

## Chapter 451

### The Very Opposite of Fantastical

The sky was bleak, grey and sunless, reflecting the architecture of the city. The territory was another city, but the very opposite of fantastical. Uniform concrete buildings were set out in plain, hard lines, like a distillation of Soviet Bloc design.

Just as the territory was a bland version of a human city, the anomalies were a bland version of human. Identical human men in identical black suits with sixties tailoring, they were a clone army of men in black. They fought with what looked like ordinary pistols, although they packed a gold-rank punch. In close, they used a martial arts style that was fast and efficient, but robotic and predictable.

Once he had killed and drained enough to accelerate his speed, Jason was confident enough to engage them directly. Although the anomalies had gold-rank speed and strength, it was on the lower end of the scale and they lacked any exotic abilities. Jason was almost able to match them in speed and had a full host of powers to pit against them.

His cloak intercepted bullets, and while many punched through its silver-rank protection, his blood robes soaked some more of the impact. His regeneration and drain rapidly healed what damage still made it through. Jason was long past the point where even moderate injuries were a distraction.

Once he was in melee range, Jason's cloak was once again key to his defence. It hid his unconventional movement, which was made all the more deceitful by feints. As his aura told one story, his body told another while the truth was something else entirely. He was still only beginning to use his aura feints effectively, but the minds of the clone-like anomalies turned out to be as bland as their appearance. Despite the precision and efficiency of their hand-to-hand skill, their lack of improvisation and imagination made their attacks predictable and their defences vulnerable to Jason's unorthodox style.

Jason had been through thousands of enemies in hundreds of fights. His current strength was the product of battles with monsters, anomalies and the risen dead; vampires, superheroes and even other essence users. His fighting style, the Way of the Reaper, was too comprehensive to be mastered by ordinary humans.

The myriad techniques and variations of his style went beyond martial arts. Its practices dipped into gymnastics, acrobatics, parkour, stealth, climbing, even sleight of hand. There were too many techniques to remember without the enhanced memory of a magically-enhanced spirit attribute. There weren't enough hours in the day for the practice required not just to master but maintain that level of skill.

Sophie and Jason both practised the Way of the Reaper, but in very different ways. Sophie came to it through training, taking a subset of the whole and building a style perfect for herself. As she moved through iron and bronze ranks she had expanded her repertoire, continuing to make the style her own without attempting to grasp the whole. She took what she needed, discarded the rest and was the stronger for it.

Emir Bahadir had studied the style more than most outsiders to the Order of the Reaper. He had hypothesised that the style was originally intended to be learned through skill books. Only then, with the skills magically imprinted, could the full style be mastered. This was his conclusion after several years of searching for remnants of the style, with dozens of subcontracted adventuring teams investigating the ruins of the fallen order.

Only through using skill books was Jason able to enjoy the level of proficiency he had obtained. He had dedicated considerable time and work into making the style imprinted on him his own and not just a series of programmed responses, but would never have Sophie's focused mastery. While it was an important cornerstone of his combat technique, it would never be the foundation that it was for her.

Jason simply couldn't dedicate the training time Sophie could to a selected subset of techniques. He adapted to his circumstances, environments and enemies, using spells, direct combat, sneak attacks and skirmish tactics as he needed. For him, the movement and stealth techniques were just as important, if not more so, than the martial arts. The broad-spectrum learning from skill books was a good fit for him.

Sophie was so good at what she did that she would pit her skills against any opponent, trusting herself and the abilities. Jason would assess an opponent and change himself, looking for the most appropriate of his available approaches. He would even switch it up against the same enemy as they adapted to him.

Fighting the men in black anomalies, Jason began with skirmishing hit-and-run strikes while his enemies were faster than him. They roamed the city in groups of four and he took some hits along the way, but nothing he couldn't endure. He left each encounter with a slew of afflictions in his wake, letting them do their work as he moved on.

Jason's biggest setback in the fight was the inability to use the affliction-spreading butterflies. The anomalies gunned down the brightly glowing blue and orange butterflies with machine-like precision before they could do their job. The only benefit was that the butterflies exploded on being destroyed, causing an amount of disarray in the orderly anomalies that Jason could make the most of.

As anomalies started dropping from the accumulated afflictions, Jason drained them and grew faster. He started fighting more directly, matching his skills and powers against

their clockwork techniques. He took a battering at first, sometimes being forced to escape, but slowly learned what did and didn't work. The uniformity of the enemies meant that a trick that worked on one anomaly would be effective against them all as they never seemed to learn.

Ultimately, these anomalies proved to be a weak match-up against Jason. His butterfly failure aside, his specific abilities were filled with answers to the challenges they posed. Being numerous but relatively weak aside from their resilience, Jason's afflictions were able to chew through their physical fortitude. Once he caught up to them on speed, their intimidating fighting technique was something of a paper tiger while their firearms were a minimal threat.

The others all had their own approaches, staying relatively close together at first before spreading out. By separating, the anomalies were less likely to converge into larger groups and overwhelm them.

The vampires each fought using different powers, with the human-like anomalies serving as self-serving blood bags. Elizabeth was a master of luring groups into traps set out using blood rituals, fuelled by the blood of the anomalies already killed. Klaus fed on the anomalies' blood to grow stronger and faster, starting with a low gold-rank baseline and growing to dangerous levels as he fed again and again.

The final vampire, Georges, also fed on the anomalies, to a different effect. With each feeding, he became more and more like them, taking on their rigid mannerisms and clean, precise movements. He even started to look more like them, with their bland faces and rigid body language.

He started using their fighting style but, unlike them, was able to learn and innovate. He swiftly reached the point of roundly besting them at their own game, even conjuring one of their pistols.

Todd the necromancer had already ordered his ghoulish army to move overland towards the sight of the battle before Jason had even expanded the territory. He consumed their energy rapidly but replenished their numbers by animating the dead anomalies. The zombie versions were only silver-rank and lacked their skills, but as cannon fodder and magic fuel, they got the job done.

Gerling moved with his four offsideers, using his unsealed essence ability to make them more powerful. They were not a match for the anomalies, but Gerling was. He would act as the spearhead, charging in, ignoring bullets burying themselves in his flesh. A charging punch to the gut doubled-over an anomaly, followed by a thunderous uppercut

that shot it into the air. Gerling grabbed its leg as it flew up and hammered it back down, slamming it over and over, as if shaking the dust from an old rug.

Gerling's men capitalised on his powerhouse charge attacks and used their slight numerical advantage to maximum effect. Jason even supplied them with pistols looted from the anomalies, as those picked up directly would not work for the humans.

Mr North offered roaming assistance. He used webs to set out magical rune traps to complement Elizabeth's. He bound anomalies in webs to help Gerling and his team when they struggled. He even took his true form of a car-sized spider from time to time, draining the anomalies of blood with the enthusiasm of the vampires.

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So long as Jason didn't retreat into his inner territories, the anomalies entering from the exterior of the domain would make their way around the ring-shaped territory in pursuit of him. Going back to the first abnormal transformation zone, Jason had discovered that unless he retreated to his domain's inner territories, the anomalies would not invade there.

The latest territory was huge, being the outer ring of Jason's entire domain, and the fighting seemed endless. The essence users consumed spirit coins to maintain their energy, while the gold-rank blood of the anomalies was a feast for the vampires, possibly due to their human form. Even so, after a dozen hours with no end not in sight, the group started to flag. Of them all, only Jason was used to the ceaseless fighting.

Jason had cleared out entire proto-spaces alone or with Farrah. During the monster waves he had fought for days on end in Broken Hill and Makassar, and clearing vast territories, full of anomalies, was familiar to him now. He also didn't need to rest for anything but mental exhaustion, able to replenish his stamina and mana at need by draining anomalies. He also didn't need to stop and let his recovery attribute heal his injuries. The closest they had to a healer was the necromancer, but his sinister life exchange powers were sealed and useless.

The vampires had never faced armies of monsters, and Gerling had always been tactically deployed by the Network. Mr North was both literally and figuratively a spider in the centre of his web, rarely taking direct action.

Oddly, it was the weakest members of the group who held up the best. Todd was relatively safe behind a wall of ghouls and felt less of the strain. Gerling's henchmen had participated extensively in both proto-space and monster wave clearing, with two of them having even fought at Makassar. This gave them similar experiences with endurance battles to Jason.

Jason had Shade helicopter everyone but himself to the closest inner territory, while he remained behind. As the holder of the domain, the anomalies would not move inward so long as he didn't either.

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It took days of constant fighting before the territory was fully claimed and the greater anomaly appeared. Jason had been hoping for a UFO or a mothman, but it turned out to be a single, normal-sized man in black. His face was identical to the others, but his suit was of a more contemporary cut, compared to the sixties styling of the others.

The subsequent fight turned out to be the greatest struggle the group had faced in all their time in the transformation zone. The anomaly wasn't especially powerful in and of itself. It was stronger and faster than the normal anomalies, but only at a low-mid gold-rank level. The problems it posed Jason and his team were twofold.

The first was that it possessed a dazzling array of miniaturised high-tech devices. These ranged from a powerful energy pistol blasting heat and kinetic energy, a force field projector and even a short-range teleporter. These were the primary tools at the anomaly's disposal, although far from the only ones.

"Was that a shoe laser?" Jason asked. "Is it bad that I kind of want him to win?"

"Shut up, Asano!" Gerling roared.

There was also a discreet jump pack on its back, to which was attached several small, disposable devices with powerful effects. A tube containing a small rocket killed one of Gerling's henchmen and severely injured the others, taking them out of the fight.

The second problem posed by the greater anomaly was that it wasn't as mentally limited as its lesser cousins. It was able to innovate and adapting to Jason and the others over the course of the fight.

Disaster struck when the anomaly charged up its pistol, teleported next to Todd and fired directly into his head, killing him. This put the pistol into some kind of charging cycle but the group couldn't take advantage as the now uncontrolled ghouls went into a frenzy. They only escaped due to the vampires managing to control at least a portion of the ghouls and they were forced to retreat. They were forced to leave Gerling's companions behind, who were inundated by the ghouls.

Away from the greater anomaly, Jason handled the bulk of the ghouls with the doom butterflies that swiftly spread to annihilate the weak ghouls. By the time he was done, the greater anomaly had tracked them down and the butterflies swarmed it. It destroyed them with some kind of rocket but the resulting explosion massively weakened its force field, putting Jason and the others on the front foot as the battle resumed.

In the end, it was the advantage in numbers that allowed them to kill it. Gordon's disruptive-force beams helped further weaken the force field. Mr North and Elizabeth set down traps they lured it into. By the time it was dead, every one of the survivors had taken severe damage. Jason's familiar, Gordon, had his vessel destroyed by the anomaly attempting to preserve its force field. This was a blow to Jason, who lacked the considerably rare materials to resummon him.

They all healed rapidly, the anomaly containing more than enough energy for both the vampires to feed on and to fuel Jason's blood harvest spell. Gerling was the slowest to recover, relying only on his gold-rank recovery attribute, yet that was far from slow. His arm was blackened and almost torn off after suffering multiple hit's from the anomaly's energy pistol, yet was back to normal by the time they returned to the pagoda.

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The survivors were in the mid-level suites in the pagoda, recovering from days of combat. Gerling had lost half of his people and Jason had lost a familiar, albeit temporarily. They had agreed to a full day of rest before taking the next step.

Jason wasn't going to risk transfiguring his new domain until they were ready for whatever came after, unsure what would happen once he completed his domain. Strangely, the distant shapes in the gloom seemed no closer than before, despite Jason having expanded into almost every territory. He did not estimate there to be more than one or two left at most.

Would there be some terrible, astral guardian in the final territory? Were the shapes in the gloom echoes of astral beings that would never be seen and pose no threat? Jason was hoping for that one more than he was expecting it.

There was still the remnants of a ghoul army running loose, although they were weak, scattered and uncontrolled. Until Jason resolved the transformation zone and reintegrated his domain with Earth, he would be unable to trigger the defences and eliminate them.

After warning the others that they should take the time to mentally prepare to face unknown challenges, Jason spent the day in meditation, readying himself for whatever was to come.

## Chapter 452

### Small Mercies

Jason had made a tradition of triggering the territory transfigurations alone on his balcony, but he changed his pattern because he was unsure of what would come next. Shade's VTOL plane form was hovering just outside the pagoda entrance, blasting wind. Jason went outside to join the three vampires, Mr North and Gerling.

