

## Stepping up-56

Tibs didn't wait for the swords to come out. He rushed the closest guard, drawing his short sword. He slashed but missed as they moved away. Tibs used the opportunity to slam the pommel of his sword on the block of crystal, but to no visible effect. As Don said, crystal didn't have to mean fragile.

He dodged a sword strike, and it bounced off the block, chipping some of it off. So strength was the way to do this.

"Careful, idiot!" someone yelled. "If you break it, the boss is going to snap your neck."

Pain along his arm due to the missed parry forced his attention back on the fight. They were over his surprise and only the block kept them from easily surrounding him. A dodge gave him momentary distance, and he considered his situation.

His horrible situation.

The only element that gave him strength was earth, which also made him slow to react. Jackal knew how to become nearly indestructible, but Tibs wasn't there. Standing still would mean his death.

He scored a shallow cut on a guard's chest, then felt someone behind him, the air moving, and Tibs threw himself to the side and avoided being caught, but was now against the packed dirt wall with four of the men around him.

"Well, looks like our intruder's taken on more than he can handle." The two before Tibs parted to let the speaker through. It was the one who'd called the warning. He was dressed in the same armor as the others and looked as nasty. "Anyone here thinks the boss will care if we hand him a corpse instead of someone to question?" the man approached and easily disarmed Tibs as he tried to menace him with his short sword.

Tibs tried to duck around the man, and nearly skewered himself on a sword. Before he took a step back, a hand grabbed his collar and pulled him back against the wall. The hand was around his neck before he reacted.

The man smiled and leaned in. "They've got to be desperate if they're sending a kid to try to stop us." Tibs reached for a knife, but a hand caught his wrist as the other one tightened around his neck. "Now now. No need for that. I'm going to make this as quick as I can. Someone use their sword on him."

Fuck that. Tibs placed a hand on the man's face and pulled the essence into him. The man staggered back in shock, but his skin was already pale, tight over his face, slightly gaunt.

"What did you do?"

The others took a step back from Tibs and the man. "They can't use magic," one of them said and glanced at the crystal block in worry.

Tibs snorted. "Who told you that?" He picked up his sword and sheathed it. "You really think something like that's going to stop us? We're Runners. The dungeon tries to eat us. You have nothing on him."

They took another step back.

“Stop. He’s lying,” another one said. “If they could use magic, they’d have destroyed this place already.” He took a step forward, sword at the ready.

Tibs ran at him, taking a cut along the shoulder as he dodged and then jumped on the man, hand on his face. Pulled at the essence. Not letting him pushed him away as he weakly struggled. Tibs didn’t let go until the man fell, an unmoving gaunt version of who he had been.

“Right,” Tibs said, turning to face the others. “I’m definitely not able to do this.” He gave them his most maniacal smile. “Anyone else wants to test what I can’t do?” He took a step toward them, and as one they ran off, screaming. The one he’d partially drained the slowest.

He let them go. He didn’t have long before others came in. He faced the block and channeled earth.

All urgency left him as he raised his fist. He moved essence along his arm, hardening it. Infusing his essence with it until instead of white, it was the red-brown of earth essence. His fist moved down slowly, but speed didn’t matter. It never did. How many times had Tibs made mistakes trying to hurry?

The fist connected with the crystal block and a crack spread along the narrow length while his fist went in past two fingers. He smiled and raised it again. The block was broken into two, each half pulsating separately, out of sync. He felt nothing different in the surrounding essence, but breaking it further could only help him.

Pain erupted in his side, and he sent essence to it as he turned. His flesh hardening and preventing the guard from pulling it out. He struck the guard and his skull shattered under the impact. He looked up and the four other guards back away.

“Fuck, they’re right, he’s doing magic,” the woman in the lead said. “Look at his skin.”

Tibs didn’t wonder what they meant. His curiosity was as slow to react as the rest of him and his arm was already moving him. They looked at the body at his feet with the crushed head and didn’t move from where they stood. Tibs brought his fist down on the block, breaking that part into two also, each pulsating in its own time.

And now, he thought he felt something in the essence. A rising and lowering of its intensity. He tried to send essence into the ground to immobilize his enemies, but even at its weakest, the disruption still ripped his control away from it as soon as it left his body. His arm was rising.

“Attack! Don’t let him break it further!” she yelled.

