

Stepping up-84

Tibs held Carina.

He held her for a while now. The sun had gone down while he made Sebastian pay. Some of his people had tried to stop Tibs, and what was left of their bodies littered the area. He didn't remember what he'd done to him, nor did he care. They'd tried to stop him from taking his revenge, so he'd removed them.

There had been only him and Carina for a while now. Long enough, all the warmth had left her body. Long enough, he knew this wasn't her anymore. But he couldn't let her go. He needed to hold on to her. To keep something of hers by him. He had nothing of Mama but faded memories. He didn't want the same to happen to Carina, so he held on to her.

He was aware of someone by the soft curse they said.

He didn't move. If they were here to kill him, he was finally fine with it. Better than having to live with the hole in his life with Carina had been.

"Tibs?" the question was soft, but insistent, not the first time his name had been called to him. He wanted to ignore them, to ignore him, but he recognized the voice. One of the few people he had left.

He looked up at Jackal. "She's gone."

"I know." The man tried for a smile, but it fell. "Looks like you made my father and his people pay for it."

Tibs looked around and in the soft morning light, the carnage he wrought was visible. Bodies still smoldered or burned. He remembered someone with a pouch of everburn, and Tibs had made use of it. A little could go a very long way, even when forced down someone's throat. Others were partially melted, the near down of corruption pooling around them. There was a pile of dust that had been someone. Tibs had pulled all the water essence out of them, and they had crumbled away.

There were more. There had been more people left than Tibs had expected, and Sebastian's screams had drawn them. He looked and felt nothing. None of the joy he'd felt at the pain he inflicted was left. None of the satisfaction at the knowledge they had gotten what they deserved for aligning themselves with a man like Sebastian.

Sebastian.

He remembered thinking of him as a masterpiece. Now, as he looked at the pieces of the man encased in ice, still in the man's shape he had been, but with each piece detached, he felt nothing. Tibs remembered managing to keep him alive as he cut him apart—Finger by finger, joint by joint—but he couldn't recall how he did it. Purity, most likely.

"It's a good thing I came alone," Jackal said. "We can't have anyone see this."

"Why?"

Jackal forced a grin. "Come on Tibs. We all know you're good, but there's no explaining this without revealing your secret."

"Why did you come alone?" he didn't care if everyone knew what he'd done. Maybe it would keep anyone from ever hurting one of his friends if they knew this was what

awaited them. If he was going to live, he didn't want anyone else to ever die.

"Someone saw you head into my father's camp, and when Carina didn't come back once the sun set, I had a good idea what my father had done. I'm sorry I didn't keep her safe, Tibs. I thought... I expected him to come after me."

"It's not your fault. I should have kept her safe. Instead, I let myself get distracted, just like Sebastian planned. He knew exactly how to get me to do what he wanted."

Jackal squeezed his shoulder. "You avenged her, Tibs. You have to let that be enough."

"It didn't bring her back."

"But it brought her peace. She can go to air knowing the person who did this to her paid for it." Jackal looked at his father and chuckled. "Paid dearly, I'm guessing."

What did it matter? The satisfaction hadn't lasted. And now Sebastian wasn't suffering anymore. He should have found a way to keep him alive longer, eternally, in constant pain. Sebastian shouldn't have stopped feeling pain while Tibs still did.

It wasn't fair.

"I'm going to bury all of this." Jackal stood. "Maybe leave enough pieces to come up with a story, but anything not water has got to be gone before anyone else gets here."

Tibs felt the earth essence before the ground shook. He could tell where it opened up to swallow bodies. Feel the essence he'd used on those go down with them. The fire did, smothered once it was buried. Cross had been right. Without air, everburn stopped burning.

He didn't react.

He didn't care.

All he wanted was for Carina to be alive again. He wanted his friend back.

"There, now we can tell them you lost it when you saw what my father did to Carina, and it's believable, while not impossible."

Tibs forced himself to look around. To see what Jackal had done. A few bodies were still on the ground, one with ice exploding out from her chest. Tibs had turned the water in her heart to ice with a thought, and it had caused that.