Standing with them, Jason closed his eyes and initiated the change. The others sensed nothing from Jason's newest and most distant territory, but Jason felt it immediately start transforming. To Gerling and the others, Jason was just standing still with his eyes closed. This continued as the remote territory took time going through the transfiguration process.

"Asano?" Gerling finally asked.

"Sorry, it's been done for a few minutes," Jason said. "I was just standing here like this to annoy you. I'm saving the world, Gerling, not ordering a coffee. Shut up and wait."

Eventually, the process reached its conclusion.

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- Your domain now encapsulates the entirety of the transformation zone and convergent astral space. You have successfully integrated and stabilised the physical and astral components of the space.
  - Your domain now abuts the dimensional membrane between the physical and the astral. Due to the damaged nature of the dimensional membrane, an astral rift has formed, allowing the intrusion of external forces.
  - To fully incorporate your domain into the physical reality without further damage to the dimensional membrane, excise the external forces maintaining the rift in order to close it.
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Jason could sense the dimensional rift at the boundary of his domain and the astral entities pouring through. Most astral beings were unable to exist in a physical space, even one infused with astral energy like the domain Jason had formed from the transformation zone blended with a collapsing astral space. One that could was an astral being Jason was familiar with, although these were more powerful than the ones he had encountered in the past. His eyes snapped open.

"Let's go."

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One of Jason and Shade's first interactions, before Shade had even become Jason's familiar, was Shade's warning Jason and his companions about vorger. Now Shade gave the same warning to Jason's new companions, making him want his old ones back.

"The vorger cannot exist in a true physical realm," Shade explained as the plane flew rapidly in the direction of the rift. "Until it is fully integrated with Earth, this space still contains some properties of the astral space we were all in when it formed. This is how they can exist here."

"So, why don't we integrate the place, then?" Gerling asked. "Shoving it back into Earth was the point of all this, right? Why not do that and kick these creatures out while we're at it?"

"Because something is maintaining the rift they're using to enter from the astral," Jason explained. "I can feel the rift. I can feel whatever's out there, waiting as it holds the rift open."

"Whatever?" Gerling asked.

"It's not a vorger," Jason said. "It's something else. It feels familiar, but I can't quite sense it enough to recognise."

"You said waiting," Elizabeth said. "Waiting for what?"

"For whoever defends this realm," Shade said. "It is common for astral beings that can enter semi-physical space to feed on physical beings. That energy anchors them and allows them to stay. When the vorger do this, they warp and deform flesh. If they do it enough, the person is turned into a flesh abomination, their soul forever trapped inside. They no longer control their own bodies, yet cannot pass into death unless someone kills them."

"You want to avoid them doing that," Jason said. "I've seen those abominations and you don't want to be one."

"You still haven't explained why we don't just shut it all down and end this," Gerling said.

"Because we may have stabilised the transformation space, but now we have rogue elements running around inside it," Jason said. "We have to purge them and then we can finish it and finally get out of here. After that, we can go back to trying to kill one another."

"The vorger are incorporeal," Shade warned. "Without a power that allows you to affect them, or an affinity to the astral, they can touch you while you cannot harm them in turn. They are, however, subject to spiritual forces. You all have strong auras. If you can wield them as weapons, they will be effective."

“That shouldn’t be a problem for the essence users amongst us,” Mr North said, looking at Jason and Gerling. “The rest of us have auras that are less actively controlled and more inherent to our nature.”

“You will likely be unable to make use of your auras in the appropriate manner,” Shade acknowledged. “I recommend you leverage what abilities you have as best you can.”

“I think I can help,” Gerling said. “I have a power that lets me pass off some power to others. You saw me using it to enhance my men. One of the things I can do with it is to invest you with a power that hurts ethereal stuff. It’ll shield you a little, but mostly add special damage to your physical attacks. Good for ghostly stuff and pretty good for breaking magic shields, too.”

“It’s called disruptive-force damage,” Jason said and Gerling gave him an assessing look.

“Must be nice to have a power that gives you all the answers.”

Disruptive force damage was a bane to incorporeal creatures, but Jason’s best source was Gordon, who was still awaiting a resummons. He was not concerned about the vorger personally, though, as he had many tools to fight them. His ability to make soul attacks alone was even more dangerous to them than Gordon, with the only question being if they were strong enough to endure it.

Unlike the anomalies, whose power was tied to the level of the transformation zone, these external invaders varied in rank. They were a mix of silver and gold-rank, the golds being the ones that gave Jason pause. The true threat was the entity just beyond his senses, however, due to not yet having entered his domain. He had a very bad feeling that the strain of power he sensed was diamond-rank, in which case all their efforts could easily be for naught. He did not voice this concern, since there was nothing to be done about it anyway.

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Unlike the anomalies that appeared all around a territory, the vorger poured in from a single rift in the sky over Jason’s latest territory. They seemed to be no fewer in number, though, which meant that the ghost-like creatures formed a sea of translucent white, glowing faintly in the dark sky. They were eerily silent, even as they stormed out of the astral, giving them an uncanny air.

The Communist Bloc style city had transfigured into a grim city of night, with dark, narrow alleys and moonlight glistening off rain-soaked streets. Jason immediately thought

of the establishing shot of pretty much every Batman movie. It was a good environment for the vampires.

Although the vorger seemed endless, they were being rapidly annihilated by Jason and his companions. Jason was the most prominent, with any vorger coming remotely close getting annihilated by soul attacks. Even the gold-rank ones put up little fight and the area around Jason became an empty bubble in a sea of ghosts as he moved around to sweep them up.

The most prominent difference between Jason's approach and the others was that when he assaulted the vorger with soul attacks, they made a noise. Normally silent, even as the others dispersed them by various means, Jason's attacks made them let out a glass-shattering screech. Since Jason was wiping them out in job lots, the battle was punctuated by chorus bursts of ghostly death shrieks.

Gerling required more effort than Jason to disincorporate the vorger with his aura, but he quickly caught onto the means. Once he figured out how to make a powerful weapon of it, he was like a giant with a hammer smashing through them.

Mr North and Elizabeth teamed up to use their unique ritual magic variations to set up defensive rituals, reminding Jason of Clive's combat style. Mr North created a web-pattern magic diagram set out in the middle of a street. He and Elizabeth stood in the middle of it and any vorger that came near found itself entangled in a web, despite its ethereal nature.

Elizabeth in turn, set up five ritual circles around the central web diagram. From each, a nest of long red tentacles emerged to lash at the vorger. They were able to extend and snake off around corners and down alleys, as if infinite in length. They sought out the vorger, wrapped around them and squeezed, the ghostly entities popping like balloons. This proved a terror to the vorger, with only Jason's aura being more avidly avoided.

The other vampires did not fare quite as well, at least at first. Gerling's power helped, but only so much in the face of the ghost tsunami. Georges, who could take on the powers and skills of things whose blood he drank, was troubled at first because the vorger had no blood to drink. Jason changed that for him, by casting a spell. Georges learned of it when he heard the icy voice Jason reserved for enemies.

*"Bleed for me."*

One of the vorger in Georges' face turned from translucent white to a red mist, with the familiar, coppery scent of blood. To Georges, it smelled amazingly appetizing and he sucked it in like he was playing tricks with cigarette smoke. Georges himself became a little translucent and suddenly he could touch the vorger as if they were physical things.

Their touch was now harmless to him. Georges unleashed his inner beast, his gold-rank speed and vampiric ferocity tearing a path through the vorger.

The last vampire, Klaus, suffered the worst. Jason also made some of the vorger in front of Klaus bleed, but consuming them was not as effective. Consumption made Klaus faster and stronger, neither of which was of great help against ghosts. Even if partially inured to their attacks by the energy infused into his body by Gerling's power, Klaus was slowly warped by the touch of one creature after another.

Jason was unable to cleanse the effect with his power as the vorger's touch left behind an affliction of the magic type, which fell outside his power to dispel. This was common amongst cleansing powers, which tended to affect curses, diseases and poisons. Mostly, the kind of things Jason did to people. Magic cleansing was the purview of magic specialists like Clive, along with dedicated healers.

When the vorger made a final surge, each combatant was isolated in a final effort by the ghostly creatures to overwhelm them. A massive wave attempted to inundate Jason's aura and overwhelm it, requiring him to dig deep and push back. He weathered the powerful and costly offensive in which countless vorger perished but was left mentally drained. He felt like he was low on mana, even though he was almost fully topped off.

The vorger finally gave up and retreated, leaving only scattered stragglers behind. Jason and the others regrouped and started clearing the stragglers, aside from Klaus. They found what was left of him, transformed into a pile of formless, grotesque flesh. It was already dead.

"I believe," Shade said, emerging from Jason's shadow, "that his vampiric nature has given him the mercy of death. Vampires sustain a false life using the life force they have stolen through blood. Once he was taken too far from his vampiric state, he could no longer contain that life force and it escaped, leaving the flesh to die."

Jason crouched to take a closer look at Klaus' remains.

"I know we were ultimately enemies," he said, "but that's a rough way to go out. And rough ways to go are my bread and butter. At least his soul won't be trapped in a twisted prison of his own body."

"Small mercies." Elizabeth said as a spear plunged into Jason's back, bursting out of his chest.

"Which is more mercy than you'll get," Gerling said, leveraging the spear shaft to heighten Jason's pain. "It's time for this idiotic game of charades to end."

## Chapter 453

### Salus Mundi Suprema Lex Esto

“Do you have any idea how hard it was to get the materials for a category four suppression device?” Gerling asked, jerking the spear again. “I’m impressed that it takes something this strong to shut your powers down.”

Jason collapsed to the ground, the spear still running through him. He groaned through gritted teeth. The surviving vampires and Mr North gathered around.

“Fortunately,” Gerling continued, “there’s been an upswing in category four proto-spaces. So while you were running around killing superheroes and playing with your magic door, I’ve been getting ready. Even so, I never could get the materials for a suppression collar. It had to be something implanted.”

Again he twisted the spear.

“To my delight, the implantation was allowed to be quite rough. As you’re experiencing.”

“You have no idea what you’re doing,” Jason said. “I’m the only one who can—”

Jason was cut off by Gerling’s boot to the back of his head, crushing his face into the wet asphalt.

“You think you’re so special, Asano. The chosen one, destined to save the world because no one else can.”

Gerling ground Jason’s face into the street with his foot.

“You’re not special,” Gerling said. “The stuff you have is. So I’m going to take it from you. I’m going to take it all.”

“You can’t.”

“Impossible just means you haven’t taken the time to figure it out,” Gerling said.

“While you were running around, claiming to be the Messiah, I was making preparations, as I said. This spear...”

Jason groaned with pain as Gerling yanked it sideways like a boat tiller.

“...was only the start.”

Gerling open a small leather pouch on his belt and took out a rainbow orb, the size of a large marble.

“This,” Gerling said, “is much more impressive than its size denotes. I’d even say it’s the most impressive thing on this planet, for the simple reason that it can claim possession of anything else.”

“Contingencies on contingencies,” Mr North said. “The spear was a failsafe, in case whoever ended up with the door proved unreliable or uncontrollable. I should congratulate you, Mr Asano, on being quite thoroughly both. Mr Gerling and I have come to an equitable arrangement where he will be my agent, and the face of saving the world going forward.”

“You can’t,” Jason said. “The door is a part of me. It’s part of my soul, now.”

“And this will draw it out,” Gerling said. “I really hope it hurts.”

“Do you even realise who made this thing?” Mr North asked. “The power of a great astral being is literally beyond your mind’s ability to comprehend. It lacks the frame of reference to contextualise it.”

The pained expression on Jason’s face vanished as his eyes went wide.

“Oh,” he said. “I knew I sensed something I recognised.”

The spear blurred and vanished, along with Jason’s injuries as he got to his feet.

“I may not be able to contextualise the power of a great astral being, but I know even they can't violate a soul. Maybe you could have sold me on it since I don't know that much about great astral beings. Except that I've lived through the proof. The Builder huffed and he puffed but my soul was built out of bricks.”

Jason pushed out with his aura at full strength. The diamond rank power that had him in its grip was reliant on his accepting the scenario, but even so, it was hard to push away. It was like being trapped under an unconscious person, who wasn’t actively trying to keep him down but was so heavy they were hard to escape. Jason gave it everything he had, straining to push back. Only due to his abnormal strength and the unique traits of his aura was he able to force away the oppressive power.