He filled himself with earth essence, but the first one collided with him before he was done, forcing Tibs to take a single step back to maintain his balance. The man, easily three times as massive as Tibs, stared at him in surprise as Tibs grabbed him by the neck, raised him, and slammed him onto the block. The impact didn’t have the focus to break it into two again, but a spiderweb of cracks spread over it.

Tibs smiled as he flicked the body away and it hit the opposing wall with the breaking of bones. The three remaining guards hit him with their sword, and while his armor was

getting sliced to pieces under the blades, they only registered as a contact against his skin, and the sound they made was that of metal striking stone.

He reached for one, but she stepped away.

They were annoyingly fast. But it didn't mean they were a problem. He faced the block and raised his arm.

"Stop him!"

Someone jumped and grabbed onto Tibs's arm, but the weight barely registered. He brought it down at the center of the spiderweb and his fist went through to his elbow. The crystal cut the man holding his arm when he didn't let go in time.

That section shattered into pieces, each still pulsating at a different speed. Around him, the intensity of the disruption fluctuated more. He sent essence out, and wrapped the closest fighter's foot with it, immobilizing him long enough to grab him.

More came down the stairs. And over the sound of the boots on the wood, he heard Sebastian giving orders to kill him at all costs.

The man came down on the largest block with as much strength as Tibs could manage, and the torso exploded as the impact shattered it into pieces.

The disruption shattered with it. Each small piece still pulsed with green light, but they no longer had an effect Tibs noticed. Outside, he sensed Don run toward the house.

He considered taunting Sebastian, but what was the point? Tibs swept an arm and there were enough people in the room they weren't all able to get out of the way of his slow arc. Bones shattered, people were forced back against the others.

In the aftermath, and under more of Sebastian's screamed orders, people piled onto Tibs. They didn't bring him down, or keep him from moving his limbs, but the number of people holding on to him made moving difficult.

Corruption pushed into the outside wall, but the house's enchantment fought back. Don was strong, but the sorcerers who had made them were more advanced. He would need help. Which meant Tibs needed to switch to a new element.

"Sebastian!" he called in a teasing tone as the people holding on to him screamed in pain as their armor and flesh blackened and melted away. "I'm coming for you!" he smiled at one of the fighters a few steps away as they locked eyes, and the man doubled over, emptying his stomach. His essence was now that deep purple that made everything so much simpler.

With bother with exerting himself, fighting everyone here when all he had to do was... corruption rolled off him and bodies melted.

"Sebastian! Where are you?" Tibs stepped toward the stairs. He noticed his armor rotting and stopped it. He didn't need it anymore, but it had sentimental value. He'd survived many runs wearing it.

He reached the steps and chuckled. "Well, that's inconvenient." The wood had rotten away to nothingness. He looked at the door. Heard the fear and commotions coming from it. A woman looked in and her face turned sickly green before moving away. Tibs had never noticed before just how pretty that color was.

He looked at the gap to reach the door. He could switch to earth, but that would mean

going slow. Air would cause him to waste time, and he might not even go after Sebastian. The man had to pay. Light? No, Purity? Definitely not, Darkness? Nope. Fire? Well, he could always burn down the house. Water?

He looked at the still melting bodies. No, that one was the worst of the deal right now.

“See, this is always the best element to use,” he said out loud in case someone could learn something. He gathered the corruption in the room and concentrated it until it was liquid. He snorted. “And Harry said this was hard.”

He shaped it until he has stairs and tentatively put his weight on the first one. When it supported him, he stepped up to the door.

The room on the other side was empty. People were running away. Now, Tibs couldn't have that. He called the stairs to him, absorbed the essence, and placed his hand on the wall. It was time to show Don what an expert could do.

He overwhelmed the enchantment by pouring half his reserve into the wall, then guided it around the house. The walls darkened and began buckling as they weakened. The ceiling creaked and groaned, and Tibs looked up as it began falling.

“Well, this could be a problem.” He said as it fell on him.

Tibs sighed. This was what hurrying caused. He slowly pushed through the rubble until he was outside.

“Tibs!” Jackal called, and he turned, smiling at his friend. “Not time!” He yelled as Tibs began opening his mouth. “My Father's getting away.”

“Jackal. How?”

“I said no time.” The fighter grabbed his arm as he ran by and nearly fell when Tibs didn't move. He looked at him, eyes growing wide. “Abyss, you can do that already?”

“What. Do. You.”

“Let go of it, Tibs. Now.” Jackal looked beyond and Tibs heard running in their direction. He didn't want to let go, letting go mean he'd rush and make mistakes again, but the pleading in Jackal's eyes made him nod.

