essences."

"Yes," Jackal said, "my father has reason to be paranoid about his safety. How does

that make *him* acceptable?" He took a long swallow from the bottle.

"Corruption can affect other essences. It ate through Sto's stone. Stone the guild told us couldn't be dug through with anything."

"That could simply have been so we wouldn't try it," Carina said, taking a sip from her tankard and then choking on it.

Tibs nodded. "Maybe, but the way Sto and Ganny reacted, the fear in their voices. Neither of them expected it to happen. Sto has corruption in the essences he can use and he's seen Don use it. So if he didn't work out that it could, and the guild said that it can't. Would Sebastian think of protecting his house against it?"

"You want Don to attack the house," Jackal said, a smile forming.

"There's a problem," Carina said, "other than Don will never put himself in that kind of danger. Your father isn't going to have been careless about his safety. That means that the enchantments on his house will be strong. I don't know if Don had enough of a reserve to do any serious damage."

"He doesn't have to," Tibs said. "He just needs to be there so he can take the credit for what I'll do."

Jackal's smile vanished. "You want to channel corruption."

Tibs nodded.

"We haven't seen you under the influence of that element," Carina pointed out.

"We have time. This isn't something that's going to happen tonight," Tibs said. "Even with the attendants, we're not going to be able to just go to his house. There's too many people guarding it."

"And there's a lot of townsfolk still living in that area," Jackal said. "My father's made sure we can't rescue them. It gives him a way to threaten innocent lives if he thinks we're about to try something."

"Having Don lead will make it tough to keep anything we do discreet," Carina said. "He'd rather blatant in his intentions, for all that he thinks he's subtle."

Tibs nodded. "Then we guide him away from a direct attack until it's time. Rescuing people will make more of them like him, so it should be easy to convince him to do that. And I can work on getting control of myself while channeling corruption."

"Do we have a place where you can do that safely?" Carina asked.

"I don't know if anywhere is safe when it comes to corruption," Jackal said.

"Air's the only element I've been prone to unleash for the fun of it," Tibs said.

"Out of the four you've tried," Jackal replied. "And it doesn't take much to get you angry when you have fire."

"We can do it by the pool," Tibs suggested.

Jackal shook his head. "We might control Merchant's Row, but my father has people watching it for any opportunity to take it from us. Someone will see what we're doing and report it. Even if they don't understand what it means. It's information we can't allow my father to get."

Tibs nodded. "So one of the unoccupied houses away from everything."

"I wish we could bring a cleric," Carina said, "in case you lose control."

“Tibs can change elements and deal with whatever damage he does,” Jackal pointed out.

“Do we want to deal with two unknown elements?” Carina asked.

“Maybe we start with purity then?” Tibs suggested. “It can’t be as destructive.”

“All the elements are destructive,” Carina said, “especially when you don’t know how to handle them. And with how they affect how you think, it’s even more dangerous.”

“How was corruption?” Jackal asked. “Seems to me that gives us a sense of what Tibs will act like.”

Tibs thought back to his audience. “He was friendly. More than the other elements. Talking with him felt more like talking with one of us than an element.”

Jackal looked in Don’s direction. “Friendly? Well, that definitely didn’t stick with that one.”

“It seems safe enough,” Carina said. “But then again, we thought the same of Air, after all, how much damage could wanting to have a fun time cause, right?” she eyed them.

Tibs nodded.

“Okay, so we can’t just go by how the audience went,” Jackal said. “More reason to have a safe place to meet that version of Tibs. If you turn into an asshole like Don, I am smacking you.”

“I don’t know if that is possible,” Carina said.

“I could start acting like a noble.” Tibs shuddered at that idea.

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Tibs looked at the cellar before looking at his friends. Why had they done through such length? They could have talked at the inn.

“I hope you aren’t going to be offended if I don’t look you in the eyes,” Jackal said, looking sick. “Those eyes aren’t any easier to look at on you than on the asshole.”

“It’s all right,” Tibs said. He remembered the effect Don’s eyes had on him. He looked at Carina and Kroseph.

“It’s unsettling,” the server said. “The way the color changes. It’s like it’s being pulled inside you and replaced with this new one. Although I have no idea what color that’s supposed to be.” He only glanced at Tibs’s eyes before looking away.

“When I sense Don’s essence, it registered as purple, like his robe, but it’s also different. I can’t explain it.” He thought about it. Sensed his reserve. It had that same color, but the wrongness of it wasn’t there.

