

Chapter 110

Tibs held Carina.

He'd been holding her for a while now.

The sun disappeared behind Sto to Sebastian still screaming for Tibs to stop, for Tibs to end it. For Tibs to kill him.

His screams drew thugs, and the bodies of those who tried to rescue their master littered the grounds. He didn't know how he killed them. He had no memory of doing so; they had been unimportant, mere annoyance trying to interrupt his important work.

Making Sebastian scream.

When Sebastian finally stopped being able to scream, he was spread over the grounds nearly as wide as the bodies of those who tried to save him.

Him, Tibs remembered how he hurt. He remembered icing one of the man's fingers, then snapping it off as Sebastian watched in horror, then started screaming as the part still attached thawed and the pain registered. Another finger he pooled fire in until it smoked, then blacked, and finally flames danced over it.

He melted a foot with corruption, used darkness on a hand until it was so weak the essence dissipated from it. He made him cough out sand, then water. He filled the man with so much light he was babbling all the things he never wanted others to know.

And Tibs used Purity.

Anytime he wasn't using another element on Sebastian, he filled him with Purity. It did nothing for the pieces he'd removed, but it kept the man alive for far longer than he what Tibs did to him should allow.

But in the end, it wasn't long enough for Tibs. Eventually, he removed one piece too many, and after flinging it away, no amount of Purity could keep the essence within Sebastian from dissipating entirely.

Tibs screamed then.

He screamed at being denied the entirety of his revenge. At Sebastian being let off far too easily. With all the power he had, he should have been able to prolong the justice he administered for days and weeks, not mere hours.

He filled himself with fire and let his rage burn.

It burned the wagons and their contents. It burned people running toward and away from him. But it didn't burn away the evidence of his work, or Carina.

He wanted his work to remain as a warning to any who would think to hurt those he cared for. He wanted them to know what Tibs was capable of and stay away. He never wanted to do this again. He never wanted to lose anyone again. He never wanted to have to rely on Water to keep the pain he allowed through him as he took Carina in harms.

He wailed as he cradled her.

He wailed until he couldn't wail anymore and simply cried.

He cried until he ran out of tears and simply held her.

He held her until he was back to himself to know this wasn't her in his arms. Carina

was gone. She'd never get to chastise him for not taking his letters seriously. Laugh with him as Jackal looked baffled as something he said sent his man storming off.

The body wasn't her, but it was all Tibs had left of her, and he couldn't let go. If she wasn't there, Tibs wasn't sure he wanted to be there either. If he wasn't there anymore, he wouldn't feel this empty pain that had settled deep in his reserve.

When the soft voice registered, he knew it had been there for sometime. Tibs didn't care. If they were here to kill him, that was fine by him. It would take the pain away. He wouldn't have to think about how he failed his family. How he hadn't protected Carina.

"Tibs?" this time his name was called with insistence and pushed through his pain enough he recognized the voice.

He looked up at Jackal. "She's gone." The statement was hollow, the pain stealing any strength from it.

"I know." Jackal tried to smile and failed. "Looks like you made my father and his people pay for it."

"Not enough," Tibs said, an amber of hate pushing through the pain to give his voice heat.

"You're lucky there's still enough fighting in the town to keep everyone busy. If anyone else saw this..." Jackal looked around. "I'm going to cover it up and—"

"No," Tibs growled, the amber igniting into fire. "They have to see it. They have to know what I'll do to them if they ever lay a finger on your or anyone in my family."

"Tibs, if the guild sees this, you won't be able to protect anyone."

"I'll destroy them," he said, the fire building.

Jackal's smile was gentle. "I know you're good, Tibs. But you can't take on all the adventurers out there, and I need you here with me to keep Kro safe. So let me hide this. I'll help you keep our family safe, but I can't do that if the guild takes you."

Tibs swallowed, fought the fire down. He protested. It was hungry and part of him wanted to feed it. But Jackal sounded like he was being smart, and Tibs knew he was acting in a Jackal way right now. In the old Jackal's way.

He nodded and pushed the fire down even deeper.

"How did you know I was here?"

