

## Stepping up-45

The sky was gray when the world came into focus again. Carina pulled him off the platform; he'd been distracted trying to tease apart how traveling this way felt. Now that he had more elements than the last time, there was a tingling to arriving, but he couldn't figure out the source.

The cold water forced him to pay attention to what was happening; it was raining. With a thought, he kept it from falling on him and Carina.

"Thanks," she said. "Welcome to the city of Kadalisayan, where I promise, the sun will shine, eventually."

"It rains a lot here?"

"Yes. The ocean is a few leagues that way. The mountain is here, causing the humidity to accumulate until it falls." She looked up. "I'd forgotten how comforting the sound of falling rain was."

"The sounds of home," he said.

She smiled and nodded. "What are the sounds of your home?"

Tibs remembered the screams, the fights. The yelling guards. "Nothing worth talking about." Like almost every other platform he'd stepped off, the steps lead to a marketplace filled with colors and a variety of language. The rain didn't keep the merchants from yelling about what they sold. They simply stayed under the awnings the side of the tents turned into.

One he understood sold bowls to boil water for tea, along with a selection of teas to go with them. He kept himself from asking what tea was. They were here for one task, getting him his last element, not for him to ask about merchant's wares.

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The announcement of the dungeon closing went much like the previous one, except that instead of guards walking through the Runners with boxes and handing the bracelets, the Runners then lined up at multiple tables and had their names checked against a list. Everyone still alive from the previous group got one, but only a handful of the most recent conscript received theirs. Arguments happened among them, even a few fights as some tried to take them by force, but by then, the bracelets were already closed and couldn't be removed. All it did was send some conscripts to the cells.

Like the previous time, no one knew how long the dungeon would be closed. No dungeon was alike, the man providing the information told them. Harry stood to the side, there to ensure peace this time, instead of instructions. Two weeks was the expected time, but the bracelet would turn orange when the dungeon was ready, and they'd have two days to return.

Were two weeks enough for what Tibs needed to do? He'd need to prepare himself, starve himself before heading into the purity dungeon, but Carina didn't know how long getting him would take. Or if he'd need to go through the usual purifying rituals as part of going in. She couldn't contact the person who would help them early in case they changed their mind and told the guards about Tibs. Returning late because he'd been arrested might cause Tirania to not be angry at him, but he didn't want to risk it.

So that night he snuck close to the mountain until Sto could hear him and asked for a month before he reopened. Explaining what a month was proved interesting to a dungeon who wasn't aware of the sun moving in the sky or Torus or Claria. When Tibs asked how Sto knew to close his door every night, the dungeon replied he didn't know it was night. Just that it was time to close himself off for a while, go through what had happened during the runs, make changes if he needed and simply rest.

So Tibs said five-zero of those, since Sto still knew when he should close the door even if it was already closed while he build the third floor. Numbers were easier for Sto since he already dealt with them, and it was simply about explaining how Tibs counted.

He had to hope that a little more than a month would be enough time.

Jackal hadn't come, deciding to stay in Kragle Rock, both to be with Kroseph and to keep an eye on his father. With most of the Runners away, the opportunity was perfect for him to reinforce his hold over the merchant.

Mez needed to go to his home with his betrothed. And Khumdar smiled and said he was never setting foot in that city again unless it was to watch it burn to the ground. Carina had glared, but hadn't commented.

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Tibs looked around, surprised at how not white everything was. MountainSea was more white than this city. The colors were drab, not all of them. But enough were faded that he searched for a reason. This was a city next to the only purity dungeon, after all.

"What's wrong?" Catrina asked, following his gaze down an alley where filth had accumulated to the point it was a mound.

He pointed. "How come it's so dirty?"

"It's a city, dirt happens."

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

She chuckled. "It means everyone here is helping the dungeon, either directly or indirectly, just like in Kragle Rock."

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

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

"I thought it would, as they get more powerful. Sto couldn't hear what happened at the bottom of the steps when we started going in. Now he can."

"Yes, a dungeon influence does grow, but fortunately, not far outside the mountain they live in. You don't want it to reach the city. It would get to create creatures in your house when you were away. It would turn the buildings into rooms in the dungeon. It would be deadly for everyone." She paused. "Even knowing that dungeons don't exist to eat us, they still do, and no one here would be prepared for that. Most people aren't ready to fight dungeon creatures. I don't think most people in the world are ready for it."

He gestured around them. "So this is just a normal city like the one where my Street is?"

"Yes." She smiled. "You really thought it was different?"

"The way you talk about dungeon cities, the way Khumdar hates it. I thought purity

was more of a thing.”

“Khumdar’s problem is like mine, I think; if exacerbated by what he is. I’m an aberration in my family. The entire purity community will consider him an aberration. If I had seen the error of my ways and did what my family expected of me, instead of sneaking in ever deeper into the library, I would have been welcomed back. He never will. If his family even acknowledges his existence on seeing him, it would be to hand him over to the fighters.”

“Couldn’t he explain things? It’s not like what he does goes against the clerics here.”

“You’re wrong, it does. We are taught from the moment we are 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, 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 tell us it’s because there are still agents of the other element out in it working against us. That we have to remain vigilant, or one day the age of chaos and horror will be back on us.”

