

Chapter 76

The street teemed with people, even if the only illumination were lanterns hung on poles throughout the burned-out husk of buildings. Each one with a family going through the rubble in case anything meaningful had survived rose Tibs's spirits because it was one more family his action hadn't killed.

Most remains had no one looking through them.

It didn't mean he'd killed them, some had been able to afford to leave the town when Sto closed his door, but he wouldn't know until everyone came back, and in his current state, seeing the potential hope among the despair he'd caused was difficult.

He stepped toward a group, parents with three children. The youngest was crying in her father's arms. Each looked lost as they walked through the ashes. He had caused that pain, so it was his responsibility to—

"Where are you going?" Kroseph asked.

"To comfort them. To explain their pain wasn't intended and that I will make it better," Tibs explained, then turned to move again.

"You can't do that." The statement was firm. The previous three nights Kroseph had taken Tibs around the destroyed buildings around the transportation platform, he'd explained. He's cuddled, he'd reasoned. Now, he'd had enough.

Kroseph had re-explained everything once they were at the inn, and Tibs had agreed with him. And Kroseph had complained that it was a waste of time, that when he was in that state, nothing got through to Tibs. But even tonight, he'd taken Tibs out again.

"Their suffering is my fault." Tibs understood Kroseph's reasoning. It was the server who didn't understand that he had to take responsibility for what he'd done while wielding fire, no matter what the consequences were. It was the right thing to do, the only way he could make it right to those he'd hurt. Those he'd killed. If the price he had to pay for that was the guild, knowing what he had done and never letting him go, wasn't that simply proper punishment?

"So? Use that mind of yours, Tibs. Don't let your emotion govern you."

"I am using my mind," he replied petulantly, then looked at the ground. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't use that tone. You're just trying to help me."

Kroseph looked at him and let out a faint chuckle. "And I can't tell if that was you apologizing, or Water. I guess that means you're improving." Doing this at night, and while staying away from those still hoping to find something in their old houses, was to keep them from seeing Tibs's eyes.

It had been his decision, and while his reasoning—he wasn't ready for the guild to think he was at the same level as the others now—had made sense to him when he'd given it. Now, it seemed to him to be an excuse to avoid being held accountable for his actions.

"There'll be time later to offer help," Kroseph said. "This is just a stroll."

Jackal and Carina had wanted to be involved in the walks, but Kroseph had pointed out that while Jackal had been good about ordering Tibs out of his element, talking with him in that state wasn't something he had an easy time of. And Carina had trouble telling Tibs when enough was enough. She wanted too much for him to understand her reasoning. When channeling Water, Tibs needed a more balanced handling.

He looked at the family again. The eldest son looked to be old enough to work at whatever shop his parents had. He put up a stoic front, but Tibs could see the pain and loss in how he moved. The middle child clung to her mother's hand, looking confused more than anything. She wasn't old enough to understand what had happened. She, most of all, needed the comfort.

But Tibs didn't go to them.

He'd agreed to listen to Kroseph's instruction. To think beyond how he felt, what he wanted to do in the moment. It didn't make sense. Now was what was important. But he'd agreed to listen, so he returned next to Kroseph and ignored the disappointment he felt.

"You have to think about the consequence of your actions, Tibs."

Tibs stifled the sigh. They were back to that again. Kroseph telling him what was important and what wasn't. Tibs had given up explaining it to him. The server was so... human. He couldn't understand what it meant to be Water to exist to comfort and bring peace.

"These are the consequences of my actions," Tibs replied, watching a lone woman pick a burned something out of the rubble and hold it to her chest, crying. "How can you look at her and not want to go comfort her?"

"I want to."

Tibs looked at him in dismay. "Then why are you standing there not doing it?"

"Because that's not what I'm here to do."

"How am I more important than her peace?"

"Because, Tibs, if you do it cautiously, with care and attention to what you do and when you do it, you can provide comfort to much more than her."

Tibs ground his teeth. "But she's here, now. Tomorrow doesn't matter if she's in pain right now."

"And what about the person in pain tomorrow? How are you going to help them if you are in a cell because the guild noticed what you did and won't let you go?"