"Word reached me you'd been seen heading this way. I would have been here sooner, but my father's people were in the town in mass. I wish I'd seen what you did to him for him to end up all over the place like that."

"I made him scream."

"Good."

Essence flowed from Jackal's feet and through the ground. Like the fighter, it wasn't precise, it went all over the place, and Tibs could tell much of it was wasted, but when it was under a body, or parts of one, it pooled there and the ground softened until what was over it sank in and vanished.

"I'm sorry I didn't keep her safe, Tibs," Jackal said. "I never thought he... I expected him to come after me."

"This isn't your fault." His voice was hollow again, without the fire. "I was the one

who should have kept her safe. I pulled our family together. But I let myself get distracted. Sebastian knew what to do, so I'd forget what was important. He made me go where he wanted. Fight who he wanted, so that I wouldn't realize who he was really after."

The hand squeezed his shoulder. "You avenged her, Tibs. That has to be enough."

"It didn't bring her back."

"But it brought her peace. She went to Air knowing the person who did this to her paid for it."

"No enough," Tibs whispered. "He stopped screaming too soon."

Jackal chuckled. "Considering how little my father suffered until now, I'm sure it felt like the unending abyss to him. There, now no one can tell what happened here."

"You missed some." Tibs smiled. It was such a Jackal thing to do, to be so confident of the work he'd done while leaving obvious clues.

"They need to be able to make a story," the fighter said. "I only left parts that don't show other elements. Anyone who looks at this will know that someone with Water killed these people, and did so in a vicious way. But that's all they'll be able to see."

"I burned a lot of wagons." And people.

"My father used Everburn," Jackal said after a few seconds. "The stuff doesn't leave anything behind once it's done burning, so let them think a batch of it caught and spread to the rest."

Tibs nodded.

"The guild will only be able to say that my father took Carina, that you came here to rescue her, and avenged her death. There's enough stories sung about adventurers doing more than they should be able to because of anger and grief. They won't question the pieces you left, but they'll be able to tell it's all that's left of my father. As for the parts that aren't there?" He sighed. "Who cares? Maybe some of his people took them when they fled. Maybe the dogs ran off with them. Not everything odd has to be answered."

"They'll ask me. They'll know I did this. They'll ask me how I did it. Harry will know when I lie." He clutched Carina to him, fear overtaking the pain. They were going to find out what he could do, and they were going to take him away from his family.

Jackal crouched before him. "How did you do it Tibs?"

Tibs searched his friend's face, trying to understand why he'd want to know that. There was no deception there, no more darkness than usual, and little of it at that. Jackal had shed most of his secrets when he'd promised Kroseph to be better.

"I—" the words stuck. "I—" he tried again, but they wouldn't come. He could see himself hurt Sebastian. Those memories were clear, but how he'd manipulated the essence he'd used to do it? That was a fog of anger and pain and essence. He had pulled so much as he worked, he had no idea what he'd done with it.

"Rage tends to blur the mind," Jackal said. "So if Harry asks, you can honestly tell him you don't know, that you don't remember. But he won't ask. My uncle's an asshole, but he isn't that kind of asshole."

Tibs nodded.

"How about we take her back, Tibs? She deserves better than to be here, among my

father's ruins.”

“She deserves to be alive.”

“Yes. She does, Tibs. If there was any fairness in the world, he'd be me here d—”

“Don't say that!” the amber turned into an inferno. “You dead is not better! I don't want anyone to die!”

Jackal nodded and at the lack of protest to fuel it, the inferno died quickly.

When the fighter reached to take Carina, Tibs pulled away, so he helped him up instead.

She grew heavy in his arms as they walked out of the camp and through the town, but he endured the pain and only used Earth to strengthen his arms when he thought he might drop her. It was his fault she was dead. He should suffer too.

Tibs heard sounds of fighting, but as he listened and walked, they died out.

Someone walked to them. Tibs saw them, but didn't as well. They were a form, nothing else.

“Who did this?” a woman demanded, anger in her voice.

“They're dead,” Jackal replied. “As is my father. Whoever else might have been in the camp fled. It's over. Spread the word, tell those thugs still fighting. If they surrender, let them. Give them to Knuckles to deal with. Let the townsfolk know it's safe to come out.”