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#### Title: Indomitable

- Your repeated defiance in the face of more powerful enemies and willingness to sacrifice everything for a cause has marked your soul. Your resistance to aura suppression is further enhanced and ignores rank disparity.
- Your aura signature has changed. Your unwavering resolve floods your aura and can be detected if your aura is examined by an aura sensing power or when projecting your aura. Allies within your aura have increased resistance to aura suppression.

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Gerling, Mr North and the vampires shimmered and vanished as the true scene was revealed. Jason was lined up next to Gerling and the vampires. In front of them was a nightmare hag, a diamond-rank entity that had little direct power but could manipulate

fears. It looked a lot like Shade if he's been put through a heavy wash cycle; a ragged, shadowy figure. It had one arm outstretched, connected to Gerling and the vampires with three beams of silver-blue light. The luminescence of the light that had just been severed between Jason and the creature was still fading away.

Mr North was also in the line of nightmare victims but had broken free of the trance state even quicker than Jason.

"You threw it off," Jason said, bending over with a weary groan, hands on knees.

"I have accepted my fate, Mr Asano. I have nothing left to fear."

"Sure," Jason grunted. "How the hell are we supposed to kill a nightmare hag?"

"You know what this thing is?" Mr North asked.

"I've faced one before, but Shade knows more than me."

One of Shade's bodies emerged from Jason's shadow.

"For diamond-rank creatures," Shade said, "nightmare hags are breathtakingly weak, at least in direct confrontation. They are, however, almost impossible to eliminate. More typically, they are bound and used for various purposes, as happened with the Order of the Reaper."

"I thought they manifested your fears as a weapon," Jason said.

"That is their means of fighting, and what makes them so dangerous," Shade said.

"They can manifest diamond rank spiritual constructs in the form of people's fears. Their method of feeding, however, is to place people in a scenario where their fears consume them."

"If you've encountered one of these in the past," Mr North asked, "how did you handle it then?"

"Other people's fears are like a box of chocolates," Jason said. "You never know what you're going to get. It created a diamond-rank version of me that was a lot more like you. One that no longer sees lines to cross. Apparently, these hags being hard to kill doesn't apply to their own manifestations."

"It killed that hag so that you would eventually become the same as the manifestation?" Mr North asked.

"No," Jason said. "It killed the hag because it refused to be controlled."

"The manifestations are accurate, then," Mr North said.

"I hope not," Jason said. "Shade, any idea on how to handle this thing?"

"To anchor itself here, it will need to feed on at least one physical being," Shade said.

"You and Mr North have denied it, leaving the others."

"We have to save them?" Mr North said. "Help them escape, somehow?"

“Shade, if this thing gets denied, it goes back through the rift, right? Job done?”

“That would be my understanding,” Shade said. “I would like to be clear that this is not a scenario in which I am comfortable making definitive statements.”

“We stick to the plan, then,” Jason said, pulling an object from his inventory.

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Item: [Travis' Big Rocket] (silver rank, rare)

*Definitely not compensating for anything (consumable, bazooka).*

- **Effect:** Launches a rocket containing vast and destructive powers of solar and kinetic energy.

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Jason slung the huge rocket over his shoulder.

“Curse my sudden, yet inevitable betrayal.”

“What is that?” Mr North asked.

“A sun nuke, by way of astral reconfiguration. I thought I'd have a Godzilla monster or something as an excuse to fire this thing off, but having Gerling and the vamps just stand there in a trance is fine too. Can't dawdle, though. Got to get this done before any of them die or break free.”

Jason opened a portal, which Mr North stared at.

“So, you can,” he said.

“Yes,” Jason said.

“You shipped us all back and forth via vehicle to reinforce that you couldn't portal?”

“Got to have an escape plan. Are you going to fight for your life, Mr North?”

“No,” Mr North said, his voice weary. “You won't let me go and the world can't afford to lose you. The welfare of the world must be the supreme law. I knew from the moment I was trapped here that this moment would come, and perhaps it's for the best. I do have a conscience, you know. I suppose it's time to pay for my many mistakes. I do love my adopted world, you know.”

“I believe you,” Jason said. “Sometimes the things we love are the things we hurt the most.”

A window appeared in front of Mr North.

- 
- [Jason Asano] has invited you to form a party. Accept Y/N?

---

“Why?” Mr North asked.

"I'm about to leave a henchman to kill all my enemies while I go away, assuming everything went to plan. Classic villain move, so I want some assurances."

"That I die."

"Yes. I considered letting you live, you know. I do believe you want to help."

"But you can't trust the way I might choose to help in your absence."

"I like you, Mr North, in spite of everything. But I also fear turning into you. And I can't leave that behind me when I'm gone."

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➤ [\[Noreth\] has joined your party.](#)

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"Noreth?"

"The name my essence user gave me. It was very precious to me, once."

Jason nodded and handed the rocket to Shade.

"There is a vault," Noreth said. "It's hidden under one of the remote magic accumulators Miss Hurin set up to accumulate and feed magic your village in Australia."

"How did you manage that?"

"With great difficulty. Even lacking the main village defences, Miss Hurin was not incautious about its protections."

"How do I open this?"

"It will only open for two people. You and I."

"Is it a trap?"

"It has traps. I advise you to have Miss Hurin assist you. Speaking of which..."

"Barbou," Jason said.

"Please ask her to make it quick and clean. Call it a final request."

"I'll ask. If she says no, I won't push. She'll probably say no."

"I know. Now, leave. You've tarried too long already."

Jason nodded.

"Goodbye, Noreth."

"Goodbye, Mr Asano. Do better for this world than I did."

Jason moved to step through the portal when Noereth called out to him.

"Actually, Mr Asano, there is one more thing I'd like to do, if you'll permit me."

\*\*\*

Jason stepped out of the portal into the mezzanine lounge of the pagoda. Barbou and Gerling's men rushed up as Jason walked towards the elevating platform. Jason didn't so much as glance in their direction, instead, holding out a hand slick with blood. Leeches

sprayed out over Gerling's men but left Barbou untouched. He skittered away fearfully as the others collapsed, screaming and yanking leeches off themselves. Jason rode the elevating platform up as his portal sank into the floor as the other end of it was destroyed.

"Thank you, Shade."

"You are welcome, Mr Asano," Shade's voice came from his shadow.

Jason reached the top floor master suite, went into the study and took a red crystal from a drawer. It was the one that Elizabeth had given him, in order to survive whatever attack she assumed he had planned. It lit up as it activated, a beacon to draw in the soul after the vampire died. Jason took out a reclamation orb and touched it to the crystal. The crystal started growing dim as the orb started filling with rainbow light. It did not fill all the way before the crystal blackened and crumbled.

---

➤ You have defeated [Georges Albon].

---

"Georges?" Jason muttered. He extended his senses throughout his domain, which covered the entirety of the transformation zone. Neither Elizabeth nor her blood crystal appeared anywhere within.

"Shade," Jason said. "I believe I've been played. Could a disembodied soul successfully leave the transformation zone, even while it's sealed like this?"

"The only way to trap a soul, Mr Asano, is in its own body, as with the flesh abominations. A god of death can guide a soul, but not bind one. The Reaper can open passages for a soul, but also cannot bind one."

"Open passages?"

"I will not be drawn into speaking on the role of my progenitor, Mr Asano. You know this."

"Fine. I think Elizabeth had her blood crystal outside the transformation zone this whole time. She somehow got Georges' crystal, maybe even made it herself. She passed it off as hers so I'd think I had her at a disadvantage."

"Then she has likely escaped."

\*\*\*

The blast zone of the nuclear solar rockets was a crater. Ash and dust blocked out the sky and the former gothic cityscape had been levelled for kilometres. Noreth dug his way out of the ground from where he had buried himself deep, inside a cocoon of magical webbing. It was just enough that he survived given that, while the force of the rocket was

immense, it was still only a silver-rank power. Noreth was gold rank, as were the preparations he made to shield himself.

Even with his preparations, his cocoon had been crushed, as had Noreth himself. Buried underground, he had to wait for bones to snap back into place before digging his way out. Once he did, he started laying out a ritual circle with webs.

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There was a rush of rainbow light in the crater, not unlike the manifestation of a monster, but this was something else. Gerling appeared from the light, bare naked, his immortality power having brought him back even from full bodily annihilation. He was still coming to his senses, when webs started whipping out from a series of nearby ritual circles, binding him between them.

"I was a little worried you'd come back before I was ready," Noreth said. "I was lucky, in this regard. Also, in that you never unsealed your strength power. You won't be able to pull yourself free, not without more tricks than you have in your bag right now."

"What do you want, North?" Gerling snarled.

"You know I only came to this place for you, right? You took my friend."

"Someone like you doesn't have friends."

"I may be a monster, Mr Gerling, but not an unfeeling one. You took my friend and I came to get him back. Because of this, he and I will both soon be dead. I can't save either of us, Mr Gerling. Or you. When you think about it, you have led all three of us to our doom in this place."

"We can team up. Fight Asano."

"No, Mr Gerling. Mr Asano was kind enough to let me take a small measure of revenge on the man who brought us here. After that, I will take my own life."

"It doesn't have to be like this," Gerling said.

"It didn't, Mr Gerling, but now it does."

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Jason opened his eyes and his vision departed from the crater where Gerling died.

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➤ **Party member [Noreth] has died.**

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"So, that's it then," Jason said.

"Will you pursue Elizabeth after reintegrating the transformation zone?" Shade asked.

"No," Jason said. "I'm done with vampires and magic factions. It's time to finish the job and go home."

“Home, Mr Asano?”

“Yeah. This world isn't it anymore.”

## Chapter 454

### Something Other Than Human

“Dr Asano, I would like to thank you again for letting us set up the interim government here. Best estimates are over a year before Paris will be restored to the point of initiating repopulation.”

“Thank you for helping push through the Transformed Relocation project with the UN, Mr President,” Yumi said. “The first of the transformed will be arriving this week.”

“It’s not entirely selfless, Dr Asano. We will be in Saint-Étienne for a time, but for the transformed, it will be a home. Many have been treated poorly after losing their humanity and I believe that things will be more harmonious if we earn some goodwill.”

Yumi and the interim French president walked along an empty street. The city of Saint-Étienne was, for the moment, still largely empty. Most of it was occupied by Jason’s spirit domain, which had remade the city. There were some remnants that the transformation zone hadn’t absorbed, left in ruins by the vampire occupation. It was not back to the way it was. The new Saint-Étienne was more like a French city as imagined by a man whose knowledge of France came from watching too many whimsical French films. The interim president was diplomatic enough not to point that out.

The vampires had abandoned France after the transformation zone was unsealed and Jason’s spirit domain became the centre of a new high-magic zone. It was retaken by eager Network forces, although it was made clear that Jason’s spirit domain only answered to one man.

“If I may ask,” the president said, “where is your grandson? He has never been big on public appearances but it’s like he fell off the side of the world in the last few months. The Network would very much like to—”

“We are aware of what the Network would very much like,” Yumi said. “Jason has not fallen off the side of the world quite yet. He has eschewed his worldly concerns, outside of preparing the clan for his departure.”

“If I may ask, Dr Asano, what exactly is this nebulous threat your grandson is saving us from? He’s not exactly forthcoming on the details, which is why so many doubt him. I’m an administrator, chosen both for my ability to get the reclamation up and running and for lacking the charisma come election time. I know little of magic and am just one more person struggling in a world that has completely changed.”

"I think you might be a better politician than you claim, Mr President. I don't understand all that much myself, but how long has it been since there was a transformation zone, anywhere in the world?"

"Forty-two days."

"That's where my grandson has been, Mr President."

\*\*\*

"United Nations Liaison to the Asano Clan?" Jason asked.

"You're the one who started taking over chunks of sovereign territory," Anna told him.

"That was never my intention."

"Then give it back."

"Anyone who wants it can come and take it," Jason said, his voice an iron fist in a silk glove. Jason led Anna from the helicopter pad outside the pagoda in Saint-Étienne, taking her inside. The atrium was full of people, very few of whom were human. They walked through the crowd towards what was now a bank of elevating platforms, part of various design changes Jason had made to accommodate the clan. The pagoda was ultimately a cloud construct, even if it rarely showed, and could be altered with alacrity and ease.

"I'm surprised no one is looking at you," Anna said as they navigated the crowd. "You're more or less the head of state, at this point."

She was awkwardly stepping around delicate elves and huge leonids while they unconsciously parted for Jason. Anna quickly learned to walk right behind him.

