

Chapter 56

Tibs limped into Tirania's office and she raised an eyebrow, looking him over.

He had a black eye, a split lip, and more injuries she couldn't see. He had them wrapped in his essence, but broken and dislocated bones were still painful.

"Training," he told her, motioning for the seat.

She nodded, and he gingerly took it.

"Do you want me to call a cleric?"

"I'll rest until my next run and I'll get healed at the door."

She smiled. "You want me to get you one, then. It closed its door to graduate. It's part of why I asked to see you."

If Sto was graduating, it was time for him to prepare for his trip to the purity dungeon and not having injuries would help. He nodded.

She took the messaging crystal from her desk and Tibs sensed it and, inadvertently, the room. There was a lot of essence in the walls. He knew the guild building was protected by it, but with seven elements he could sense, he had a better sense of how tightly it was woven, even if there was so much he still couldn't differentiate.

Even the desk was composed of a weave so tight Tibs wondered if essence was all it was made of.

The door opened a few seconds after she put the crystal away and a young man in the white cleric's robes entered, placed a hand on Tibs, causing all his pain to vanish, then left. On top of being able to move without problems, he felt as if he'd just stepped out of bed.

Tirania placed a bracelet with a yellow gem on the desk. "I know you don't like having your status acknowledged; which is why I'm doing this here."

"That's the bracelet we get so we can leave the town."

"Yes, and once the dungeon is ready for runners again, it will turn red. Unlike those the others will receive, this one will not turn black. It will turn green."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that instead of paying a reward for the return of the bracelet, regardless of if you are attacked to it or not. We will only do so if you are with it and unarmed."

Tibs bit off his protest. He was heading into a dungeon with no idea how long it would take to get in or get his audience once inside.

"Understand, Tibs, that this is a show of trust I've never given a Runner." Her glimmering eyes were fixed on him. "But you protected a dungeon at the risk of your life. You went beyond what I'd expect an adventurer would. And Harry keeps complaining about how you are trying to take over his job. You care for the people here. I see a great future for you as an adventurer."

The silence stretched, and Tibs wondered if she expected him to respond.

"But I understand the temptation freedom represents," she continued. "If you run, I will see to your punishment myself, and the trust I am showing you will never be shown again, not even if you nearly kill yourself for the dungeon a second time." She pushed the

bracelet toward him. “So treat this with the respect it deserves.”

He placed it around his wrist and snapped it shut. The pain was sharp and immediate, and once it passed, the bracelet was tight against his skin.

She smiled. “Keep it covered until the gathering is called in a few hours, and stay at the back so no one will notice. Then you can enjoy your travels.”

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The sky was gray when the world came into focus again.

Carina pulled him off the platform, breaking his concentration as he tried to tease apart the difference in how using the platform felt compared to the doorway Sto made. The tingling was there, but unlike with the doorway, he couldn’t work out its source.

Then the rain registered as the cold water seeped through his clothing, then it no longer reached him or Carina as he willed it away.

“Welcome to Kadalisan,” she said, “where I promise the sun will shine, eventually.”

“It rains a lot here?”

The ocean is a few leagues that way, and the mountain is over there. The wind pushed the humidity here, and it accumulates until...” she motioned around them. “I’d forgotten how comforting the sound of falling rain was.”

“It’s the sound of home for you.”

She smiled. “What’s the sound of your home?”

He remembered the screams, the fights, the yelling of the guards...their laughter. “Nothing worth talking about.” As with nearly every platform he’d stepped off, it opened to a marketplace filled with colors and too many languages. The rain didn’t keep the merchants from yelling to entice visitors to their booth, and the awnings served as another attraction as people used them to step out of the rain.

The one he understood as they passed praised the bowls she sold as the best for getting hot water, as well as her selection of teas to go with them. He looked at the bundles of leaves and kept from asking why there were so many kinds. He was here for the dungeon, not satisfying his curiosity.

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The gathering before the closed dungeon went much like the previous one, except that instead of guards moving through the Runners, handing out the bracelets. They had to line up before tables, where their names were checked against a list. As far as Tibs saw, everyone who had survived Sto’s rampage got one, and to his surprise, a few of the recruits also received one.

There were fights among the recruits, as some without bracelets tried to take one from another as they walked away, but the only thing they got was guards taking them away, the recruit had had to put it on before leaving the table, and once on, it could only be removed with essence.

Harry stood to the side as a man explained what the closure meant, and how they didn’t know how long it would be, and then the bracelet would tell them to return and the deadly consequences of not returning. The guard leader glared at all of them, not just the

recruit, and Tibs had the sense he couldn't wait to no longer have to deal with any of them.