“The door's going to be closed,” she said. “I heard Tibs got it to—”

“The dungeon'll know it's safe now,” Jackal said. “They can sense stuff like that, so it'll open the door soon so we can go do our runs again.”

Tibs sensed the people massing around them as they walked. He recognized Mex and Khumdar by their essence as they stepped in next to him.

More people waited for them outside the inn, with Kroseph at the forefront.

“I am so sorry, Tibs,” he whispered, hugging him around her body. “I hope you made him pay,” he added hatefully.

Tibs nodded, then let himself be guided inside. Instead of heading to their table, Kroseph led Tibs up the stairs and to a room where a tired-looking Clara waited.

“Can you save her?” Tibs blurted out, suddenly hopeful. She was a cleric, and she had more training than he did. Who knew what they could do?

“I'm sorry,” she said sadly. “That is beyond Purity's purview. What I can do is ensure her body is preserved until it can be returned to her element in the way she wanted.”

“Her family should be told,” Khumdar whispered.

“I'll get right on it,” Jackal replied sarcastically. “As soon as we have a way to send messages out.”

“I mean only that while here element is Air,” the cleric replied tiredly, “her family is from Purity. They may wish to handle her return according to their ways.”

Jackal sighed. “I know. I'm just...”

“We're all angry,” Mez said, lips tight. “If your father wasn't dead already, I'd have an arrow burning through him right now.”

“His head's still there,” Jackal replied. “Feel free to get in some target practice, but

stick to normal arrows. If there's even a suspicion he escaped, no one here will be able to rest quietly."

Clara guided Tibs to the bed, where he reluctantly laid Carina's body. She did something with Purity, but he didn't pay attention. His focus was on Carina. He pulled a stool to the bed and sat.

Clara finished her work, then left. The conversations died down, people moved around him. Some lay a hand on her. Tibs didn't move.

"Tibs?" Jackals asked. "You should come down."

"I'm not leaving her."

"Tibs, she—"

"Let him be," Kroseph whispered. "He has to deal with this in his own way."

More came and went. Eventually, no more came, and those still there left, one by one, Jackal being the last.

"I'm sorry," he told her. He'd said so often enough he thought there were no numbers for it. He felt as hollow as his voice sounded. Being sorry didn't undo what he'd let happen. He wanted to make it up to her for failing her in such her way, but she didn't wake up to tell him how he could do that.

He so wanted her to wake up and be angry at him. To scream at him, to promise she'd make his learning his letters more horrible than it had been at this point.

"I'm sorry," he told her yet again, and discovered that he had tears left to shed.

* * * * *

The food on the plate had been steaming when it was put before him. Now it would be cold. He hadn't touched it.

He wasn't hungry, or thirsty, or anything anymore. This wasn't the way Purity took those away. Anything he felt was sucked into the abyss inside him. Even that amber was gone, dead from nothing to feed on. Everything fell into that abyss, attempting to fill it, Tibs thought, and failing.

He wasn't at his team's table by choice. He wanted to stay at Carina's side, but Tandy had wanted time alone with her friend to say goodbye. He hadn't been able to refuse her. Carina had been important to a lot of the people in the town, and they too would want time with her.

He wavered between feeling better that so many people had cared about her too, to feeling bad that in failing to keep her safe, he'd cause them to suffer as well.

Something poked his leg. It poked it again, then whined. Tibs looked down at the dog seated next to him. It licked its muzzle.

Tibs put the place down before it.

"I swear," Serba said, "absolutely nothing I do teaches her to stay away from you." She dropped into a chair. "How are you doing?"

He kept watching the dog.

"Look, I'm sorry for what it cost you, but I'm happy you killed the bastard."

"What do you want?" he asked, not looking up from the dog. She hadn't cared about Carina or him. She didn't care about people. Her dogs cared more about him and Carina than

she did.

“Your presence is being requested by Guild Leader Tirania,” she said. “Should have been the vaunted Voice of the Guild here telling you that, but he’s nowhere to be found, so Harry decided I was the next best thing for a reason.”