"I'll explain it to them and they'll understand that—" He frowned. No, not them.

"What are you thinking, Tibs? Last night you went on about how the guild could be made to understand how he'd mishandled things."

His frown deepened. He had said that. He remembered. But how could he have believed it? The guild didn't care. It was that simple.

He rubbed his temple. Why did it have to be so complicated, so muddled? He wanted the clarity.

"The guild doesn't want to help us, just themselves." They weren't as direct about it as Tibs was when channeling corruption, but he could see the similarity.

"So no running to them and hugging them?"

He shook his head. "But she's not them. I could go to her and... be careful how I did it."

"Right now isn't the time, Tibs. And telling her how this is your fault isn't going to help her. It might make her angry, make her lash out at you."

"But it would be so I can make it right. She'd see that."

"Maybe not. If you could simply go to her, hold her, and listen. That might help, but I'm not sure you can do that yet."

Tibs bit back his argument and remembered that Kroseph had years of experience dealing with people. That he'd been working at the inn almost longer than Tibs had been alive.

"How would you do it?"

Kroseph looked at the woman. "I'd ask her if she wants to come to the inn. I'd bring her an ale, maybe two, and not ask for her to pay. I'd let her numb herself to the pain for a little while so she could rest and hopefully, tomorrow, she'd be in a better state to pick up what's left and move forward."

"What if she isn't?"

"Then I've done what I could. The rest is up to her."

"But I can do more. I can take her pain away, make her comfortable."

Kroseph chuckled. "Like you did when you made me wet?"

Right. Tibs couldn't do everything he wanted. Everything he knew he should be able to when channeling Water. Sometimes he did do more, but he didn't know how, and when he tried to redo it on purpose, it didn't happen.

"I can't do everything," Tibs said. He'd been told that. He'd even told himself that before, but this time it... didn't sound like an excuse. It didn't make him want to help any less, but...

He ground his teeth. "I wish Sebastian had never come."

"Is that anger?" Kroseph asks, surprised.

Tibs frown. How could he be angry at a time like this? It was his anger that had caused him to channel fire and cause this destruction. "I'm sorry," He mumbled and hoped Kroseph didn't hear.

"And now shame?"

Tibs felt his cheek burn. Why did Kroseph sound so happy about it? Everything being muddled wasn't a cause for happiness. He kicked a stone as they started walking away and pouted.

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"Okay," Quigly said, sounding unsure, even while holding a well-made sword in his hand. "Why am I doing this again?"

Tibs recognized Sto's work in the etching along the blade. The sword was ordinary, but the warrior was skilled in using it. Jackal had claimed it and Tibs had seen him fight.

"Because Jackal trusts you not to hurt Tibs in the process of training him how to fight with a sword," Carina answered

Tibs's nervousness had nothing to do with the sword part of the training.

“He has his element,” Quigly said. “What’d he need with knowing how to swordfight?”

It was the element part that he wasn’t sure about.

“You scared?” Tibs asked, and the look of reproach on the warrior’s face told him his bravado looked as thin as it felt.

“Do you understand how easy it is to hurt you with this?” Quigly brought his sword up quickly, then slashed. Tibs was too far to be in danger, but the ease with which the warrior handled the heavy sword was... uncomfortable.

“I do. There are plenty of fighters. That’s why I need to learn.” It was one of the reasons, anyway. The other one...

He swallowed and looked at Jackal, lounging on the crates.

The other reason was why they were away from the training grounds for this.

Kroseph had pronounced Tibs good to advance in his practice the day before, and Tibs had argued against it. He didn’t feel ready. How were one and three days of nightly outings in the troubled area so Tibs couldn’t do anything to help an indication he was ready for more?

“You’ve got this,” Jackal said.

Tibs closed his eyes and let the essence flow out of the bracers and onto his hand, then stretched it until it was the length of a short sword and hardened it into ice. He listened for the need to melt the weapon and absorb it and set that aside. Caring was for later. This was a time to harden himself.

He smiled to himself.

This was a time to be like ice.