“Do you believe those stories?”

She didn’t answer, and Tibs looked around again to keep from pressing her about it. They’d walked long enough that Tibs expected the buildings to change more than they had. There weren’t identical, some were three stories, some, mostly shops, were two. But there was a lack of refinement to all of them that felt unusual.

Plain buildings were things he’d associated with his Street and places like that now that he had visited other cities. Places where coins were rare, so buildings didn’t improve. Anyone with just a few coins would spend some on making their home look better, feel more comfortable, all the way to the nobles who wasted coins on grandiose homes they didn’t even live in. Here, he hadn’t seen one house in disrepair yet, but also no houses with more than the essentials.

“I question them,” she finally said. “Even before meeting Khumdar. I didn’t understand why my family was against me reading from the library, but there are books there that contradict the story I grew up on. The sorcerers of purity don’t interact much with the clerics because they know things that would challenge the beliefs needed for the clerics to be effective. Because the fighters interact so much with them, they can’t know too much either.”

“How about the archers and rogues?”

She chuckled. “We don’t have much of the one, and none of the other. Or so we’re told,” she added. “I don’t doubt we have few archers, and those we have fall in with the fighters, there mainly to protect the clerics and the city.”

“And the rogues?” Tibs asked, distracted by a man dressed in a uniform that screamed guard to the part of Tibs had survived by identifying them had was talking to a woman looking penitent before him. The tone had the sound of a lecture to it.

“Tibs?”

“What is he doing?”

She listened for a few seconds. “He’s chastising her for sitting there when there’s work to do.”

“Isn’t it her decision if she’s going to work? Her coins to make or not?”

“Have you listened to the clerics in Kragle Rock?” she asked after a pause.

“The ones who heal us before and after the dungeon. There was that old guy when the corruption pool appeared. He wanted to have Khumdar thrown in a cell for trying to help. They keep to themselves the rest of the time. Although there was one. She was young, and she was trying to get rid of the corruption.” He tried to remember more. Other than she’d seemed odd, there wasn’t much, except. “She seemed determined to clean it all by herself, even if it killed her.”

Carina nodded. “Hard work is one of the core tenets of purity, and clerics are determined to adhere to it.” She nodded to the woman who went inside the home, now that the guard was no longer reprimanding her. “Everyone here lives under those tenets. You’re more likely to be stopped for vagrancy than you are for larceny. At least with theft, you are working toward something. You’ll still be arrested if you caught,” she said as Tibs looked at the higher windows.

They lacked the refinement that often added purchase, but also didn’t have extra work done on them to make reaching them more difficult.

“I’m not going to walk the roofs here,” Tibs said, bringing his gaze back to the road. “This is too important. If I don’t do this now, I’ll have to wait until the next time Sto graduates, and I don’t know when that will be.”

She nodded. “Then also keep your fingers out of other’s pockets and purses. They aren’t any kinder here to pickpockets than elsewhere.”

“But kinder than vagrant?” Tibs asked with a grin.

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

If Tibs had to point out one difference from the other part of the city they’d walk through, it was that the houses here seem larger. Maybe. By a few hands span. Carina stopped in front of a door and smoothed her robes down. She looked Tibs over as if he could have gotten out of the set of good clothes she’d forced him to put on before they left, and knocked on the door.

There was motion. Something fell, someone cursed. Tibs thought he heard a laugh.

The door opened and a man with eyes without color scowled at them, then immediately smiled. “Carina!” he hugged her, transferring the wet clay that was on his shirt, pants, and hands onto her robes. “And you are the young man who fell off a mountain.”

“Tibs, this is…” she trailed off, and he realized she was trying to remember the name the cleric had told him.

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

“Right, Paul.” She blushed.

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

“I’m Tibs,” he replied, hesitated, “rogue.”

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

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

The man, no woman, Tibs could decide. They had the square shoulders and hips of a man, under the clothes, but also breasts. When they answered Carina, their voice was deep but carried a lightness Tibs associated with women.

Peolo crossed the room and pulled them to their feet with an amused giggle, then kissed their temple.

“Stop it,” they said. “We have guests.”

“And now our visitor can understand you,” Peolo replied.

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

“Yes.”

They smiled. “It’s a lovely name.”

Tibs found he was blushing. “Thank you.”

People straightened the table and Tibs focused on the top of it, which was spinning. He didn’t understand what about that person made him uncomfortable? No, he wasn’t uncomfortable. The opposite. They put him at ease in a way he’d only felt when he had been in Water’s presence. Only they had no element. Their eyes were green like the 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 looked at Zackaria who was still fussing with the clay on the floor. “Leave it. Carina never cared and her friend is a Runner like her. A messy floor isn’t going to bother him.”

They hesitated before standing. “Should I get us wine?” they asked, and Peolo looked at Carina and Tibs.

“I haven’t had wine in ages,” she answered hopefully.

Tibs shrugged. He’d tasted wine in a tavern, and it had been fine, even if he still preferred ale.

They left and Peolo motioned to low stools. “Now, what brings you to our humble home, Carina and Tibs?”

“Tibs needs your help,” she said. “He has to get into the dungeon. He wants purity as his element.”