The man who had held the rope was there, next to the contraption. The ice melted, leaving him wet and dead. Other bodies either had marks they had died by water or by blade. Had he killed anyone with his sword? He remembered using darkness to cut someone. If he remembered how; he should tell Khumdar.

Sebastian's head was still there, the ice starting to melt, with the circlet around his head. It was magic, and it had made it difficult to encase him in ice, but Tibs had had more essence than it, so it had failed. He felt more of the man's enchanted clothing and items under the ground.

"There, you got angry and lost it on my father. Some of his people tried to protect him and you killed them, too. The rest fled, taking his body with them as..." Jackal shrugged. "Who cares. It's not like I was here to ask them why, or you were in a state to question them, are you Tibs?"

"She's dead." He clutched her body tighter.

"I know." Jackal crouched next to him. "Let's take her back, Tibs. She deserves better than being here, among my father's stuff."

“She deserves to be alive.”

“Yes, she does. If the world was fair, I’d be the one dead here, not—”

“Don’t say that!” how would losing a different friend be fair? “I don’t want anyone to die!”

Jackal nodded. When he offered to take Carina, Tibs pulled away. No one would take her from him. He let Jackal help him up, then they headed back to town. She grew heavy in his arms, but he continued to hold her despite the growing pain. It was his fault she died. He should suffer for it.

Cries sounded as the Runners watching over Sebastian’s camp saw them, and immediately died. By the time they reached the first building, more Runners were assembled. Tibs didn’t care who they were, only that they didn’t get in his way.

“Who did this?” someone demanded.

“They’re dead,” Jackal replied. “As is my father. The rest ran off. It’s over. Someone go tell Knuckles it’s safe to let the townsfolk out of the dungeon. Tell him. Tell him Carina’s dead.”

The procession grew around them, and the rest of his team joined in before they were at the inn. There, Kroseph waited for them.

“I am so sorry, Tibs,” He whispered, hugging him around her body. “I hope you made him suffer.” Then he guided Tibs inside the inn, and to a room, where the cleric waited for them.

“Can you save her?” Tibs asked, suddenly hopeful. She had more training. She knew how to use purity for more than generalized healing.

She shook her head. “I can make sure she is preserved until her body can be returned to her element in the way she wanted.”

“Her family should be told,” Khumdar whispered.

“I’ll get on that,” Jackal replied sarcastically, “As soon as we have a way to send a message out.”

“I simply mean that while her element is air, her family is from purity. They may wish to handle it the way it would be for them.”

Jackal sighed. “I know. I’m just…”

“We’re all angry,” Mez said. “If your father wasn’t dead already, I’d have an arrow for him.”

“His head’s still there. Feel free to get some target practice in,” the fighter replied.

She guided Tibs to the bed, where he laid Carina’s body. She did something with Purity, but he didn’t pay attention. His attention was on Carina. When she moved away, he pulled the stool next to the bed and sat on it.

“Tibs, you should come down,” Jackal urged him.

“I’m not leaving her alone.”

“Tibs, she—”

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

One by one, Jackal the last, they left him alone with her.

He wanted to tell her how sorry he was, but he’d already done so. He’d beg, pleaded,

explained. He'd made promises and curses. Now, all he had left was to make sure she knew he was there for her still.

All she had to do was wake up and tell him what he could do to make this fair.

* * * * *

The plate of food had been steaming when it was placed before him. Now, it was probably cold. He hadn't touched it. He wasn't hungry, or thirsty, or anything. He felt like that void that had been inside him after he'd taken the shadow from Water. He wanted there to be something to fill him, anything.

He hadn't wanted to come down, to leave Carina's side, but Tandy had wanted time alone with her friend; time to say her goodbyes. Tibs couldn't refuse her that. Carina hadn't been important only to him. As demonstrated by the others in the inn, waiting for a turn to sit with her.

It made him feel slightly better to know so many others had cared for her, but then he felt bad because his inability to keep her safe was the reason they were now in pain, too.

Something poked his leg, then whined. Tibs looked down at the dog seated next to him. It licked its muzzle. Within thinking, he took the steak from the plate and gave it.