He opened his eyes and was disappointed at all the jagged edges of his sword. It wasn’t what he’d envisioned, but yet again, the smooth blade escaped him.

“You’re eyes,” Quigly said. “They’re blue.”

“It comes and goes,” Carina said. “He can’t control it.”

“That’s a thing?” the warrior asked. “Mine didn’t do that.”

“It’s his age,” she replied.

He was going to hurt someone with this, Tibs realized and also understood it was Water influencing his thinking. There were times when hurting someone was needed to protect others. He didn’t like how muddled his thinking have become, but that was the price of being human. That was what he was, even if there were times when he thought he was the element.

Tibs released his breath. He was ready.

“Tibs?” Quigly asked, and Tibs jumped. He looked at the vicious weapon he held, envisioning all the pain he’d inflict with it and he nearly flung it away.

“I’m okay,” he said, trying to keep his voice from shaking. He was okay. He was Tibs, human. Not Water. He didn’t look to inflict pain, but he had to be ready. He had to be better at it so he could defend himself and the town when he had to.

“You don’t look okay.”

“Holding the sword’s shape isn’t easy.” He’d practiced the lie after Jackal told him

the plan for the morning. He'd done do with and without water. Lying while channeling water was tricky because he could say the innocuous ones easily, like this. But lies that could hurt stuck in his throat. Telling himself the lie was innocent didn't help. He knew the truth and water knew it.

So he had to practice them. Tibs wasn't much for lying, but he wasn't above it, and lies were as much tools of the rogue as were the lock picks or his fingers. He was a rogue, so he needed to be able to use all his tools.

Quigly looked unconvinced. "Okay. What kind of training do you have?"

"I've practiced with metal swords, but even the short ones get heavy."

"And that isn't?"

Tibs looked at his jagged sword again. "It's water." It did look thicker than those he'd trained with. "It's my essence. It's part of me. It doesn't weigh anything." He slashed left and right, trying to make it look as effortless as the warrior had, but it felt clumsy.

Quigly smiled. "How's the balance on it, then?"

Tibs stared at him, then looked at his sword, trying to understand what it was supposed to balance with.

Quigly tapped the hilt of his sword. "This is for more than protecting your hand. It balances the weight of your blade and allowed for easier motions. On a well-made blade, it's about here." He placed the flat of the blade on his finger close to a hand-span from the guard. The sword wobbled a little, then didn't move. "This is the sword, not me using my element. I'm hoping that I'll be able to do what you did, eventually. Being able to make my weapon will make my life easier." He smiled. "Although I'm going to stick with making mine look ordinary. I'm skilled enough that I don't have to scare my opponent."

"I keep trying to make it look better," Tibs grumbled.

"What about the balance?"

Tibs found a spot without shards on the flat of the blade that was close to where Quigly had put his finger and placed it. It remained still.

The warrior approached and studied the placement. "On a sword this long, it should be about here, but the jagged part will change the balance. I think it should be more there." He reached for it and paused. "Can I?" Tibs handed it to him and Quigly found a place for his finger. When he put the sword there, it was still. "Did you change anything about how it's balanced when you handed it to me?"

"I'm holding it the same as I was when I had it."

Quigly placed his finger at another spot. Again, the sword didn't move. "You're not talking about how it was on your finger, are you?" He handed it back to Tibs.

"It's made with my essence; that's what I'm holding."

The warrior stepped away and looked at his sword. His brow furrowed in concentration, and disappointment was over his face when he lowered it. "Is it a water thing, or can I look forward to doing that with the sword I'll make, too?"

"You'll learn more about molding the essence at a higher rank," Carina said. "That might be one of them."

"What rank are you?" he asked Tibs.

“Rho, but because of my age, I’ve had to learn differently. You might learn it at a higher one.” He wondered if the lack of resistance from Water was because he’d told the lie so often it was natural, or it was one of the harmless ones.

“You need to keep in mind that metal isn’t known for being malleable,” Carina said, “so that will have an influence too.”

“But I will be able to do it.”