“How do you feel?” Jackal asked.

“I feel fine. I don’t think Corruption has an effect on me.” He thought about it. “Maybe it’s more like us than the other elements?”

“I don’t think ‘more like us’ means much to an element,” Carina said.

“But you don’t feel like melting the wall or anything?” Jackal asked.

Tibs laughed. “Of course not. This isn’t our house.”

“So, if it was your house, you’d be okay with doing it?” Kroseph asked.

Tibs frowned. “Well, it depends. If there’s a reason to do it, I wouldn’t have to worry

about someone else complaining.”

“Is being too friendly going to be a problem?” Jackal asked.

“Water’s too compassionate,” Carina pointed out, “and you wouldn’t think that could be a problem.”

“Until Tibs starts helping the enemy.” Jackal nodded.

“Is that it, though?” Kroseph asked. “Do you want to be friends with the people who are attacking the town?”

Tibs shook his head. They were his enemy. He had no interest in being their friends. His shaking slowed. Although, if they thought he was their friend, he would make it easier to stab them in the back.

“What are you thinking?” Kroseph asked.

Tibs hesitated. Like him, his friends wanted their enemy dead, but Kroseph wasn’t a Runner. He wasn’t hardened to the reality of what the dungeon required them to do. What life required of them. He might object to his idea; then they’d have to convince him it was the best one.

“I thought that maybe I could pretend to be their friends, but that wouldn’t be right.”

“Wait, what?” Jackal asked. “What does Corruption care about things being right?”

“You’re confusing how you think it should act with the reality,” Carina said, but she too was studying Tibs. He only looked at them out of the corner of his eyes. He didn’t want his eyes to make them uneasy. “But you’re right that it sounds like a strange thing for Tibs to say, so the element is affecting him.”

“You think so?” Tibs asked, trying to figure out how it might be. He wasn’t seeing it. He didn’t think he’d have outright said he wanted to convince Sebastian he was on his side so he could betray him. Not with Kroseph there. It would waste too much time getting him to understand how practical the idea was. Like he had with Don. It’d do it and once it had happened, it would be easier to get the server to see it was the best way.

“Why not do that?” Jackals asked, pensive. “Everyone’s always underestimating you.”

“The archer watching the platform had a drawing of Tibs,” Carina said.

“Because he’d want him taken out before he got off it,” Jackal replied. “I doubt he was able to give such a picture to everyone who works for him. With his eyes being normal brown, he could pass himself as someone wanting to join the winning side, and take out the teams before they realized it.”

Tibs watched Kroseph as he nodded along. The server stopped as he noticed the attention. “What?”

“You’re okay with me doing that?”

Kroseph frowned. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You’re not a Runner,” Tibs answered. “You haven’t seen how hard things can be, and the kind of stuff surviving requires.”

“You’re wrong, but why would that make me not want you to do it?”

“You don’t think it’s wrong that I plan on lying just so It’ll be easier for me to kill them?”

Kroseph looked pensive. “Yes, I think you shouldn’t have to do it. But among the list

of things I've seen happen since Jackal's father started this attack, it's rather low on the scale of 'wrong things'."

"Oh," Tibs chuckled in embarrassment. "I'd decided to lie about what I was going to do because I thought it was going to be too much work convincing you it was what he had to do."

"Alright," the server said, hesitatingly. "I can understand why you'd think that." He looked at the other two. "Have you worked out how it's affecting him?"

Jackal shook his head. "You might as well let go of it, Tibs. We'll try—"

"Just wait," Carina said. "Tibs, to do this, pretend to switch sides so you can get close to Jackal's father and take him out. I think you're going to have to learn how to do more with your essence."

"You're going to want me to read, aren't you?" Tibs asked, unable to stop the shudder. She shook her head, and he relaxed.

"I'm thinking the best way is to get Don to train you."

Tibs started to protest. That still sounded like he'd have to do work, but he realized she was right. Don was the only expert he had access to. Getting into the guild to ask for one would mean waiting for them to call him. Unless Don's teacher was still here. Would he, with the dungeon being closed? Don would know that and if his teacher was here. Tibs would go to him.

He noticed the way they looked at him. "What?"

"You're thinking about it?" Jackal asked, dismayed.

"Carina suggested it, and it's a good idea if his teacher isn't here. His teacher would be the better person to train me."

"But that would mean telling the guild you have more than one element."

Tibs nodded. "They'll understand why I didn't tell them. It's not like they tell us everything either." He smiled.