"They don't see me. Or, more precisely, their minds actively ignore my presence. It's an aura manipulation trick I picked up some time ago from Craig Vermilion. There is a lot to learn from how vampires use their auras."

"There's a new leader who had managed to rise up amongst the vampires," Anna said. "They've separated from the Cabal, who pretty much rule Africa and Russia at this stage. She's concentrating power in parts of Europe and Central America, pulling back from aggressive action."

"I've met Elizabeth," Jason said lightly. They arrived at the elevating platform and got on, alongside several other people.

"So I've heard," Anna asked. "I'd love to hear more."

"She and I spent some time together. I tried to kill her but she outplayed me."

"Some of our intelligence suggests that she's holding back until you're gone. That she wants to avoid you trying again and knows that you intend to leave this world behind."

"That's more likely obfuscation," Jason said. "She's probably just taking the time to consolidate her power."

“Our analysts agree. The ancient vampires seem to have realised that they need to work together but that isn’t natural for them. Many aren’t happy about pulling back after the successful attacks on network holdings in Germany and want to take advantage of the civil war in the US.”

“She’s not stupid enough to poke the dragon while it’s chasing its own tail. Not my concern, in any case. The vampire war is your apocalypse, Anna, not mine.”

“And how is your apocalypse going?” she asked. “A lot of very powerful people made very sure that I’d ask.”

“It’s all finished but the paperwork,” Jason said. “I need to finish up in the other world but for practical purposes, the job is done. To the best of my understanding, the dimensional membrane stopping the earth from spilling out the side of the universe will slowly recover over the next couple of decades. At the very least, things here are no longer escalating. Barring some god-like dimensional entity showing up to make trouble, you can rest easy.”

“Some kind of public announcement would be nice,” Anna said. “We can do it with the UN, make it nice and legitimate. There are a lot of worried people out there, and a lot of crazies stoking trouble. It would be nice if you could explain it all.”

“What do you want me to do, Anna? Go on TV and start talking about alien gods? You want the UN to endorse a message that goes directly against most of the world’s religious beliefs? Remind me what the revelations about magic and monsters did for global religious harmony?”

“We can couch the language to excise anything contentious.”

“People never much liked the truth, Anna. There’s little point feeding them half of it. Let them think what they want. I don’t care anymore.”

Anna looked at Jason’s impassive face. She remembered the wild, animated man she had met just a couple of years ago. He seemed much older despite, if anything, looking younger. There was a tiredness to him, to the way his bizarre eyes watched the world around him.

“Coming back to this world has done more to you than going to the other one did, hasn’t it?” she asked.

“Any sign that Gerling or Mr North are still alive?” he asked, ignoring her question.

“I thought they were both dead. I heard you saw it with your own eyes.”

“I looted their bodies, but I’ve been deceived before and death isn’t always the end. I know that better than most.”

“There has been no sign of Gerling or Mr North. As best we can tell, they both are truly dead. I have no information on Adrien Barbou, either, past Gerling raiding the EOA headquarters and taking him. I don’t suppose you know his ultimate fate.”

“He’s dead. That, I am certain of. Is the EOA showing signs of recovery?”

“No. Somehow, someone got access to the vast majority of their funds and siphoned them away. They lost half their leadership. More, once you realise how much Mr North kept from the others, which we’re still only finding out about now. Recovery isn’t possible and do many of its people are being absorbed into different Network factions.”

Jason nodded absently but didn’t say anything.

“Jason, we traced where the money went.”

“We’re taking in non-humans from all over the world, Anna. Even with the infrastructure I’m bringing to the table, that takes a lot of funding.”

“The UN has offered to help with that.”

“Talk to my uncle Hiro. He’s managing the relocation program on our end.”

The elevating platform took them to the pagoda’s portal chamber, now a warehouse-sized space occupying an entire floor. The walls had archways much larger than those Jason created himself, all of which were open portals. It was a hubbub of activity, with people, forklifts and even supply trucks coming in and out under the direction of a harried group of Asano clan members in visibility shirts.

Jason led them to one of the portals where Asano clan members were checking everyone going in and out.

“Patriarch!” one of them said, startled as Jason stopped masking his presence from her. She was nineteen years old and Jason’s second cousin. He had given up on trying to stop the clan members from calling him that.

The clan structure had been instigated by the former members of the Japanese Asano clan, mostly Asano Akari’s father. Nothing had been heard from the Japanese Asano clan, led by Akari’s grandmother, Noriko.

Jason had not been on board with formalising the clan at first but was railroaded by his grandmother. Yumi had told him that if wanted a say in how the clan was organised, he was welcome to increase his participation in administering it. Jason had declared surrender, washing his hands of the whole thing.

“We’re going through to Slovakia,” Jason said.

“Of course,” Jason’s cousin said.

Jason and Anna went through the portal, arriving in an almost identical portal room. They took an elevating platform up to what was now known as the Patriarch’s suite on the

top floor and Jason led them out to the balcony. Compared to her last visit, when it was ruined and empty, all was repaired and odd folk bustled about in the streets. Celestines and leonids, elves and even more exotic people. The once devastated landscape had been repaired under the attentions of Jason's father, Ken.

"It's looking better," Anna said.

"Yes," Jason said. "My father has found it very fulfilling. There's a lot of damage to be fixed around the world and my father's powers and experience are well-suited to handling them."

Anna turned to look at Jason.

"You wanted to take him with you," she intuited.

"He has found a new purpose. I won't try and deny him that."

"So it will just be your sister and her family leaving with you?"

"No," Jason said. "They've elected to stay."

Neither his face nor his aura betrayed his feelings on that.

"My sister had taken the food logistics of the relocation project in hand," he said.

"You'll be seeing a lot of her in your new role, I suspect. Her husband is working with the new medical infrastructure and research team."

"I heard you poached Gladys from the Network. Ketevan wasn't happy."

"We need a lot of people with a lot of expertise. Learning the ins and out of many new species is quite the challenge, even before you start getting into essence users and any other magical quirks that may appear."

"What about your niece?"

Jason bowed his head.

"I'm not the uncle she knew. Not even the one who came back, from before the monster waves. They love me, but they look at me and don't recognise these eyes. Or the man behind them."

"You scare them."

"Yes."

"I won't lie, Jason. You scare us all. Some of the most powerful beings on the planet went into that transformation zone and only two of you came out. One came out queen of the vampires and the other came out with a kingdom."

"I'm not a king, Anna. Mayor, maybe, although that's my grandmother, really."

"Jason, unless you want to let the French and Slovakian authorities reclaim the land, you're a de facto head of state. They're playing nice now, while they're scared and happy that the vampires are staying away. The time will come, though, when they start looking to

take that land back. And even if they don't, what will you do with it? You know you have more territory than the Vatican, right? That's not even counting those astral spaces of yours."

"I've left grandmother in charge of all of that," Jason said. "She'll be more amenable to cooperation than I am anymore."

"She can't do the things you can do."

Anna's aura senses weren't sophisticated enough to understand what Jason did but everything around her seemed to go still.

"Rather than try and get me to do the things I can do," Jason said, "you should be very glad that I've elected not to do them. I'm done with it all, Anna. I'm leaving the clan with as many resources as I can and I am going. This world is better off without me, now, and I'm better off without it."

"This world could use you."

"This world did. Goodbye, Anna. Shade will take you to see Grandmother."

"This way, Mrs Tilden," Shade said, emerging from Anna's shadow.

"One more thing," Anna said. "Some rumours I've heard."

"You mean you've checked in with your spies within the clan."

She didn't deny it.

"Is your clan resuming the human augmentation research that the EOA was conducting? You've been scooping up certain former EOA people the Network had its eye on. The Network has more expertise in this area. They're willing to collaborate."

"I'll bet they are. I don't trust them to avoid the same shortcuts that Mr North did," Jason said. "I have given the clan only a few hard rules to follow in my absence, and the way that research is conducted is at the top of the list. I've already made sure it's impossible to replicate the existing process for creating silver-rank augmented humans."

"The clockwork cores," she said. "We've been debriefing ex-EOA as their organisation collapses in on itself. The source of the cores went missing, months before Mr North died. We believe he took it."

"He did."

"How much of North's assets did you get your hands on? Did you torture it out of him in the transformation zone?"

"I didn't torture him, Anna. He was a monster that wanted to be a hero and got it very wrong. He hoped that I wouldn't be the same as him."

"We all do, Asano. You're not a monster."

“It feels like this world wants me to be. Do you remember what I used to be like? I got kidnapped and a few hours later we were trading some fun banter in your kitchen.”

“That wasn’t fun for me, Asano. I was afraid you were going to kill my wife.”

“Oh, that reminds me. Shade, give her the painting on the way out.”

“Painting?” Anna asked.

“Something Dawn left behind. A gift for your wife.”

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Jason and Farrah had spent weeks drawing out the ritual circle by shaping and placing stones. They were using a football field in an isolated outback town in Australia, never repopulated after the monster surge. The entirety of the circle could only be made out from the air.

Using their wings of fire and wings of darkness to survey their work, Farrah and Jason reviewed and tweaked the largest and most powerful ritual either would likely ever be involved in. At the very least, they wouldn’t expect to top it before reaching diamond rank.

After hours of work every day for the better part of a week, they were finally done. They sat in the sun-weathered wooden stands of the old football field, the last paint job flaked and gone before Jason was born.

“I think we’re good,” Farrah said. “A few more tests to make sure. The final assessment has to be yours, though.”

Farrah was a better and more experienced ritualist than Jason, especially with a ritual of this scale. She was the one making sure that all the aspects worked together while Jason, as the specialist in astral magic, took the lead on the ritual’s purpose and core design.

“We’ve pretty much made a more elaborate Stonehenge,” Jason said. “In a footy field. That’s pretty awesome.”

“We’re opening a passage between realities and you think being in a dusty field in a town that was all but dead even before the monsters is what makes it impressive?”

“I do crazy dimension stuff all the time,” Jason said. “Rebooting Stonehenge is a new experience for me.”

“So,” Farrah said. “We can go whenever, now.”

Jason looked up at the sky, clear and blue.

“I wanted to come back home better than I left,” Jason said. “Now I think I’m leaving it worse than when I arrived.”

"We've talked before about Rufus telling you that there'd be hard choices," Farrah said. "I don't think he quite had all we've been through here in mind but only the scale was off, not the sentiment. Sacrificing your sense of self-worth because that's what it takes to do the right thing doesn't make you bad, Jason. It just makes you feel bad."

"When I faced a nightmare hag in your world, my fear was power corrupting me. When I faced one here, my fear was not being as special as I thought."

"I hate to break it to you, Jason, but you needing a little humility is not news."

"Did someone tell you that you're good at cheering people up? They lied to you."

"Jason, you're the second most important person in the world right now. That would mess with anyone's head. Add in the fact that you out-skill everyone here to an absurd degree, now. But don't worry; back in my world, I'll take you to Vitesse. In any big adventuring city, you'll just be some guy."

"I am looking forward to just being some guy again," Jason said.

"That won't be a problem. You're strong, I'm not playing that down, but over there you're far from unique. You and I are what they call guild level."

"Rufus told me to stay away from adventuring guilds."

"That's because guilds in dinky little province towns are just pointlessly aping how they do it in the big cities. There, all the top adventurers are in guilds. Guild level means you have the skills to be recruited by a real guild. Once you see it for yourself, you'll see why we were so dismissive of the Greenstone adventurers."

"You're in a guild?"

"Yeah. The Burning Violet guild. It's an old guild but after Rufus' grandfather became guild leader it became more and more associated with the Remore Academy. It's Rufus' family, plus allies like Gary and me. Gary's around the bottom of guild-level, to be honest, because he's as much a craftsman as an adventurer. Splitting your training time comes at a price."

"The guild must be strong if it's full of Remore Academy graduates," Jason said.

"It's okay, but you're underestimating the level of guilds in a city like Vitesse. Plus, most of the big-family graduates don't join. They have family connections that lead into the more prestigious guilds, but connections only open the door. The Remore Academy gives them the skills to walk through it. Mostly it's the lower-class graduates who join the Burning Violet guild."

"There are lower class graduates?"

“Sure. The Remore Academy has a huge scouting program, looking for people with potential. The academy does scholarships, puts them up in dormitories and trains them until they’re trying to escape, free tuition be damned.”

"You didn't attend the academy, did you?"

“No. I was already an adventurer when I met Rufus and Gary.”

