

## Chapter 66

“I’m sorry,” Tibs told her. He wasn’t surprised at her reaction. He’d failed utterly at keeping the town and its people safe and comfortable.

“For what?” she asked.

“For letting this happen. For letting people be hurt. I should have made Sebastian understand he shouldn’t be doing this. That there are better ways to get the comfort he’s after.”

“Jackal,” Carina called, without looking away from Tibs. “You need to come here and look at his eyes.”

“I saw them,” the fighter said, looking in their direction as he walked to a burned man, crawling away. He paused. “Okay, so he can make them blue too,” he said, surprised. Then resumed walking.

Tibs raised a wall of water between the fighter and the other man, who was looking to escape the pain he was in.

“Tibs?” Jackal asked.

“I won’t let you hurt him any more.”

“Think of it as me making sure he doesn’t suffer anymore,” the fighter said.

“No. Killing him is not the solution.”

Jackal looked at Tibs. “He was part of those who hurt these women, killed those two men.” He indicated two bodies who had escaped being burned by already being stretched on the ground. “You’re the one who burned him, Tibs. I’d think you want me to finish the job.”

He had caused the pain. It was an act he would have to live with, atone for. “Because I made a mistake doesn’t mean I can let you make one, too. Violence isn’t the way to solve anything.”

“Tibs,” Carina said. “You need to let the essence go.”

Go? “What do you mean? I can’t let go, it’s me.”

Carina looked around, pausing on the burned buildings and corpses. “No, Tibs. The essence isn’t you. And I think...” she looked at him. “I know they’re affecting how you think.”

“No. That’s wrong. I thinking clearly, finally.” He frowned. If he was thinking clearly now. What did it mean for before? Hadn’t he felt like his thinking was clear too when he wanted to consume everything and everyone? Or when he’d wanted to lie there and pounder all the possible solutions instead of going and helping take the pain away?

No, it had just been an illusion of clarity then. Imposed by the essence he manipulated. But this was him. Water was his first element, after all.

But the concern in Carina’s eyes worried him. He should do what he had to, so it would go away. To calm her, make her feel better.

“Once Jackal promises not to hurt that man.” But he couldn’t do that at the expense of someone else’s death.

“Tibs,” Jackal whined.

“Jackal,” Carina said. “Come over here.”

“But he’s trying to get away.”

She looked at the wall of water. She couldn’t sense the man on the other side. The pain he had to be in. Tibs didn’t sense that. Only how he was slowly moving away. Once Carina was appeased, Tibs would go see to that man; soothe him. Beg forgiveness for causing the pain.

“He’s probably just trying to get away from you. Come here and he’ll stop trying to escape. And Tibs wants to be sure you aren’t going to rush to hurt him once the wall falls. We’ll talk about how to deal with him afterward. She smiled at Tibs. “That’s okay, right?”

Tibs smiled back. He knew she’d understand. Carina didn’t enjoy causing pain, either. She was simply limited in how she could resolve conflicts.

Jackal dragged his feet, leaving furrows in the hard dirt. “I’m not happy about this,” he said once he was never to them.

“I’m sorry,” Tibs replied. “I’ll find a way to fix that, too.”

“He’s here,” Carina said, as Jackal opened his mouth. “So that man isn’t in danger. Now, I need you to let go of the essence.”

Tibs didn’t know how he’d do that. But he had to try; to help Carina feel better. He loosened his mental fingers, as released his breath, knowing it wouldn’t change anything, but

—  
Tibs sucked in air and looked around in confusion. “What—”

Why had he done all this?

“His eyes are normal again,” Carina said with a satisfied smile.

Normal? Why wouldn’t they be? He looked from her to Jackal. The fighter looked concerned.

Tibs thought back on what he’d done. How had he unleashed so much fire? He’d been angry and—no, not angry. He’d been enraged. Still... he checked his reserves. He had no more essence in his reserves for fire, earth, or water than he had before, although they were somehow still full, while the vast reserve of his element was noticeably lower.