Two weeks was what the man said they could expect, even if it might be longer or shorter; no two dungeons took the same amount of time when it came to graduating.

Not thinking one and eight days would be enough, Tibs sneaked to the mountain in the night and asked Sto to remain closed longer, for one month, and discovered that like Tibs, when he'd arrived here, Sto didn't know what a month was. Or even what a day was.

Since Sto didn't see of sense the sun, Torus, or Claria, Tibs had to resort to the nightly closing of Sto's door—Sto wasn't aware he closed it as the sun set—and asked for five and zero of those.

Tibs had to hope that would be enough time.

Jackal had opted to stay in Kragle Rock, both to be with Kroseph, and to keep an eye on his father. With so many Runners away, his friend expected him to try something.

Mez had to go to his home with his betrothed and Khumdar stated he was never setting foot in that city again unless it was to watch it burn. Carina glared but hadn't commented.

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Tibs was surprised at how not white the buildings were.

MountainSea was more white than this city.

How could a city next to the only purity dungeon be so...drab?

"What's wrong?" Carina asked, following his gaze into an alley that was covered with so much filth it qualified as having hills.

"How come it's so dirty?"

"It's a city. Dirt happens," she answered casually.

"But it's a purity city. Doesn't that mean anything?"

She chuckled. "It means everyone is helping the dungeon, directly or not. Just like in Kragle Rock."

"But purity." Tibs imagined he sounded like Jackal when he said 'but we won' as an excuse for the stupid thing he's done."

"The dungeon's power doesn't extend over the city, you know that."

"Sto is sensing further as he gets more powerful."

"Yes, a dungeon's influence grows as they age, but fortunately, not very far from the mountain they live in. You don't want it to reach the city. It would be able to create creatures in our homes when we were off working. Every building would become a room in the dungeon."

She slowed and looked at the people. "Even knowing dungeons don't exist to eat us, it's still not something I'd want. No one here would be ready for that, and they'd still die as it tested everyone, and most failed. Normal people aren't ready for a run."

"So this is just a city like the one where my Street is?" he asked in disappointment.

"You really thought it was different?"

"You way you talk about dungeon cities, the way Khumdar hates this one. I thought purity had more of an influence."

“His problem is like mine, I think,” she said pensively. “If exacerbated by what he is. I’m an aberration in my family, while anyone with a link to purity will see him as one. If I’d seen the error of my ways and joined the folds of my family, instead of sneaking ever deeper into the library, I would have been welcomed back. He never will. If his family ever acknowledged him, it would be to hand him over to the fighters for execution.”

“But he could explain things,” Tibs said. “It’s not like what he does goes against the clerics here.”

“You’re wrong,” she said with a mix of sadness and anger. “We’re taught from the moment we’re old enough to understand the stories, that before purity made the clerics, madness covered the world. That the other elements used their agents to sow chaos, dissension, and outright madness. That it, through us, brought peace to the world.”

“What I’ve seen of the world isn’t particularly peaceful.”

“And the stories explain that, but saying there are still agents of the other elements in the world working against Purity. That we have to be vigilant lest one day, chaos and horrors will return.”

“Do you believe those stories?”

Tibs looked around to keep from pressing her as she stayed silent. They’d walked long enough he’d expected they had crossed into different neighborhoods with changes in houses to represent them, but they were all similar in their... ordinariness. Some were three stories, those seem to be mostly shops. Some were two, but even they had a lack of refinement that made them more like the one-story houses than different.

Tibs associated plainness with Streets. His and others he’d visited in his search were places where coins were too rare for anyone to improve the buildings. He’s thought that anyone for whom coins were a normal thing would use them to make their home look better, feel better.

He hadn’t seen any houses in disrepair yet, but also nothing beyond the essential of what made a building.

“I question them,” she said, snapping his attention back to her, “even before meeting Khumdar. I didn’t understand why my family was against me reading from the library until I found books contradicting the stories I grew up on. The sorcerers of purity don’t interact with the clerics because they know too much that would challenge the beliefs they need to be effective. Because the guards spend so much time with the clerics, they too can’t know too much.”

“What about rogues and archers?”

She smiled. “We don’t have much of one, and none of the other.” She paused. “Or so we are told. There are archers within the guards, so I expect that is what class they are, and as guards, they will be limited in what they can learn.”