“Undead taking over a town, right?”

“Yeah. You know, it’s funny; I used to think of that as this great horrible disaster. Compared to Makassar, though, it wasn't even a big deal. The numbers were smaller and the Adventure Society sent a whole contingent of gold-rankers, so there was never any doubt about resolving it. That’s why they let low-rankers like us participate.”

“That would be nice,” Jason said. “I’m looking forward to seeing people more powerful than me and being happy instead of afraid.”

“Well,” Farrah said. “It sounds like you’re ready to go. Just take a good look as you’re saying your goodbyes. You won’t be back for a long time. While you’re doing that, I’m going to Switzerland.”

“Switzerland?”

“So I can essence-up the most important person in the world. I’m going to need some essences, by the way. And some awakening stones. The good stuff, too; no cheapies. I could have done this a year ago if you’d told me she moved to Switzerland a quarter of a century ago. We didn't have to worry about the Americans at all.”

“I didn’t know.”

“You need to stay on top of these things, Jason.”

“You didn’t know either.”

“I’m from another universe!”

Jason shook his head.

“You know I can’t portal you all the way to Switzerland, right?”

“The United Nations is loaning me a plane. I promised Anna I’d help with the protection magic on the new UN building.”

“They’re going ahead with that?”

“Well, with the US civil war still going on, it’s not exactly a testament to peace.”

Jason groaned.

“I don’t want to get caught up in more mess, Farrah. You know that.”

“I know, but Anna’s a friend. While you were running around stomping out monster waves, I was working with her to get the grid back up and running. She’s a good person, Jason.”

Jason got to his feet.

“I know,” he said. “But I’m just done with it all. I have to let it all go.”

She stood up as well and gave him a warm but concerned smile.

“Are you sure you’re ready for that?” she asked. “The places, sure, but the people?”

“Yeah,” Jason said sadly. “I’m sure.”

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Jason made his farewells in France, on a warm autumn day. Taika complained about his mother and her opinions on French food. Travis wanted to go with Jason but knew that his contribution would be critical to the coming war with the vampires. He did, however, jump at the chance to give up his previous affiliation and work with the Asano clan. Jason extracted Travis’ family from the United States personally.

At the end, Jason drifted down the River Furan on a cloud construct pleasure yacht with his sister and niece. They didn’t speak of magic or monsters or leaving. They enjoyed each other’s company, played one of Greg’s board games out on the deck. Jason ignored the occasional glance Erika made at his strange eyes and what he read in her aura when she did.

After watching the sunset together, he opened a portal and sent them back to Saint-Étienne. He was about to close it when a small figure dashed back through and clamped him in a vice hug.

“Goodbye, Moppet,” he said, tousling her hair.

Jason’s body no longer had the physiological mechanisms to produce tears. He had been something other than human for a long time, but never had he felt it more than in that moment.

## Chapter 455

### Everyone Calls Me Gary

In the city of Greenstone, Gary Xandier and Rufus Remore walked quietly along an empty street, the night lit up by magical lamposts. Gary was a huge lion man, yet looked sunken and small, with none of his signature boisterousness.

“It was a good service, I thought,” Rufus said.

“Good service?” Gary reacted angrily. “Good service? He died saving this city and what does he get? A bunch of sneering nobles, glad to see him go. They hated him. They always hated him. Tiny people who tell themselves they’re giants.”

“There were friends there too, Gary.”

“Farrah wasn’t. She’s dead, Rufus. Now Jason’s dead. How long until Hester shows up at my door to portal me to your memorial service?”

“You could stick around. Watch my back.”

“I was watching Farrah’s back. We both were, and what could we do? Watch her die, that’s what. Adventuring was meant to be fun, Rufus. Remember that? See the world; help the people who need it. It turns out we’re the people who need it, Rufus.”

Gary hung his head.

“What will you do now? For a team, I mean. There’ll be no shortage of takers back in Vitesse.”

“They can stay there,” Rufus said. “I’m going to stick around, work on the new training centre.”

“Good,” Gary said. “Be a teacher, Rufus. Maybe we’ll live long enough to be old friends.”

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A flatland of long, yellow grass spanned to the horizon under a wide-open sky. Little more than a few sparse trees broke up the endless sea of gold, shifting gently in the breeze.

A remote village of low buildings was the sole population centre, with the few other buildings spread across the massive territory being ranches or other operations with no more than a handful of people. A lion-like leonid woman marched up to a cottage several kilometres outside the solitary village.

Accompanying the woman was a human man, who followed her to the cottage door. The building was a small stone affair, with an attached smith’s forge. The woman stood outside the door and bellowed a name.

“GARETH!”

Inside, Gary winced. The door hit the wall as it was slammed open, Gary’s hangover making it feel like it had hit his head on the way.

“Mum,” he groaned. “Did you open the door by yelling at it? Also, you know everyone calls me Gary.”

“No, everyone calls you the perpetually drunken blacksmith who half-arses his work. Are you sleeping on a pile of your dirty laundry?”

“I don’t suppose you’re here to wash it?”

“Although it might surprise anyone who knew you, you’re a grown man, Gareth. You’re old enough to do your own laundry.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Because somebody is too good to come visit his mother. Magda had to come get me, which does not reflect well on you as her employer.”

“That’s not what I pay her for.”

“No, you pay her to manage the business side of your smithy, which is hard to do when the smith spends all his time in a wine-soaked heap. You’re not an onion Gareth, so stop trying to pickle yourself.”

Gary patted around until his hand fell on an empty bottle and he held it up, even as he still lay in a pile of dirty clothes. He peered at the label.

“This is wine? I may have been ripped off.”

“You should listen to your mother, Gary,” came a familiar voice. Gary propped himself onto his elbows to see Rufus standing in the doorway, behind his mother.

“I’m going to let you two boys talk,” Gary’s mother said. “Afterwards, Gareth, you and I are going to have some words about keeping a clean house.”

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Gary eventually managed to navigate himself to actual furniture and sit at his dusty kitchen table. He leaned over it, propping his head up.

“Gary, you aren’t exactly looking your best,” Rufus said.

“You are,” Gary said. “Are you polishing your head again?”

“I don’t polish my head.”

“Sure you don’t. You hit silver?”

“The monster surge precursor signs have been going on for well over a year now, even if it increasingly seems like the surge will never come. There’s been a noticeable increase in silver-rank monsters in Greenstone, which got me over the threshold.”

"I thought you were going to run your new school instead of going back to adventuring."

"It's only a training annex, and I am. But you know what standards are like in Greenstone. All the good adventurers leave, so someone has to step up."

"Didn't a bunch come back for the monster surge?"

"We've been waiting for the surge for years at this point, Gary. These surge precursors have been showing for more than a year. It should have been weeks; months at the outside. People won't wait forever, especially in a place like Greenstone where all but the lowest ranks stagnate."

"So, you're leaving?"

"No. I'm still getting the training annex ready. It won't go into full operation until after the surge. The academy won't send people before then. Danielle Geller left. Managed to hit gold rank, or so I've heard."

"Good for her."

"You know, Gary, you were bronze-rank before I even had essences."

"It's not my fault you're immature," Gary said.

"I'm sorry," Rufus said. "Was I just called immature by the man who once forgot to wear pants to a fight?"

"I'm covered in fur, Rufus. It's easy to miss."

"Oh, I remember what you were covered in. It matted in your hair and we had to buy crystal wash to get it out, remember?"

"Right, yeah. Farrah wanted to just cut it out of my hair with scissors. She would have left me looking like a sick stray cat."

"Gary, you are a sick stray cat. Your mother asked me to come here from another continent. She's worried about you."

"She's my mum. That's her job."

"I'm worried about you."

"Don't, Rufus. Just don't."

"I'm not going to push. I do have something for you, though."

"The way this conversation is heading, I'm not sure that I want it."

Rufus took a small object from his pocket and placed it on the table.

"What is that?" Gary asked.

"You know what it is," Rufus said.

Gary picked up the monster core and held it between the thumb and forefinger of his huge hand. He turned it over, examining it before setting it back on the table.

“What do you want me to do with this?”

“If you want to push your smithing to the next level, you need to rank up. You’ve been bronze rank for my entire adventuring career and you’re on the very brink of silver.”

Rufus tapped the monster core with his finger.

“If you’re really done with adventuring, then this is how you rank up, now.”

Gary looked at Rufus silently for a long time.

“So, that’s what you’re doing. Trying to wake me up by making me choose.”

“Gary—”

“I don’t want to hear it, Rufus.”

Gary stood up, picked up the monster core and walked to the door of his modest cottage. He opened the door to reveal the huge span of yellow grass outside. He threw the monster core out into it with all his considerable strength.

“Rufus, you’re my best friend in the world and I love you. But get out of my house.”

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“I don’t know where he is,” Magda said. The leonid woman had been approached in the village by an unusual man, asking after her employer.

“He hasn’t been staying in his cottage,” Magda continued. “He comes in every couple of weeks and works for a few days, then goes again. I’ve just been going up to collect whatever he’s made to sell twice a month.”

Magda was nervous. The customer had the immaculate perfection of a very high ranker, so if he grew angry at Gary’s less than excellent work ethic, there was little they could do about it.

“It’s fine,” the man said, smoothly producing a gold-rank spirit coin. “Go home for a while and... Mr Xandier, was it?”

“Yes, Gareth Xandier. But everyone calls him Gary, except him mum.”

“When Mr Xandier is ready for your services again, he will find you. It may be some time, so this should carry you in the interim.”

He held out the coin for her to take, but she hesitated.

“Young lady,” he said, despite looking half of her forty years, “I assure you that I will take more offence at the rejection of my offer than the loss of the coin.”

Magda’s eyes went wide and she plucked the valuable spirit coin from his fingers, hurriedly, then was shocked at her own rudeness. He laughed lightly, holding up a hand to forestall her apology.

“It’s fine. I’ll have to go find him myself.”

“You aren’t going to hurt him, are you?”

“Oh, I probably am,” he said. “But there’s nothing you can do about that anyway, so you’d best run along.”

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Gary was unconscious in a hammock strung between two trees. A sword buried itself in one of the trees, cutting the strap holding up the hammock and dumping Gary on the ground.

Gary yelled angrily as he woke up, untangled in the hammock and tore it apart with his considerable strength. He scrambled awkwardly to his feet and looked around, seeing and sensing nothing. He was in a copse of thin, widely spaced trees and there shouldn’t have been space to hide.

He looked to the sword sticking out of the tree and yanked it out. He immediately realised it was his own work.

“This is one of mine,” he muttered.

“I’m surprised you’re willing to admit that out loud,” a voice said from behind him.

Gary turned to find a slender, handsome man standing before him. His clothes were as immaculate as his face, both out of place in the wild savannah. Gary couldn’t sense an aura, which could have meant silver rank, but his instincts told him otherwise. This was a dangerous man.

“What do you want?” Gary asked.

“I don’t just go around buying terrible swords, Mr Xandier,” the man said. “But I found that one to be especially infuriating.”

Gary looked at the sword in his hands. It had gone into and out of the tree without so much as a blemish. He hadn’t exactly put his heart and soul into making it but it was an entirely serviceable product.

“It’s a perfectly adequate sword,” he said, in defence of his work.

Gary didn’t see the blow coming or even feel it land. One moment he was standing there with a sword in his hands and the next he was tumbling across the ground. Only when he rolled to a stop did the sting of the strike hit him.

“Adequate,” the man said as if spitting out a slice of rotten fruit. “The next time I hear that word come out of your mouth, Mr Xandier, it won’t be a gentle tap like this one you get.”

He was already standing over Gary by the time Gary rolled over and painfully sat up.

“If you want your money back,” Gary told the man, “go ask the guy you bought it off. Also, kiss my pert, hairy rump.”

The man gave Gary an assessing look.

“You don’t care what I do to you, do you? You have some sense of my power and it just doesn’t matter to you.”

“Yep,” Gary agreed. “So, kill me or sod off; I’ve already got a smug friend. He died, but I’m not looking to refill the position.”

The man continued to stare at Gary.

“I see,” he said. “You tried your hand at adventuring and it didn't go so well. Lost people. I hate to break it to you, Mr Xandier, but that is hardly a fresh story. It's been told forever and will be told again forevermore.”

Gary let himself fall back in the grass.

“Oh no, I’m not special. Now you’ve tracked me down for this great revelation, can we get back to the part where you leave me alone?”