He was sore, as Don caught up to them.

“See, that's what someone with power can do,” the sorcerer said proudly.

“Never doubted you,” Jackal replied. “We need to go. My father got out of the house before it fell in. He'd headed for the platform.” This time, when he pulled on Tibs, he followed.

“He doesn't have an Attendant,” Don said. “What does he think he'd going to do?”

“I don't know, but knowing my father, he has a plan.” Jackal glanced at Tibs. “Don, I think you need to go back to the inn.”

“And let you claim you did everything? Not a chance.”

“We won't claim it,” Jackal snapped as they came around the house's rubble. A mass of Sebastian's people were heading in the platform's direction.

“Right, like you haven't spent your entire time since our first encounter planning out to undermine me,” the sorcerer replied.

“I'm taking the roofs,” Tibs said and didn't wait for an answer. He ran to the closest

house and climbed. There were no direct roads to the platform from this location. Even with the alleys, it was a series of turns. While using the roofs, Tibs could go in a straight line.

So long as he could keep himself from getting distracted.

He ran the length of the roof and jumped. He laughed as he let himself fall further than he'd planned before sending air before him and forming a platform to land on and jump. He looked behind him, pouting. He'd expected it to be more fun. He ran the length of the roof and threw himself in the air.

This time, he wrapped air around him like he'd seen Carina do and tried to get him to carry him further up.

"Oops." He shucked and tucked into a ball before crashing onto the roof. He got to his feet and ran down the incline, then threw himself into the air. He really should pay attention to what he was doing. He made a disk, jumped off it, and landed on the other roof.

That was the way to do it.

But, if he fell because he was too heavy, and when he filled himself with earth he was so heavy he couldn't be moved, what would... He threw himself in the air and pushed that essence throughout his body.

He watched in amazement as his hand became translucent. He could see the roof he was about to crash into through it.

"Oops." He giggled and had a gust of wind push him up. He was surprised his armor was still on him and laughed. Now, wouldn't that be fun, flying around stark naked? He could just imagine what Jackal would say. He grabbed at the strap keeping the arm armor on. No better time than now to do it.

Motion in the corner of his eyes made him stop. Fighting. They were really far.

Tibs looked down.

No, he was really up. The wind was still pushing him up.

Laughing, he had it stop, and he continued in the same direction.

How fast could he go on the way down? He let go of the air essence.

"Shit, shit, shit!" Tibs was falling from higher than he'd ever been. Options, what were his options? He cursed. Only one, really. Hopefully, he would be focused enough to keep from crashing.

Tibs laughed as the houses approach. This was a lot more fun than he'd expected. A yell made him look up. A group had pushed through the attack and Tibs made out Sebastian. For a second, he considered letting him go and enjoying his fall, but the man was responsible for a lot of people in his town dying and being unhappy. He couldn't let him get away with that.

And really, how much fun would it be to make the man pay for all the unhappiness he'd caused?

Translucent again, Tibs altered his fall to match Sebastian's run. He only had a dozen with him now. The others remaining behind to prevent pursuers. Tibs laughed. No one ever looked up.

An arrow hit his armor and sent Tibs careening aside. He bounced off a roof, then another one before landing between two houses.

He pulled on the arrow, but his translucent fingers slid along in instead of grabbing onto it.

Well, that was no fun. If he let go of the essence to pull it out, he'd be ripping it out of his flesh too. He should have remained in the sky. Coming low had been a bad idea. He jumped to the roof, and the platform was only a few blocks away. He couldn't see Sebastian from this angle, but he had to be ahead of the man.

Tibs was going to have some fun. He jumped the roofs, aiming for ever higher without help from the wind. He missed one and hit the wall on the opposite house, groaning as he slid down. The sound was a formality as filled with air as he was. He'd barely felt the impact.

How high of a fall could he survive this way?

Back on the roof, he saw the platform and Sebastian running toward it. How had the man gotten ahead of him? Tibs pouted. That was so unfair. He only had legs to run with and Tibs had had the sky. He jumped to the other roof, then down.

He knew how to make Sebastian pay for cheating like that. He let go of air and channeled—

Tibs screamed in pain and grabbed onto his shoulder, hand around the shaft of the arrow, and barely kept from falling.

Sebastian turned to look at him. The man next to him had golden eyes.

"This isn't over," Sebastian snarled before the essence around him and the man with golden eyes shifted.

"No!" Tibs yelled, channeling fire to keep Sebastian from escaping.