“And the rogues?” Tibs asked, then stopped to watch a man in a uniform and made Tibs think he was a guard who was talking to a penitent-looking woman. Tibs didn’t understand the words, but the tone was that of a lecture.

“He’s chastising her for sitting there when there is work to do,” Carina explained.

“Shouldn’t it be her decision? It’s her coin to make or not.”

She watched the exchange for a second more. “Have you listened to the clerics in Kragle Rock?”

“They don’t say much when they heal us as we leave the dungeon. There was that old guy, when the corruption pool happened, but he just screamed to have Khumdar thrown into a cell for helping. The rest of the time they keep to themselves...but,” he remembered one. “There was a young cleric, and she was trying to get rid of the pool. She seemed determined to remove the corruption, even if the attempt killed her.”

Carina nodded. “Hard work is one of the core tenets of purity, and the clerics adhere to them more than any here.” She nodded to the woman, who stepped into the house, now that the guard was done reprimanding her. “Everyone here lives under those tenets. You are more likely to be stopped for vagrancy here than larceny. At least with theft, you are working toward something.” She smiled at him as Tibs eyed a high window. “You will still be arrested if you are caught.”

It lacked the refinement that added purchase, but it also didn’t have any work down to make reaching it more difficult.

“I’m not walking the roofs here.” Tibs started walking again. “What I have to do is more important.”

“Then be sure to keep your fingers out of others’ pockets. They aren’t any kinder to pickpockets here than elsewhere.”

“But they’ll be kinder to me than to a vagrant?” Tibs asked, grinning.

“Barely.” She motioned ahead. “We’re nearly here.”

The only difference Tibs saw in the houses here, compared to the rest of their walk, was that they seemed slightly larger. Or maybe it was his imagination.

She stopped before the door and smoothed her robes down. She looked Tibs over as if the good set of clothing she’d forced him into might not be good enough, then knocked.

There was motion inside. Something fell, someone cursed. There was laughter.

The door opened and a man with colorless eyes scowled at them, then immediately smiled. “Carina!” He hugged her, transferring wet clay from his shirt, pants, and hands onto her robes. “And you are the young man who fell off a mountain.” He greeted Tibs after putting her down.

“Tibs, this is...” She trailed off, trying to remember the name the cleric had given them.

“Paul,” Tibs said. “That’s the name he said to us.”

She blushed. “Right. Paul.”

“If you’re bringing him to my home, I think we’ve moved beyond aliases, Carina. And I doubt Zakaria would stick to calling me that.” He gave Tibs a slight bow. “I am Peolo Whiteblood. Cleric, purveyor of her word, protector of her honor.”

“I’m Tibs.” He hesitated. “Rogue.”

Peolo smiled. “Simplicity does have its place. Please come in.” He stepped out of the way. On the other side of the room that made up the entire floor, someone picked up lumps of clay off the floor next to an overturned table. “Forgive the mess. You startled me while I was turning clay.”

“When did you start working with clay?” Carina asked, “Hi, Zack! It’s good to see you again.”

The man, no, woman? Tibs couldn’t decide. They had the square shoulders and hips of a man, but also breasts. When they answered Carina, their voice was deep but carried a lightness Tibs associated with women. In a way, they reminded him somewhat of the newer version of Bigger Brute Sto had used to fight Jackal.

Peolo crossed the room and pulled them to their feet with an amused giggle. Then kissed their temples.:

“Stop it,” they said, pretending to push him away. “We have guests.”

“And now, our visitor can understand you.”

“Oh.” They smiled and curtsied. “I am Zackaria. It’s a pleasure to meet you. Did you say your name is Tibs?”

“Yes.”

“It’s a lovely name.”

Tibs realized he was blushing. “Thank you.”

Peolo straightened the table and Tibs focused on the top of it, which was spinning.

He didn’t understand what about them made him...uncomfortable? No, the opposite. They put him at ease in a way he’d only felt before in Water’s presence. Only their eyes were the green of grass with flecks of gold that seemed to light up when they smiled.

“It’s rather early for you to have reached Epsilon,” Peolo said, then to Zackaria, still fussing with the clay on the floor. “Leave it. Carina never cared and her friend is a runner like her. A messy floor won’t bother him.”

They reluctantly stood. “Should I get us wine?”

Peolo looked at Carina.

“Please?” she said. “You don’t know how much I’ve missed it.”

Tibs shrugged. He’d drink what was offered.

They left, and Peolo motioned to a set of low stools. “Now, what brings you both to our humble home?”

“Tibs needs your help,” Carina answered. “He has to get into the dungeon. He wants Purity as his element.”