The man plucked a wooden chair out of the air and sat down next to Gary, still lying in the grass.

“Mr Xandier, my name is Virid Martine.”

“Gary. Stop calling me Mr bloody whatever.”

“Very well, Gary. Like you, I am a practitioner of the smithing arts.”

“Then make your own sword and leave me alone.”

“Gary, you will find that as you move into the upper realms of any craft, the principles you’ve formed start to inform your work. Over time, this becomes the basis for the nuances that make your signature style unlike that of any other.”

“If I told you my core principle was solitude, would you go away?”

“No. We’re here to talk about my core principle. It’s a simple one, being the idea that all skill, from sword mastery to dance to cooking to smithing, has foundational skills from which everything else stems. No matter how sophisticated or advanced the technique, it is, in some way, an extension of the foundational techniques.”

“I hate to break it to you,” Gary said, “but that principle is as much yours as it is everyone’s who has ever done anything.”

“Yes,” Virid agreed. “One might consider it the core principle of all skill. Yet, despite knowing this simple truth, so many go on to disregard it. They rush towards complexity, always seeking to push the boundaries without fully exploring the depths that the fundamentals have to offer. In doing so, they fail to grasp that foundations are where the greatest depths lie. The very things they seek are fragments of a greater whole.”

“That’s a great story, really. I’m not sure why you’re telling me, but you’ve given me a lot to think about. So, if you could just leave me to that...”

The sword Gary dropped when Virid hit him came flying through the air to slap into Virid's waiting hand.

"Everything we make tells a story," Virid said. "About us, about who we are and how we look at the world."

He turned the sword over in his hands.

"This sword tells the story of a man who is patient. Who doesn't rush to the end but fully explores that place he's already at, knowing there is more to learn. A man who spent years honing the basics of his craft rather than move on to the new, flashy thing. It also tells the story of a man who no longer cares. His skills are ready to move on, to advance his mastery, yet he lacks the will. He's become lazy and careless, with only the dedication of the past allowing him to get by on a series of shamefully adequate works."

Virid threw the sword and it shattered into pieces, falling into the grass.

"Because of my particular focus, I like to peruse the work of those still on the early stages of the path. When I saw this sword, I was infuriated. That someone whose steps on the path were so solid had lost their way."

Virid stood up, grabbed his chair and shoved it into the air, where it vanished. He then closed his eyes and stood in place, silently. Eventually, Gary sat up to look at him.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking for something," Virid said. "My aura senses are expansive enough that it can take a little time to hone in on something specific."

"Maybe you should be practising that, then, rather than harassing people who were perfectly happy in their hammock before you showed up."

Virid's eyes snapped open.

"Happy? Are you genuinely going to sit there and claim to have been happy?"

"Comfortable, then."

"Comfortable is an animal unaware it's waiting to be slaughtered."

With a gesture from Virid, a line of fire appeared in the grass but didn't burn it. An archway of blackened metal arose from the flames, which themselves then rose to fill it.

"On your feet, Mr... Gary. It's time to go."

"I know how portals work," Gary said. "You can make me do a lot of things, powerful as you are, but you can't make me go through that thing."

"True," Virid acknowledged. "What I can do is other things, until you agree to go through on your own. Do you want me to do other things, Gary?"

Gary's only response was a groan.

"That's what I thought. Now, get up."

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In the chaos of a monster attack, no one noticed a fiery portal open in the middle of a village. Virid and Gary stepped out and Gary immediately started whipping his head around. The village had mustered some kind of defence, from the shattered palisades and pikes lying beside the dead, but that defence had been broken. Now the screams of villagers and the shrieks of monsters mingled in air thick with the coppery taste of blood.

“Do something!” Gary yelled. “You’re powerful enough! Fix this!”

“My help comes at a price, Gary.”

“Just do something!”

“You don’t care what the price is?”

“NO!”

Virid made a casual gesture and moments later, silence passed over the village. Looking around, Gary spotted metal spikes sticking out of the ground, impaling every monster in sight.

“There you go,” Virid said lightly. Gary flashed him an angry look and rushed off to start checking on people.

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Virid and Gary were walking on the battlements of a fortress town, designed to accommodate the local populations during monster surges. After the destruction of the village, Virid and Gary had accompanied the survivors there.

“The world is growing dangerous,” Virid said. “This extended period of pre-surge monster activity is becoming worse than a monster surge due to its protracted length. It doesn’t present the full threat of a surge, but the world cannot hunker down and wait out years of heightened danger. People, especially those with the least resources and greatest isolation, are becoming victims.”

“You didn’t seem to much care in that village,” Gary said. “Putting terms on helping people as they died around us.”

“You don’t get to judge me, Gareth Xandier. You don’t know the things I’ve done, but I know what you’ve done. You’ve sat around, slowly drinking yourself to death while people out there are suffering. You think you’re excused because you don’t have a portal power? Just being far away doesn’t absolve you of failing to help any more than it does me.”

“Is this what your price is about?” Gary asked.

“Yes. I’m glad that you didn’t ask what it was, Gary. It speaks well of you.”

“So, what have I put myself in for?”

“You aren’t going to back out? I forced an agreement out of you under some duress.”

“We made a deal and you kept up your end,” Gary said. “I’m not going to just go back on my word.”

“Very well,” Virid said. “As we’ve both borne unfortunate witness to, there are many people in many places in need of help. We can’t fight for them all but, as smiths, what we can do is give them the tools to fight for themselves. Weapons, armour, reinforced gates. Not big, flashy works. Basic things. Foundational.”

“Why?” Gary asked. “Why me?”

“It’s not just you, Gary. Those of us that exist at the upper reaches of power like to step in during the monster surges but this time the challenges are greater. There are few of us and so many in need. We’ve taken it upon ourselves to recruit people we feel are responsible and capable enough to help where they can.”

“You could have just asked.”

“Could I? I found you through your sword, Gary, and that sword told a story. It wasn’t the story of a man ready to help. You had to see, to remember who you are.”

“And who is that?”

“Someone who cares enough that losing people can break him.”

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Five swords were floating in the air. Glowing yellow with heat. Like a symphony conductor, Gary waved his arms and they descended into the water troughs waiting below them.

“There are advantages to silver-rank,” he muttered to himself. He had held an instinctive aversion to using monster cores, but he knew he was never going back to adventuring. More than a year of travelling between remote villages and fortress towns, shoring up their defences had confirmed it. He could do far more swinging a hammer in a smithy than he could swinging one at a monster.

That was not to say that he hadn’t taken up his war hammer. Monsters had no interest in waiting for his work to be done before striking at towns, villages and homesteads.

Gary finished the last of his work, nodding with satisfaction. This last batch of swords marked the end of another village’s worth of work and it would be time to move on. He placed the swords in a crate that he easily shouldered before heading out of the smithy.

“Fuzzy man!”

The little elf girl clamped onto Gary’s leg like a limpet. He plucked her off by the back of her tunic and held her out, arms and legs wheeling.

“Hmm,” he said sternly. “I seem to have developed an unseemly growth on my leg.”

The elf girl's mother came along and took her little girl.

"Sorry, Gary."

"It's fine," Gary said with a chuckle. They walked towards the main street, Gary holding the swords on one shoulder and the woman holding her toddler, still straining to reach Gary.

"She's never seen a leonid before, and she won't like it when you're gone."

"My being gone means you're more ready to face danger than when I arrived," Gary said. "I can't feel bad about that."

"So, you still intend to leave in the morning?"

"Yes," Gary said. "Providing my transport shows up on time for once."

"That's a little rude," Virid said as the crate on Gary's shoulder opened and a sword floated out. It moved over to Virid, whose annoying enthusiasm for appearing from nowhere was undiminished.

"Not bad," Virid said as he examined the blade.

"It meets your standards, then?" Gary asked.

"Well, my standards are very high."

"Then you can offer me some guidance," Gary said. "Which is good, because I have questions."

"I walked right into that one," Virid complained. "I'm starting to regret you reaching silver-rank. Of all the people I've recruited, you're the one who bothers me the most."

"The others don't want you to help their craft along?"

"Yes, but their questions are shallow and lacking insight."

"Or you just don't like the way they're developing as master smiths."

"Which is the same thing. You know that most of them don't think that grinding out swords and pikes is helping them advance their skills?"

"It's fine," Gary said. "If you don't want to help me, you don't have to."

"I didn't say that," Virid said hastily.

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The latest town to receive Gary's attention was the largest he'd visited. Although the region was remote, the town was the trade and travel hub for all the little villages around it. Gary had been a part of converting the town into a semi-fortress town, and more than once had stepped out to face monsters that threatened it.

The town was having a feast to celebrate the completion of the new walls, with tables and spit roasts set out in the central square. Gary was gesticulating with a full roast leg,

spattering fat and sauce as he told a story to the people sharing his table. He stopped as his silver-rank hearing picked out familiar voices arguing.

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“Your shields are magic,” Belinda complained to Neil. “All they cost you is some mana. Every time one of my shields gets broken I need them fixed or replaced.”

“You’re an adventurer,” Neil said. “You can afford it.”

“We’re not exactly scooping up coin running around after the herb witch, here,” Belinda said. “Not all of us come from money, Neil.”

“Herb witch?” Jory asked.

“Sorry, sweetie,” Belinda said. “I’m sure what you do is very important.”

“It is,” Jory said.

“Look, Neil,” Belinda continued. “My point is that I use a lot of equipment sets, and since we hit silver I’ve been running around with garbage. I need to find someone who can supply quality work at a decent price.”

“Lindy, that’s why we’re here,” Jory said. “I heard they have a travelling smith here who makes quality stuff.”

“You also said this was a defenceless town,” Neil said. “We just spent quarter of an hour waiting to pass the checkpoint in their giant metal wall. We could have told them we’re silver-rank adventurers.”

“You can’t just go flaunting it,” Jory said. “We’re not here to make a fuss. And don’t the new walls suggest that they do have a good metalworker here?”

“I will point out,” Belinda said, “that none of my equipment sets, varied as they are, include walls.”

“You have a big shield,” Jory said. “That’s kind of like a wall.”

“Jory?” a booming voice called out.

Jory looked ahead to where sounds of revelry were coming from the town square where lamps lit up the early evening. A huge, hairy figure was rushing down the street, brandishing a leg of meat like a weapon.

“Gary?”

## Chapter 456

### I'm the Bait in Question

At the Adventure Society dock in the city of Greenstone, Emir Bahadir's cloud palace had been replaced with a cloud ship that would dwarf an ocean liner. Humphrey, Sophie and Neil boarded via a cloud dock that led directly into the side of the ship where one of Emir's staff led them inside. They were taken to the owner's stateroom, which was less a room and more like three storeys of typical Emir excess.

In an office larger than most homes, Emir was sitting behind a desk under a transparent ceiling that showed off the blue desert sky. The elevating platform deposited the trio as Emir was completing a meeting with the Deputy Director of the Adventure Society, Genevieve Picot. She was an elf whose appearance was uncharacteristically aged for a silver-rank essence user.

Emir stood to shake her hand and she walked away, passing Humphrey, Sophie and Neil as they departed the elevating platform and she stepped onto it. Neil and Humphrey wore diplomatic expressions, while Sophie openly glared. Genevieve has been party to the political machinations that had made Sophie into a pawn, endangered with death and worse.

"Steady," Humphrey murmured.

"Don't worry," Sophie told him. "If I go after her, it'll be a better plan than jumping her during some random encounter."

"Sophie," Humphrey admonished.

"Most people only think it through to the actual killing," Sophie said casually as they walked across the office that was more like an ostentatious town square. "It's planning what comes after that matters. That's where you get caught."

Humphrey shook his head as Neil snorted a laugh. Behind them, the staff member that escorted them up was descending with the Deputy Director. Emir moved forward to greet the three. The formal office furniture dissolved into cloud-stuff before reforming into a comfortable lounge suite.

"Sit, please," Emir invited. Despite the appearance of ordinary armchairs and couches, the engulfing plushness of their true nature was luxuriously felt as the group sat.

"The time has come to leave," Emir said, getting straight to the point. "Jason's memorial is behind us and the Adventure and Magic Societies are finally done pulling you in for questions."

"It's our duty to do everything we can," Humphrey said.

“Incredibly tedious duty,” Sophie said. “They kept asking the same things, over and over. I know an interrogation when I’m in one.”

“They weren’t interrogations,” Humphrey said.

