

## Chapter 02

Tibs barely noticed the city as it came to be around him. He, and what was left of his team, walked behind the procession, passing merchant's booths. People paused to watch, even once they were out of the market surrounding the transportation platform, then returned to their shopping or selling.

Tibs ignored the ambers, demanding to grow into an inferno at the un-bowed heads, after they put who was on the stretcher out of their minds. He wouldn't let the ice thaw. These people didn't deserve his anger. Even without essence, those living in this city followed the teaching of Purity; hard work first, then the rest. They had acknowledged someone had fallen, and now they had work to do.

A few did pause longer; some outright stopped. Not everyone had the same dedication to their dungeon's element. But then, someone pulled them away, so they'd stop wasting time.

He wondered what they were heading to. Did people who wield Purity make time to perform rites for the dead? Would Carina's family do more than pause in their work? If they performed rites, what would they look like?

On his street, the dead were left where they fell, to be collected by somber women in robes of brown so deep they could be black. Before that, the scavenger took anything of value. Where they took the bodies, Tibs didn't know. He never cared to find out. Mama had remained hidden in their small home until the warm weather returned and the smell pushed even Tibs away for longer than he'd liked. When he'd returned and found their home empty, the pain hadn't lasted; his hunger was too strong. It was when he understood she wouldn't be there for him anymore; that he'd have to fend alone through everything that was yet to come.

He'd left and never went back, focussed on surviving however he had to.

When the procession stopped, Tibs didn't recognize the drab buildings. They looked only slightly better than those closer to the platform. This could be where Carina's family lived. Someone stepped behind Tibs and placed a hand on his shoulder.

Zackaria smiled at him when he looked, squeezed his shoulder, then let go. At the front of the procession Paolo looked at Carina, pulled the hood of his robe up, then turned and led them onward.

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When they stopped, they were in a courtyard on the east side of the city, darkened by the mountain's shadow. Men and women waited for them. Tibs recognized Carina's parents, and others seemed familiar; but most were strangers.

"Another one fell."

The voice was so unexpected that even as frozen as he was, Tibs startled. Both that Val spoke and the solemnness in her voice caused it. They were much further from the mountain, the dungeon, than Sto could reach.

"What's he doing here?" Craren asked in disgust.

"Not now," Val replied. "Can't you see how sad he is?"

"All I'm seeing is how cold he's made himself."

"Why do you think that is? He isn't the first. Our people make connections with others, and they deal with grief in their own way."

"He doesn't—"

"Not now." The firmness in Val's tone silenced Craren.

How long had it taken the dungeon to push her influence this far? Why wasn't she making this part

of herself? There was a wall around the entrance, which Tibs had thought was how far she reached. And Carina had mentioned how it was there to keep the town safe, in case a dungeon creature escaped. He'd been well inside the wall the first time he'd heard Val and Craren.

Didn't it mean every house was a dungeon room? She couldn't affect anywhere people were, but how long did she need them out of their home before she could convert it? He sensed his surroundings, and none of the structures felt any different.

Thinking back on his time within this dungeon, before they realized he heard them, anytime they talked about the clerics and other Runners going through their floors, there was always respect in their voice. They were certainly amused at the antics, but never did they speak like the Runners weren't important.

Maybe... he looked around. Maybe Val wasn't turning everything she reached into part of her because she wanted the townsfolk here to live unhindered by her creatures. She had to have creatures. Fighters and archers couldn't simply walk through empty halls and do puzzles. They needed creatures to be put to the test.

"My daughter chose to work a different path," Carina's mother said in a steady voice, once she took position where Paolo had stood. "And I failed her by not understanding that her choice did not mean she rejected what we stand for. In demanding that she adhere to my way of working, I pushed her further into her own, while never realizing how hard she worked to achieve it. She broke our rules, made her way to the forbidden parts of the Great Library, and all I saw was that she disobeyed me. Not how hard she had to work to make it past the security keeping the uninitiated out."

She paused, but shook her head when Paolo whispered to her.

"My actions led to her being discovered, not her own," she said. "If I had understood what she craved, allowed her to pursue those cravings, she would have followed the steps and been allowed within the library. Instead, my stubbornness in only seeing what she wasn't doing led to her being taken away from our element. Led to her having to choose another."

She watched as her word caused the crowd to shift uncomfortably.

"My daughter honored Air as much as Purity. She added lightness to her dedication to the work. She did not replace one with the other. My weakness pushed her to another element, but my daughter remained true to who we are. The Whitebloods are clerics, but before that, we are hard workers. My daughter worked hard at everything she did. She worked hard at becoming a sorcerer. She worked hard at surviving a dungeon she was never prepared for."

She reached back, and Carina's father joined her, taking her hand.

"We were fortunate to see her again when, as is tradition with the young dungeons, those surviving them are allowed to leave while it transitions to a higher difficulty, and my daughter chose to return home. Chose to spend some of the little time she had away from that place with the person who had forced her there."

This time, the pause was caused by tears. "I met the woman my daughter became. I found out about the work she put into becoming her. She—" her voice cracked. "She forgave my stubbornness." She took slow breaths.

"I am not here to grieve the daughter I lost. I am here honoring the woman she was. The woman who fought to protect the town she lived in. Who only stopped working hard when that work was brought to an end by a man who should never have been allowed to come close to that town."

She straightened. "My daughter is of Air, but she made Purity proud."

Tibs swallowed, and the ice cracked. The tear fell before he regained control, freezing the pain so it couldn't dig its claws into him.

She stepped aside, and the crowd parted to reveal an intricately carved metal table with thick legs. Lines and knots were all Tibs could make out of the designs.

"As is tradition," she said as the stretcher was placed atop the table. "My daughter will be purified down to the element she was, so she may rejoin it. It will be Air, but I also believe some of her will make their way to Purity, and that Purity will embrace her without hesitation."

Paolo, along with five others, each with their hoods up, stepped around Carina and placed a hand on her. Tibs sensed the Purity essence flow from them and into her, and her colors faded away, letting him see through her until she was no longer there.

"Sweet travels, Child of Air," Val said, as the last of Carina ceased to be. "I did not get to test you, but you proved yourself one of the elements. Know that I will remember you, Carina of the Whitebloods.

"Your essence rejoins those who came before you," Craren said solemnly. "And the spark that made you will guide those who come after."

"Goodbye, sis," Jackal whispered. "Abyss, I'm going to miss you."