She shrugged. “I don’t see why not. Essence isn’t limited to what we think of this.” She flicked the blade with a finger. “It’s purer and more—”

“Please no teaching,” Jackal groaned. “This is about Tibs learning swordplay.”

“I’ll tell you more later when he isn’t around to complain.”

“I’d like that.” Quigly faced Tibs and silently tapped his foot. “How long can you make the blade?” he asked when Tibs started wondering if they’d do anything.

He shrugged. “I want to learn how to use a short sword.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I’ve tried others. I can’t even lift one well.”

“Yes, but weight isn’t an issue with this, right? Neither is balance.” He raised his sword. “This isn’t about if it’s long or short or thin or thick. It’s about what you’re able to manage. A long one will be better because it keeps your enemies away from you, but with weights comes difficulty in controlling the swings. Your height would also be a factor because anything longer than that you’d need to carry on your back, and unlike what the bards want you to think, that’s now how you want a weapon when a fight surprises you.”

He sheathed his sword and turned to show how the end of it was just about his ankle.

“When I can make mine, it’ll be a little shorter because I don’t like how this keeps tapping on my—” he snorted. “Right. When I can make mine, I won’t have to worry about carrying it. So if length or weight and balance aren’t an issue, you want to go for as long of a sword as you can wield.”

Tibs looked at his sword and with a thought, the blade stretched until the point was in the crate next to Jackal’s head. “Sorry.” He pulled it out and nearly scalped the fighter as he moved it. He let go of it in horror as the pain he could have inflicted registered. How could he have been that thoughtless? “I’m not doing this.”

Tibs turned and headed for the alley.

“You’re going to let one mistake stop you from learning?” Quigly asked, and the tone stopped Tibs.

“I am not afraid,” he said, rounding on the warrior. “I don’t want to hurt Jackal.”

“I can take a scratch,” the fighter said, amused.

“It’s not funny!”

“Tibs,” Carina said. “You need to think. You need to remember what Jackal’s able to do.”

Tibs closed his eyes and forced his breathing to slow. That had been Water. And he was Tibs. Jackal could take a beating, so a scratch from his sword wouldn’t bother him.

He nodded and came back, picking up the sword and shortening the blade. Did it mean something that he’d dropped it, instead of reabsorbing it? Water refusing to take

something that could have hurt back. Or Tibs, knowing he'd need it still?

"That's too long for precision work," Quigly said, although the way he looked at him made Tibs suspect he had questions he'd rather ask. "But being able to change the length as you fight is an advantage. You can adapt to your opponents and surprise them." He grinned. "I will definitely figure out how to get that to happen."

Tibs swallowed the bile threatening to come up. Not only would he be better at hurting people, but they wouldn't see it coming. How could he contemplate such a thing?

Because he had to protect others. He had to make right what he's allowed to happen and he could only do that by being better at taking down his enemies.

He hated that he would have to fight again.

Tibs raised his blade. "How do we start?"

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Tibs panted as the sword came to a stop by his neck. Quigly looked at him and Tibs nodded. He was dead.

He was dead from exhaustion, too. His sword didn't weigh anything, but moving around trying to hit the warrior was tiring. He straightened. But he couldn't let that stop him. He straightened and readied himself.

"Well," a woman called, "there's my favorite guy."

Tibs absorbed his sword and let go of Water.

"I'm taken Cross," Jackal said. "Please remember that, or my man is going to have to have words with you."

"He can keep you," she replied.

"Cross," Quigly greeted her nervously. "I didn't know you were back. I'd have met you at the platform."

She hugged Tibs and ruffled his hair. "How's my puzzle partner? found any good ones while you were away?" She winked at him as she ignored the warrior.

Tibs sighed. He was going to get caught between people and their specialness again. "I found a few, but I couldn't bring them back. They were like that castle you told me about. Part of something."

She nodded. "How about I show you those I got, and you can tell me the fun I missed?"

"So," Jackal mock whispered to Quigly. "You and her?"

"What are you talking about?" the warrior hurried to answer.

"Smooth, man." Jackal patted his shoulder. "Way smoother than how I found out I was Kro's special guy."

Tibs sighed. Why did he always get dragged into this kind of situation?