“Just because they were too weak-willed to pull out the pliers doesn’t mean it wasn’t an interrogation,” Sophie shot back.

“What kind of life choices did you make?” Humphrey asked her.

“They weren’t choices, rich boy.”

“That brings us to the main topic of discussion,” Emir interceded.

“It does?” Neil asked.

“Indeed it does,” Emir said. “Miss Wexler, how much do you remember about your life before Greenstone?”

“Not much more than flashes,” Sophie said. “I was barely more than a toddler when we came across. I remember the shipwreck and being found by adventurers and taken to Greenstone. Things before that are just fragments.”

“Do you even know the name of the city you were born in?” Emir asked.

“No.”

“It was Kurdansk,” Emir told her. “In the People’s Holy Federation of Dreisil.”

Humphrey snorted derision in an uncharacteristic display of contempt.

“People’s Holy federation,” he muttered. “The more they try to make a nation sound free and righteous, the more tyrannical and corrupt it is.”

“You’ve been?” Neil asked.

“I was travelling with my mother, not long before I first received my essences. Our airship docked there to resupply and the port master extorted the captain for so-called docking fees. I wanted to speak up but Mother stopped me. Said that’s just the way it was, there. Bribes and graft, baked right into the civil structure of the city.”

“Have you not been to Old City?” Neil asked, Sophie nodding.

“At least the criminals in Greenstone have the decency to not pretend they’re anything else.”

“Did you not hear the Duke just made the surviving member of the Big Three crime bosses the mayor of Old City?” Neil asked.

“Adris Dorgan’s goal is legitimacy,” Humphrey said. “He needs to go straight in order to fulfil his ambitions. I don’t like it, but it will take someone like him going legitimate to get Old City’s into line after years of default criminal rule.”

“That’s an oddly reasonable position,” Neil said. “Your mother tell you that, did she?”

“No,” Humphrey said, his gaze flickering downward. “Jason did. Well, then Mother said the same thing.”

“Jason and your mother always did think alike,” Neil said. “She was classy, while Jason was... Jason, but behind the curtain, I think his mind worked a lot like hers.”

“I noticed that too,” Sophie said.

“You know, Humphrey,” Neil said, “your father might be lucky Jason’s not around anymore. I think we all saw where that thing with your mum was going.”

“Wha...?”

Humphrey puffed up with rage, his eyes going wide. Sophie reached over to place a gentle, restraining hand on his arm.

“Neil, don’t be an arse,” she said, turning to face him so Humphrey wouldn’t see her trying not to laugh. She turned to Emir, who was watching leisurely as Humphrey sat glaring at Neil, who sat with a chastised expression but laughing eyes. She forcibly put the conversation back on track.

“Emir,” Sophie said. “How do you know what city I’m from when even I didn’t?”

“Do you recall last week when I told you that I would like to dig into your background?” Emir asked.

“You’ve been doing it for six months, ever since we went into the astral space?” Sophie guessed.

“I have, yes,” Emir said. “If we’re going to catch the Order of the Reaper by the tail, we can’t just keep following the trail they’re marking for us. We need to find something they didn’t put in our path and you’re the only thing we’re confident about fitting that description.”

“So, what?” Sophie asked. “You want to send me to this city and parade me around until someone tries to kill or recruit me?”

“Our plans are a little more nuanced,” Emir said, “but, essentially, yes. We intend to go fishing, Sophie, with you as the bait.”

Humphrey leaned forward, his hostility switching immediately from Neil to Emir.

“What makes you think we’ll let you use our team member like that?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Neil agreed. “We’ve had our fill of sketchy plans with no margin for error. They’ve cost us enough already.”

“I realise that,” Emir said, “but—”

“I’m not sure you do, Mr Bahadir,” Humphrey said. “You never lost a team member. Your adventuring stories are hilarious anecdotes about fighting monsters with ducks or accidentally kidnapping princes while robbing royal treasuries.”

“Exactly,” Neil agreed, suddenly in lockstep with Humphrey. “Ours are about paying in blood and death so that our homes and families aren’t annihilated by some god monster’s version of a land grab,” Neil added.

“Down, boys,” Sophie said. They both turned to look at her, half out of their seats. She raised her eyebrows at them and they sat back down.

“I’m the bait in question,” she told them. “Let’s at least hear the man out.”

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“Oh yeah,” Neil yelled with angry sarcasm. “Let’s all be human bait.”

He was sprinting alongside Humphrey through a maze of narrow alleys, dodging piles of rubbish and old crates as their feet moved rapidly across the rain-slicked cobbles.

“The choice was Sophie’s to make,” Humphrey yelled back. “Also, she’s not human. Neither are you, for that matter.”

“It’s an expression!”

“How about we get less arguing and more speed,” Sophie suggested. She was in front of them, lightly jogging backwards as she went slow to keep pace with the others. “I know you don’t have a lot of experience being chased but yelling loudly is not going to help. I suppose it’s the fault of your upbringing.”

They emerged from an alley onto a busy street, in the middle of a raucous parade. They slowed down and merged into the boisterous crowd, letting the flow take them away.

“What do you mean, upbringing?” Neil asked loudly to be heard over the parade.

“You two were brought up wealthy,” Sophie explained. “You were raised being told that you’d get everything you want by yelling loudly.”

“I believe,” Humphrey said, “that your prejudice against the well-to-do is showing, Sophie,” Humphrey said. “I cannot speak for Neil, but I was raised in no such manner.”

“Well, I can speak for me and I wasn’t,” Neil said.

“Then why is it that rich people always end up yelling loudly about the things they want when they aren’t just given them immediately?” Sophie asked.

“We do not!” Neil yelled, then slumped as Sophie gave him a pointed look.

“Perhaps some discretion?” Humphrey suggested. “We have not escaped yet.”

“It’s fine,” Neil said. “Everyone’s yelling. They’re not going to find us.”

“They found us,” Sophie said and started pushing her way back out of the crowd. Humphrey and Neil didn’t bother to look as they moved to follow.

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“Was that strictly necessary?” Neil asked as he and Humphrey poured bottles of crystal wash over themselves. The yellow oil was rapidly purged from their bodies, which

were stripped down to simple pants and no shoes. It left their muscular bodies glistening wet, rather than looking like marinated slabs of meat.

“Yes,” Sophie said, her clothes still pristine. “Completely necessary.”

They were standing in a ramshackle wooden shed in the entertainment quarter of Kurdansk. Originally a warehouse district close to the Kurdan River docks, the large plots of relatively inexpensive real estate made it the most viable place for building large theatre halls. It was a heady mix of pleasure, criminality and money that made it a dangerous but alluring place where wealth and poverty collided.

Sophie blended in easily, especially given that her dark-skinned, silver-haired celestine ethnicity was the most populous race in the city. She was the one who found a way to disguise the companions who stood out much more, by flaunting, rather than hiding them.

“You did impressively well,” Humphrey told Neil. “For an elf, you have a surprisingly low centre of gravity.”

The muscular elf shot Humphrey back a venomous glare.

“What?” Humphrey asked innocently. “You want me to pretend I don’t have the might essence?”

“Yes,” Neil said. “Yes, I do. We were putting on a show.”

Humphrey turned to look at Sophie.

“Did it have to be oil wrestling?” he asked. “I’m still not sure that being half-naked and covered in yellow grease was the best choice of disguise.”

“It worked didn’t it?” Sophie asked. “I’ll show you the recording crystal later; you both looked completely different.”

“You recorded it?” Neil asked.

“No,” Sophie said quickly. “What I did do was receive several lascivious invitations for you two.”

“Really?” Neil asked. “What kind of women?”

“It was mostly men,” Sophie said. “Women prefer more of a sleek, lean body, instead of...”

She waved her hands at the two men whose torsos resembled inverted triangles made of abs and pecs.

“...all this. I mean, it’s not bad but you’ll find a lot of women will pick lithe over bulky. You look like a kilo of walnuts in a pair of quarter kilo bags.”

Neil looked down at his body.

“Walnuts?” he asked, then over at Humphrey. “Humphrey, do you wax your chest?”

“No,” Humphrey said hastily, shifting his gaze. “The oil probably made the hair fall out. Do you wax yours?”

“I’m an elf,” Neil said. “We don’t have chest hair.”

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“Excellent work,” Emir said. “You flushed them out.”

“What is our next move?” Humphrey asked.

Sophie, Humphrey and Neil were finally safe in Emir’s cloud ship, floating above the city. Out of the low-magic region of Greenstone, the full functionality of his cloud ship was restored. It was docked to a taller example of the many towers in Kurdansk’s busy skyport.

“Your next move is to get out of the city,” Emir said. “They made an open move and we have their tail now. Your part in this is over.”

“Good,” Neil said. “My church has sent word. Asked me to join up with Jory while they have him running around isolated towns, teaching them to make cheap potions.”

“I thought he was working more like a lecturer,” Humphrey said. “What do they need you for?”

“He’s taking a direct approach,” Neil said. “The monster surge precursors are hitting these outlying communities hard and they need to be as self-reliant as they can with resources stretched thin everywhere.”

“They want to give Jory more protection?” Humphrey asked. “Won’t your church protect him?”

“We will,” Neil said. “He’s an important asset to the church. The Healer expects Jory’s work to help a lot of people.”

“Jory wants protection he can trust,” Sophie said. “Guards are fine but they won’t fight for you the way a friend will.”

Humphrey nodded.

“We’ll be parting soon, then,” he said. “At least, for a while. Which brings us back to the question of what is next for Sophie and myself.”

Sophie turned to Emir.

“Did you find anything out about my family here?” she asked.

“No,” Emir said. His aura didn’t betray the lie but that wasn’t how Sophie had learned to spot them.

“You owe me, Bahadir,” she said. “I talked my team into going along with this and you know why.”

“You need to be patient, Miss Wexler,” Emir said. “This is not an affair for bronze-rankers to dabble in.”

“Yet, you had no compunction about staking her to a tree and waiting for predators to sniff her out,” Neil said.

“Tell her what she wants to know, Mr Bahadir,” Humphrey said. “Unless you want my mother to come and ask.”

“I heard she reached gold rank,” Emir said. “Please pass on my congratulations.”

“I will,” Humphrey said. “Last time I spoke with her over water link she expressed an interest in coming to see how I was doing here. You know she never approved of this endeavour.”

“Are you seriously threatening me with a single, freshly ranked-up gold-ranker?”

Humphrey didn't say anything, simply giving Emir a wicked grin that startled Sophie. She had last seen it on the face of Jason Asano and it looked alien on the normally straightforward Humphrey. Even in her surprise, she didn't miss the subtle clenching of Emir's jaw.

“Fine,” Emir said. “Just don't do anything stupid.”

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“What do you mean, gone?” Emir asked his acting chief of staff, Wilmont. Wilmont was an elf known for his unflagging composure.

“I did tell them that you would not like them disembarking,” Wilmont said. “I sent word to you immediately, of course, but Miss Wexler was not to be deterred, despite Young Master Geller's best efforts.”

“But he followed her anyway, of course,” Emir said, not asking.

“Indeed, sir. Young Master Neil remains aboard, preparing for departure. He will be transferring to the church of the healer's skyship quite soon.”

“At least tell me my granddaughter didn't try to follow them.”

“She did,” Wilmont said. “After the fact. As a member of the household, the staff felt more comfortable in more forcibly restraining Miss Ketis.”

Ketis was Emir's granddaughter, whom Sophie was training to use her martial arts, derived from a skill book, the way Rufus had once helped Jason. Emir hoped Sophie would be a more-or-less positive role model, which wasn't working entirely as intended.

“At least there's that,” Emir said. “You should have stopped the others too, Wilmont.”

“As Miss Wexler quite vociferously pointed out, Mr Bahadir, they are your guests, not your prisoners.”

“I meant stall them, not lock them up,” Emir said. “Constance would have done it.”

“Miss Constance is not here,” Mr Bahadir. “If I were as capable as her, then I would have already had her job instead of just filling in.”

Emir rubbed his hands over his face in frustration.

"I'm sorry," he said. "That was rude of me, Wilmont; I apologise. I just feel out of sorts without her by my side."

"Of course, Mr Bahadir. I am certain that Mr Morse will take pains with her wellbeing."

"Then you don't know Cal," Emir said. "He's a firm believer in strength through adversity. It's why she asked him to help her."

Emir's chief of staff, and the object of his affections, Constance, had taken a leave of absence from Emir's staff. She had left with Emir's old teammate, Callum Morse, with the intent of not returning until she reached gold rank.