His gaze fell on the man who was crawling away through the mud. One of the men who had hurt these women; killed two of the townsfolk. With a snarl, he moved to stand, but Carina caught his arm.

“Don’t,” she instructed.

“He isn’t getting away with taking part in this,” Tibs snarled.

“Does that mean I can go finish him?” Jackal asked hopefully.

Tibs almost said no. That he needed to be the one to end him. But his recent shift in how he thought stopped him. Was this him, wanting this, or...

What had happened?

He nodded to the fighter.

“Make it quick,” Carina said. “We need to take these women and child to the inn to be seen to, and then deal with something...important.”

“Sebastian has to pay for this,” Tibs said. That was what he wanted. Tibs was sure of it. Sebastian was behind this like he’d been behind so many things going wrong in his town. And

he'd wanted to make him pay for those, too.

"We will," she said, "but after we figure out what happened."

"They were—"

"That's not what I mean."

The burned man's pain pleading came to an abrupt stop.

"You don't have your bracers, Tibs. So how did you have all that fire? Or the essence to stop it? Could you do that wall of water even with your bracers? You said nothing had chanced after your audience with Purity."

"It hasn't," he protested. "I don't have anymore essence in the element's reserves." I studied the reserve for his element. It shouldn't be this low since all he'd used it for was for the cut at his back. The only way he could think of it being this low was if...

"I think I used my essence to do this."

"Well, yeah," Jackal replied. "It's kind of obvious you did this because your eyes were fire red, and there's no one else with fire around."

"That's not what he means," Carina said pensively. "But that isn't possible, right?"

Tibs stared at her. "You're the one who reads a lot, so you should know." He noticed motion at the edge of his vision. The woman and boy. He hated himself for having forgotten about them, even after Carina mentioned them.

He stood.

"I think this is one time where what you do not being in any book is true," she said. Tibs headed for them, and she followed him. "You're going to have to try something when you aren't distracted by a fight and feel what happens."

"Can we make it something safe?" Jackal asked, crouching next to the woman cradling the boy. "Are you okay with me picking both of you up?" he asked her gently.

"There are no safe elements," Carina replied, helping the other woman up. Tibs used his element to wrap both women's forming bruises and the boy's injuries. He Getting angry again at how he'd been violated. He found the man who'd hurt the boy, dead. The only injury was his groin, burned to ash.

Tibs hoped the man has suffered.

The woman didn't reply to Jackal, didn't seem to even notice there were there. So the fighter picked her up carefully.

"Tibs didn't seem quite as inclined to burn everything down when his eyes were blue or earth brown," Jackal said quietly.

"My eyes were blue?" Tibs asked jubilantly, then frowned. "But they aren't anymore?"

He scouted ahead as Carina spoke.

"They seem to change with the essence you used."

They were one street away from the attack when he realized he hadn't given a second thought to moving away from the rooming house, and his bracers, and he was happy about it.

He kept them away from anyone. With three injured people, they weren't in a position to risk another fight, and he didn't want to risk using any of his essences until he understood what had happened.

At the inn, they handed the women and boy to the clerics. Then Jackal went around telling the Runners there what they had caught Sebastian's people doing to them while Carina spoke with Kroseph and his father.

Tibs was glad to see the server out of his room.

Nearly all the Runners were out of the inn by the time Carina rejoined Tibs. By their expression, Sebastian would be down a good number of people by the time the day was over.

"Kroseph is letting us use his room," she said, then they headed up the stairs. Jackal kissing the server on the cheek in passing.

Inside, the fighter leaned against the door, and Carina had Tibs sit on the bed while she took a chair.

"I've thought about it, and because it's the element you're known for having, and Jackal was right that—"

"Don't sound so surprised," Jackal said. "I have been right before."

She rolled her eyes. "You seemed calm when you were using water, so I think that's the best one to test it with." She looked at him expectantly and he nodded, not wanting to do anything without being prompted. When she became a teacher, she wasn't always appreciative of him getting ahead of her, and in this case, he didn't want to try anything without her being ready.

