

Planning-2

The city came to be around Tibs, and he barely noticed it. A way had been cleared through the merchant's booths surrounding the transportation platform for the procession, and it allowed Tibs and what was left of his family to rejoin them quickly.

People stopped their buying or selling as they watched them walk through the booths. Once past the market, people only looked up from their work, gave a nod of acknowledgment, and went back to it.

Tibs didn't care; he hadn't allowed himself to thaw. But with those living here, Tibs understood why they barely paid their respect to the dead. Purity was about dedication to work, and that meant anything else only got little attention.

Some paused longer. Some outright stopped. Not everyone had the same dedication to the element their dungeon and city revolved around. But there was someone nearby to remind them the procession wasn't important in the view of their element. It might be a guard, or simply the person working next to them, noticing the prolonged pause.

Tibs wondered how or even if her family had rites for the dead. Did anyone following Purity acknowledge an event that meant someone would no longer be dedicated to the work the element demanded? If they did, what would it be?

On his street, the dead were left where they fell, to be collected by somber women dressed in robes of brown so deep they could be black. Where the bodies were taken, Tibs didn't know. He'd never asked or tried to find out. Mama had remained hidden in their small home until the warm weather returned and her smell pushed even Tibs away. He'd accepted she was gone by then, having had to fend for himself through the cold times. On the coldest nights, he hadn't returned to her since she hadn't provided heat or safety in too long.

He'd felt a pang of pain when he returned to their place and found she was gone, but he'd been too hungry to be able to wonder where she'd been taken. Staying alive had meant he couldn't afford to think about her often.

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

Zackaria smiled at him, squeezed his shoulder, and let go. Ahead, Paolo stepped before the procession, looked at Carina's body, pulled the hood of his robe up, then turned and started walking.

The procession followed.

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When they stopped, they were in a large courtyard in the mountain's shadow that marked the east side of the city. Men and women were assembled there, waiting for them. Tibs recognized Carina's mother and father. Others seemed familiar, but otherwise were strangers.

"Another one fell."

The voice was so unexpected that even as frozen as he was, Tibs startled. It was both Val's voice and the solemnity in it that caught him by surprise. They were further from the mountain, therefore the dungeon than anything Sto could reach.

"What's he doing here?" Craren asked, sounded disgusted.

"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 he did that? He isn't the first. Our people will make connections with others. And they have their own way to deal with the grief of the loss of someone who mattered to them."

"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 were houses between them and the walls that marked the compound around the dungeon's entrance. Tibs thought it showed where the dungeon's influence started. He'd been well inside it when Val and Craren had noticed him that first time.

Didn't the fact he heard them here mean each house was a room within a dungeon? Carina had talked about it once. That it was why the wall was there, a way to ensure the city's people were safe.

But that had been before they'd known Sto was a person, not an animal.

Val had silenced Craren. She'd been respectful of the progression when she's noticed them. Thinking

back on what he'd overheard them say, before they found out he heard them, they spoke of the other clerics with respect, even when they were amused at their antics.

Maybe... Maybe Val wasn't doing anything here because she wanted the people in the town to live unhindered by her creatures. She had to have creatures. Fighters and archers couldn't all go through the same tests of endurance they had put Tibs through, not once they had their audience at least.

Ahead, Carina's mother stepped before the procession. Paolo placed a hand on her shoulder, then moved to stand with the others.

"My daughter chose to work a different path than that of her family," She said, voice steady. "And I failed her by not understanding that her choice did not mean she rejected what we stood 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 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. My actions led to her being discovered, not her own. If I had understood what she craved, allowed her to pursue those craving, she would have followed the steps and been allowed in 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 paused, and Tibs felt it was more to let her words sink in than compose herself.

"My daughter honored Air. She added lightness to her dedication to her work, but 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 Whiteblood have been clerics, but before that, we have always been 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. We were fortunate to see her again, when, as is the tradition with the young dungeons, those sent there are allowed to return home while it transitions to a higher difficulty, and my daughter chose to return home. Chose to spend some of the little she had away from that place with the person who had forced her there."

This time, when she paused, Tibs could tell she needed the time to steady herself. "I got to meet the woman my daughter became. I found out the work she put in becoming her. She—" her voice cracked. "She forgave me for my stubbornness." She took slow breaths. "I am not here 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, felt the ice crack inside him, then a tear fall, before he took control again and froze the pain before it could reach out for him.

She stepped aside, and the crowd parted to reveal a pyre.

"As is our traditions," she said. "We call on Fire to release our elements so we may rejoin those we are aligned to. My daughter will go to Air, but I have no doubt some of her will also go to Purity, and that Purity will take her in without hesitation."

Carina's body was placed on the pyre. Then Paolo stepped to it, holding a lit torch.

"Sweet travels, Child of Air," Val said, as the cleric lowered the torch to the wood. "I did not get to test you, but you proved yourself to one of the elements, so know that I will remember you, Carina of the Whiteblood."

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

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