"I swear," Serba said, "nothing I do teaches her to stay away from you."

Tibs shrugged.

"How are you doing, Tibs?"

He didn't answer. Those who mattered knew how he felt and didn't have to ask.

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

"What do you want?" she wasn't here to thank him or say she was sorry. She hadn't cared about him or Carina. Her dogs cared more about the two of them than she did.

"Your presence is being requested by Guild Leader Tirania."

Tibs petted Thump's head, and the dog licked his hand. The gesture felt more comforting than Serba's empty words.

"Did you hear me, Tibs?"

"Yes." He scratched Thump behind an ear, where she liked it, and her tongue lolled out.

"Well?"

"What?" Thump looked at him, and he thought he saw sorrow in her eyes. She knew how much of a pain Serba could be.

"She isn't going to like that you're making her wait."

"I don't care." What did he care what Tirania wanted? Where had she been when they were attacked? When Carina was killed?

"Tibs, she isn't someone you tell no to. And I'm pretty sure this is about rewarding you for how you saved the town. Come on, you're a hero again. You aren't going to refuse to have the guild leader sing your praises, are you?" the grin Serba gave him almost made him channel fire and use it on her.

He let water cool his anger. She was just a messenger. Anger at her wouldn't help anything. Anger didn't help. He needed to remain calm if he wanted something to come

from Carina's death.

"Yes, I am." He had more important things to do than play Tirania's games, whatever they were. Sebastian had manipulated him and Carina had died. He wasn't letting someone else dictate what he did. When he was ready, and not before, he'd find out how many of the Runners had survived. He would have to rearrange the patrol schedule, but at least with Sebastian dead, the threats on his town should be minimal.

"Tibs," she said in exasperation. "You really don't want my uncle to be the one to drag you there."

Tibs would love to see Harry try. He had some choice words ready for the guard, and how he went about 'defending' the town, which he had claimed he'd do. Adventurers were no better than nobles, Tibs had decided.

He forced water to cool his temper again. Did he have anything to gain by angering Harry? He had to work with him, even if indirectly. If the guard enforced his authority and stop Tibs's Runners from patrolling the town, that was a headache no one needed.

He got out of his seat and followed Serba out. Before they made it one block, Jackal was at his side, angry, but silent.

Instead of the guild building, she led them to the transportation platform, where a crowd parted before her until he could see Tirania standing on it, Harry on one side, Alistair on the other. His teacher's expression was neutral, but Tibs knew him enough to read the anger in his eyes anytime he glanced at Tirania. Harry stood straight, as usual. A man forever on duty, ready to obey orders, no matter how wrong they were.

"And here he is!" Tirania proclaimed, her voice projecting further than it normally could. "Your Champion!"

The crowd exploded in cheers and Tibs wanted to burn them all, but he called on water again. They weren't to blame. They had nearly lost everything and needed something to celebrate. Tirania was using that, using them, using *him*, to distract from the fact she had hid away when they could have all used the guild's help.

He could feel his anger rise, despite water and he forced it down as he stepped forward and she continued proclaiming his exploits, going all the way back to saving the dungeon. He doused his anger over and over at the satisfaction in her eyes. She knew exactly what she was doing, and she was rejoicing in how she turned his work to her advantage, making it seem like she had been behind it all.

And they bought it.

He had to ice the water over his anger at the realization that they thought her a hero through his actions.

She had stood aside and let Sebastian attack them when she could have stopped the man each time. Probably by herself, definitely with the help of all the adventurers she had at her disposal. If she'd simply stepped outside her precious guild building, Carina would still be alive right now.

As he stood next to her, her hated hand on his shoulder, and he smiled at the crowd, Tibs discovered that anger didn't have to run hot.

Anger could be glacial. It could be slow in making plans, calculated in how he was

going to destroy her and that guild that did nothing but lie to them.

Water had either been wrong or purposely misled him.

Water didn't have to be about comfort.

Water could be about destruction.

And when he was done with this cursed guild, there would be nothing left behind but waves retreating in the distance.

End of Book 2.