She took his hand and turned it palm up. "Make a little water, just enough to hold."

Water formed and Tibs closed his eyes as he remembered the abrupt way the man's pleading had ended. How could he have agreed to that? He raised his gaze to Jackal. "Why?" he demanded, plaintively.

"Carina?" the fighter asked, sounding worried.

"Tibs, look at me."

He wanted to ignore her, to get Jackal to explain his actions, his wanton causing of pain and death, but the concern in her tone pulled at him.

"What did I let Jackal kill that man?" he asked her. "How did that solve anything?"

"What are your reserves like, Tibs?"

What was the point of the question? What was the point of this, if even he was willing to let death and pain happen? Didn't he know better? His role was to soothe, to take the pain away, not—

"Tibs, I need you to focus," Carina said. "What are your reserves like?"

He focused on soothing her since he couldn't do anything about what had already happened. That meant answering her question.

"They haven't changed. There's still barely any in any—" How was that possible?

"Tibs?" she asked, and the worry made him answer.

"It's all water."

His vast reserve was no longer white. It was blue. So much blue. With all this, he could soothe the entire town, even all of MountainSea.

"Tibs?" she called again. "I need you to let go of it."

"No." How could she ask that of him. He hadn't even tried to take the pain away. To work out how he could comfort everyone in Kragle Rock.

“Tibs, we need to know what will happen.”

“People will continue to suffer.” He was going to be willing to let them suffer, to cause the suffering. “I can’t let that happen.”

“You aren’t your element, Tibs,” she said in a soothing tone. “Do you remember when you explained that to Jackal and me?”

“I didn’t do that,” he replied.

She smiled. “Not in those words, but it’s what you meant. Once I understood that I advanced faster. Now, you need to remember that, so that you’ll get back to yourself.”

“I am myself.” He searched her face, trying to understand what she meant. He was who he should be.

“Right now, you’re different.”

“Water,” Jackal said.

Tibs nodded. “I’m water.” Why were they confused by that?

“You aren’t water,” she said. “You’re Tibs. Water is only an element, and you use its essence. You told me you saw her as a woman, that she’s caring. She understood you and your pain. She accepted it, even as she encouraged you to let her soothe it away.”

“Isn’t wanting that better than wanting to inflict pain?”

“You don’t want to inflict pain, Tibs,” she replied with a smile. “Of every Runner here. Of anyone linked to the guild, you’re probably the only I know of who’d rather we have quiet days of doing our runs and nothing more.”

“But I have inflicted pain,” he said, unable to mask his shame.

“You did. It isn’t because you’re willing to inflict pain that you want to do it. You don’t live in the world of the elements, Tibs. Here, we all have to make decisions we don’t like. Make the best of not always great situations. You have to be yourself to do that.”

“Do it for Mama,” Jackal said.

He closed his eyes as he remembered her laugh, her encouragement, her cold body. He could let go of her now, of the pain, the loss. He could wash it all out.

He could even forget her entirely; if he chose to.

He gasped, and Carina caught him.

How? How could he even contemplate forgetting Mama? He needed to find those men and make them pay for what they did to her.

“You okay?” Jackal asked.

Tibs nodded. “Thanks for bringing me back.”

The fighter smiled. “Poking your sore spot is the least I could do after you lied to get my man angry at me.”

“Your reserve?”

Tibs sensed inward and was rewarded with a vastness of white, with only some of it missing.

“It’s back to normal.”

“Can you use any essences without causing your eyes to change color?”

“I don’t know.” He looked at the room. “I didn’t mean to do with when I used fire.”

And I don't think this is the right place to try it. I don't want Kroseph angry at me again." He looked at Carina and smiled viciously. "But if you want to watch to see if it happens, you can come when I go burn Sebastian's house with him in it."

"I'm up for that," Jackal said, over Carina's protest, rubbing his hands together. "One question, though. You going to do that before or after you figure out how to not burn the entire down? You know, so I can let Kro and his family know to leave first?"

Tibs sighed. He could always count on Jackal for an inadvertent dousing of his burning anger.