"Okay, there is something definitely wrong here if you're willing to not only tell Don about this, but the guild. Tibs, let go of the essence," Jackal ordered.

He did and frowned.

"Welcome back," Kroseph said, smiling.

"I wasn't gone," Tibs replied.

"Can you tell me why you were willing to tell the guild?" Carina asked.

He went over what he'd said and thought. "It was the quickest way, the simplest one to get what I wanted."

"But they wouldn't have let you do it," She pointed out. "The moment they found out you have more than one element, they would have captured you."

"I wasn't thinking about that. The only thing I was focusing on was right now. I have a sense that I thought they'd see how good it would be for them too, but that's vague. What mattered was that I'd get what I wanted without a lot of work. Just like lying to you about betraying people, Kroseph. I didn't think you'd be okay with it, so I made the decision to say I'd considered it and dismissed it. That way you'd even respect me a little more."

"Taking the easy way," Jackal said, "lying to get what you want. Letting people believe

you're better than you are." He smiled grimly. "Now that's Don."

"Does that mean you can't use corruption?" Kroseph asked.

"I can still use it," Tibs said. "But it's going to be like Air and Fire. I'm going to have to be careful the situation doesn't change what I want to do once I'm channeling the essence."

"You mean like when you left me to go rescue Don?" Carina asked, with only a hint of bitterness in her tone.

"I wasn't rescuing him," Tibs said. "I was rescuing a Runner who was arriving without knowing what was going on. I could feel the essence condensing."

"Could you tell it was void essence?" she asked, her tone turning curious. They hadn't had the chance to talk about it until now, with Don around and then focusing on locating a place for this exercise.

"No, but what else would it be on the platform?"

"So Corruption looks for the easy way," Jackal said. "That's going to be a problem because nothing of what we're going to have to do to get my father out of here is going to be easy."

Carina nodded. "Getting to be himself while channeling essence would be the simplest way."

"How about your bracers?" Kroseph asked. "Can't you limit yourself to using that?"

Tibs shook his head. "I don't know how. I've had to use amulets at the same time as my reserve since the start, so I don't know how to not do it." He sighed. "Yet more things to practice."

Kroseph patted his leg. "You can worry about that later. Let's go back to the inn and see what's available to eat."

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"No," Don said. Looking at the rough sketch of the town drawn on papers. He placed a finger on the building Jackal as suggested as the place to assemble the people the attendants took out of the building near his father's home. "That's barely two blocks away from the Crawling Worm. Someone going or coming from there is going to notice a preciously empty building being occupied."

Jackal's effort to keep his temper under control was visible. "I didn't know they'd taken over the Worm," he said through clenched teeth.

Don looked at a woman opposite the table. She was a Rogue, one of the conscripts.

"They moved in last night."

Tibs elbowed Jackal in the side as he started to speak. They were here to support Don. Not take over the planning. The fighter glared at Tibs but closed his mouth. Don's smirk nearly ended the meeting.

"What's the alternative?" Carina asked, louder than she had to and drawing the attention away from Jackal. "We still need to house a dozen families. That's the largest home we have access to. Everything larger is in the noble's neighborhood. I hope you're not thinking of putting them there."

Don rolled his head. "Like they'd be allowed to stay. The nobles would just hand

them to our enemy, to put themselves in his good graces. We're lucky there's more of us with an element than them. Otherwise, they'd been on his side already." He tapped a group of homes. "That's where we're putting them. It's away from the fighting, and territory either group holds. It means the odds of a patrol finding them by accident are lower. There's also a courtyard enclosed by the buildings. So the kids aren't going to be stuck inside all the time."

Jackal frowned and studied the map. "The houses aren't connected."

"Then maybe if you'd taken the time to walk about this town of ours," Don replied with a roll of the eyes, "you'd know that whoever drew that part got it wrong."

Jackal looked at Tibs, who shrugged. He didn't remember every building in the down.

"Even if you're right," Jackal said, "we're going to have to allocate people to watch over them. Low odds of a patrol isn't no chances."

"Less, or more than if we house them where you wanted?" Don asked with a smirk.

Jackal ground his teeth again, then nodded. "Considering the Worn's now my father's property. We'd have to put a lot more there to ensure they're safe." The next words visibly hurt the fighter. "Your idea is the better one."

"Thank you." How Don could put so much superiority in those two words, Tibs didn't know, and he was too focussed on making sure Jackal didn't give in to his anger to investigate it.