Tibs petted the dog’s head, and she licked his hand. The gesture was more comforting than anything Serba said.

“Did you hear me, Tibs?”

“Yes.” He scratched her behind the ears and her tongue lolled out.

“Well?”

“Well, what?” The dog canted her head, and Tibs saw the sorrow in them. She understood his pain. Or she knew firsthand how much of a pain Serba was.

“She isn’t going to like that you’re making her wait.”

“I don’t care.” Why should he care for anything Tirania wanted? Where was she when Sebastian attacked the town? When he killed Carina?

“Tibs, she isn’t someone you tell no to. And this is about rewarding you. You get to be a hero again. You aren’t going to refuse to have the guild leader sing your praises, are you?”

He looked up to see her grin, and that amber Tibs thought was dead came to life.

Praises? Someone wanted to sing his praises when he’d failed so miserably? And that person was the one who had forced him to take charge of this fight? Have put him in a position to fail Carina?

He poured Water on the amber. Serba was only a messenger. He kept on pouring water when the amber fought him, reminded him there was someone else that should pay for Carina’s death. He agreed with it. But this wasn’t something he could take on under its heat.

He iced the Water inside him until the heat was gone, poured it into that abyss that didn’t seem to want to fill. He couldn’t fill it with ice, but he could block it. Make it so it couldn’t demand more and more out of him. He iced every part of him that even hinted of wanting him to feel pain, to feel anything.

“Tibs,” Serba said in the stretching silence of him ensuring nothing of what was about to come could hurt him. “You really don’t want Harry to be the one to drag you there.”

Tibs didn’t care. Tibs found he cared very little for what anyone wanted. The only thing that mattered was his plan, as vague as it was. And it only mattered because it gave him something to work toward to avenge those who had wronged it. And because he didn’t care, he saw that his plan started with him playing the part of the subservient.

He stood, taking Serba by surprise, and she hurried to catch up to him, whistling for her dog. Outside, instead of heading for the guild building, she led him to the transportation platform. Not even one block out, Jackal joined them, silently glaring at his sister.

Tibs didn’t care.

“Here he is!” Tirania’s voice resounded over the crowd assembled there. “Your champion!”

The crowd parted to let them through. On the platform, Tirania stood in what would be resplendissant clothing, if Tibs cared. On her left stood Harry, straight, ready to obey whatever order he was given, no matter how wrong they were. If Tibs cared, he’d be

screaming at the man for standing by the dungeon door while his help would have ended the fighting in hours. On her right, Alistair look at Tibs, his expression neutral, but there was anger behind that cool expression. Tibs knew his teacher well enough to see that, not that he cared. If he cared, he'd have words for the man about sacrificing his beliefs for the easy path of going along with what the guild did. How hard had he tried to change things from the inside, if, by his own admission, they hadn't?

The crowd exploded in cheers as Tibs reached the steps leading up to the platform, as if someone has instructed them on when to let their enthusiasm loose.

If he cared, he knew he'd explode on them, possibly literally. It would be wrong, but if he cared, the amber of his rage wouldn't care. They're lost nearly everything because of the people on the platform and yet, here they were, cheering to her command. They were victims, just like Carina. But if Tibs cared right now, that would be one thing he wouldn't be able to care about.

He joined her, adding more ice to the amber fighting it, as she placed a hand on his shoulder. His rage couldn't get what it wanted by being unleashed.

The smile he gave the crowd was as cold and uncaring as he felt, but they cheered anyway. They cheered him and the woman who had let Sebastian nearly destroy their town. The woman who simply by stepping outside her cursed building could have stopped all of this from happening. She could have done so just by ordering Harry to stop it.

But she hadn't. She'd remained inside her precious building.

Tibs's smile stopped being cold as an idea of a plan formed. It didn't turn into a pleasant smile, but the crowd didn't notice that either. She didn't notice it either, because all she had eyes for was the adoration the crowd sent their way. She was making herself a hero to the town by associating with him.

Let her.

Tibs didn't care.

Let her think herself the hero.

Let her think herself safe within her guild.

Let her do that until the moment Tibs brought it all crashing down around her.

This end Stepping Up.

Tibs's story will continue in Breaking Step