After the trail of the energy vampire that possessed Thadwick Mercer went cold, Rufus Remore's parents continued the investigation while Callum returned to his usual activities. An avid monster-hunter, he was one of the few gold-rankers that obsessively worked to raise his strength with the unflagging enthusiasm of a low-ranker. He agreed to assist Constance who had renewed her ambitions for gold rank as the world grew more dangerous.

"He best bring her back to me safe and sound," Emir said, "or he and I will have words."

"You and he, sir?"

"Well," Emir amended. "Me, him and a bunch of gold-rankers I hire. I'm not an idiot."

"Would you like me to dispatch people in pursuit of Young Master Humphrey and Miss Wexler?" Wilmont asked.

"No," Emir said wearily. "I already had people waiting to follow them. They were obviously going to leave."

"Then, if I may ask, Mr Bahadir, why not have them stopped yourself?"

"I can't responsibly ask Sophie to let me put her in any more danger," Emir said. "If she insists on doing it herself, though, who am I to stop her?"

"Then why the exasperation, sir?"

"Wilmont, it would just be really nice, from time to time, to be surprised by someone making a sensible decision."

"If I may be so bold, Mr Bahadir; if what you are looking for is sensible, you may have chosen the wrong profession."

## Chapter 457

### The Past Can Wait

To all appearances, Marta Fries was an unremarkable resident of the city of Kurdansk. Like many of Kurdansk's celestines, she had dark skin and silver hair. Her small row house was no different to the others wedged together on the narrow street where she lived.

The plain but powerful aura suppression bracelet on her arm hid her silver-rank aura but also impeded her aura senses, so she didn't sense the approaching bronze-rankers until they were close to her door. There was something unsettling about the celestine; a hint of familiarity that put Marta ill at ease. She didn't dwell on it or hesitate, immediately moving to her bedroom and pulling up the rug to reveal a trap door from which she took her emergency bag.

Mara pushed aside the wardrobe to reveal the removable wall panel that she herself had installed. It had gone unused for the two decades since her friend Melody had used it in the course of faking her death. Marta now used it herself, swiftly disappearing into the night. She never sensed the gold-ranker who quietly watched her emerge into the alley.

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Sophie knocked again, this time hammering on the door with her fist.

"I don't think breaking this woman's door is the first impression you want to make," Humphrey told her. "I don't think anyone is home."

"If she knows something about my mother, I have to find out for myself."

"I understand that," Humphrey said, "but you can't conjure her into being by wanting it enough. You need patience."

She turned a glare on him and he met her gaze, unflinching.

"You've always been a realist, Sophie," he told her. "In a city full of hidden enemies is not the place to lose that."

She grimaced but gave a reluctant nod.

"We'll try again later," Humphrey reassured her.

"You needn't bother," a male voice said as the door opened in front of them. The man behind it had an unexpectedly familiar face.

"Mr Morse?" Humphrey asked. "What are you doing here?"

"The resident is gone," Callum Morse said. "She's not coming back."

"How do you know that?" Sophie asked.

"Because I watched her leave for good," Cal said.

“Are you tracking her?” Sophie asked.

“I am.”

“Tell me where she is,” Sophie demanded.

“No.”

“Why not?” Humphrey asked.

“Because you lack the strength to walk that road and I will not let you borrow mine long enough to get yourselves killed.”

“You’re going to keep that from me?” Sophie asked.

“Yes, he is,” a female voice came from behind. Another familiar face was walking up the narrow street behind them. It was Constance, Emir’s hitherto-absent chief of staff.

“You only got this far because Emir asked something of you that he had no right.”

“We agreed to it,” Humphrey said. “It was our choice.”

Constance shook her head.

“Miss Wexler’s motivation is clear and understandable,” she said. “You should know better, Mr Geller. You were raised better. Why would you go along with this?”

“Because she needs it,” Humphrey said, with a glance at Sophie. Constance waited for further explanation but all she got from him was a flat stare. She let out a weary groan.

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Emir was in the middle of a massage when his very relaxed body went very tense.

“Sir?” the masseur asked.

Emir whipped himself off the table, snatched up a robe and threw it around himself as he almost skipped out of the massage room. The moment he had been waiting for had arrived as he sensed Constance returning to the cloud ship. She had reached gold rank and come home.

Emir didn’t even bother with an elevating platform. Remoulding the ship to open a hole under his feet and through the decks below, he dropped multiple levels. His robe was one of the things flapping around in his rapid descent to the docking chamber of the cloud ship.

“This is what you’ve been up to?” Constance scolded as Emir landed in a crouch.

“What was the rule about wearing pants in front of the staff?”

Emir looked up with a grin, which turned to a frown. Constance’s normally neck-length brown hair was cropped short and her pale skin contrasted unflatteringly with the light green and brown armour she was wearing. What perturbed him was not her appearance but the fact that she and Callum were frog-marching Sophie and Humphrey in

through the docking port, along with the embarrassed-looking people Emir had sent to trail them.

“What exactly is happening?” Emir asked.

“Do you seriously think that you should be the one asking that?” Constance asked. Emir had been longing to hear her voice, although not in that particular tone. “Using bronze-rankers as bait?”

“We made our own choices,” Humphrey said.

“You’re bronze-rank,” Constance said without breaking her gaze from Emir. “You don’t get to choose danger like that.”

Sophie deftly twisted out of the grip Constance had on her arm, turning to poke Constance in the chest.

“We chose to put our lives on the line and one of us died saving a city full of people,” Sophie said. “You want to shove us around, you’re gold-rank and you can. But if you denigrate what we’ve done and what it cost us then I will find a way to kick the crap out of you, gold-ranker or not. How’s your poison resistance?”

Callum snorted a rare laugh at Constance’s nonplussed expression while Humphrey grinned proudly. Emir did his best to mask his expression, with mixed results. Callum put a calming hand on Constance’s arm.

“They’ve faced their own trials and made real sacrifices, Connie,” he said softly. “They might be in dire need of guidance but we still have to respect that.”

“Wait,” Emir said. “Connie?”

“That being said,” Callum continued, ignoring Emir, “respecting their experiences is not the same as letting them run off and get killed.”

“What were you thinking, Emir?” Constance asked, turning to Emir once more.

“How do you even know what’s going on?” Emir asked her. “You’ve been gone for a year.”

“You think you’re the only one tracking the Order of the Reaper?” Callum asked.

“I did, yes,” Emir said. “Everyone is looking at the Cult of the Builder, now. Adventure Society, governments, everyone. Are you saying you’re running your own game? Why on your own? Why not throw in with me?”

“Because you aren’t my only loyalty, Emir,” Callum said. “I’m part of the Cult of the Reaper.”

“Since when?” Emir asked.

“Since always.”

“You never told us that.”

"I told Gabriel and Arabelle."

"Everyone on our team but me?"

"You have a big mouth, Emir. Especially when you aren't wearing pants."

Callum glanced over Sophie and Humphrey.

"Your judgement isn't always sound," he continued, "and you need someone to keep you in check."

"Like Connie, here?" Emir asked.

"Yes," Callum said.

"Do you even want me back?" Constance asked Emir.

"How can you even ask that," Emir said. "I just jumped down five decks with no pants."

"We all saw," Humphrey said. "Perhaps some clothes and a little time will give us a chance to discuss things more calmly."

"You haven't lost all sense, then," Constance told Humphrey. "You realise I'm going to tell your mother about this."

At that moment, Neil appeared via elevating platform, his possessions packed into the dimensional bag slung over his shoulder. He looked around at Emir in his robe, Sophie and Humphrey, Constance and Callum, plus a handful of Emir's silver-rank operatives trying to avoid anyone's attention.

"Did I miss something? I missed something, didn't I? Nobody tells me anything."

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"There are trails to follow, but they're dangerous for you, as you are now," Callum told Sophie. "You're too weak and your team is scattered to the wind. Reach silver-rank, gather them together and I will give you what you need to take the next step."

"You don't have the right to keep knowledge of my family from me," Sophie said.

"But I have the power," Callum said, "and there is nothing you can do about it but wait. Concentrate on growing stronger."

"Surprise," Emir said. "The guy obsessed with getting stronger suggests you go get stronger."

Sophie, Humphrey, Neil, Emir, Constance and Callum were sitting in one of the cloud ship's secondary bar lounges, Emir now wearing clothes.

"If it were your family, how would you take someone keeping it from you?" Sophie asked Callum. Emir winced, breaking his gaze from where it had been locked on Constance.

"Not the approach to take," Emir told Sophie. "You and Callum have much in common when it comes to family."

"I understand your frustration," Callum told her, seemingly unfazed. "But I also know the price of letting your emotions drive you places they should not. So, I'm stopping you, until you are ready. Hate me if you like."

"That woman knew my mother," Sophie said. "And you let her go."

"She needs to go," Callum said. "You have brought attention onto her that will get her killed. She needs to disappear from more than you if she's going to live long enough for you to get your answers."

"I could have had them today," Sophie said.

"No," Callum said. "If not for the presence of Constance and I, you and she would most likely be dead, along with Emir's people trailing you."

"Then what do you expect us to do now?" Sophie asked. "Because I am done playing fish on a hook and I don't care about the stabby pricks of the Reaper."

"I'm a little curious about them," Humphrey said. "If you're part of the Order of the Reaper, why are you letting us run in circles hunting for them?"

"I'm not a part of the Order of the Reaper," Callum said. "The Cult of the Reaper venerates the principles of the Reaper. The sanctity of death."

"Sound like the church of Death," Neil said.

"We have long worked alongside the church of Death. Our values and objectives are often aligned. The Order of the Reaper is an offshoot of the cult. They started as a faction that wanted to become more active. Specifically, to accrue political power."

"That doesn't seem to fit what I know of the Reaper," Humphrey said. "Admittedly, that isn't a lot, but that shows how obvious it is."

"Yes," Callum agreed. "The order split from the cult, mouthing affinity to the Reaper while abandoning the principles that come with it. They became self-serving assassins until they overreached and were forced to falsify their demise. The so-called last bastion of the order, that you explored beneath Sky-Scar Lake, was part of a faction that sought to retain ties with the cult. They counselled reconciliation and were sacrificed for it."

"How do we not know this?" Emir asked. "Jason's Asano's familiar should have had this information."

"The shadow of the Reaper that administered the trials was a familiar from a time before the cult and the Order segregated. It was set in place when the astral space was a trial grounds for our youngest recruits, from whom our larger secrets were kept. I suspect

the order was careful in what they allowed him to learn, given that he was a part of the re-emergence plan taking place even now.”

“I don’t care about any of this,” Sophie said, standing up.

“Do not go out into the city looking for answers,” Callum warned. “They left with the woman who disappeared and all that waits for you now is death.”

Humphrey stood up as well.

“I don’t like it either,” Humphrey said.

“But you think I should let it go?” Sophie asked him.

“I think neither Mr Morse nor this city will give you the answers you want. But there are sources of knowledge greater than either of them.”

Constance put a hand over her face and groaned.

“Must you, Mr Geller?”

"This is my team, not yours," Humphrey told her. "You can disapprove all you like, but we get to make our own mistakes."

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Vitesse, the city of flowers. Located in what Jason Asano would know as the French Riviera, its iconic skyline was marked by huge towers with flowering vines spilling down the exterior. Known as the garden towers, most had every third or fourth floor dedicated to gardens using water, light and plant magic to create lush refuges of peace towering over the city below. They were residences for the city’s wealthy elite, meaning aristocrats and adventurers, as well as headquarters for the city’s key organisations.

The Adventure Society and Magic Society both maintained entire buildings to themselves. The continental council for the Adventure Society sat in Vitesse, rather than the capital. The royal family maintained a tower as a palace, with most of the family residing there.

The Remore family had no aristocratic title, while the Gellers had only a title from the small provincial city of their origin, refusing all others. Neither family was begrudged their residences in some of the city’s premier towers, however. On a courtyard balcony thick with floral aromas, Danielle Geller was giving her son a disapproving look.

“I always intended for you to learn from Jason Asano,” she told him. “You may have learned some lessons I did not intend, however. I’m not sure I approve of this rebellious streak.”

“Yes you do,” Humphrey said.

Danielle laughed, not denying it.

“Where is Miss Wexler now,” she asked.

"The temple of Knowledge," Humphrey said.

"Good," Danielle said, nodding her approval.

"You aren't afraid she'll get information that will send us into danger?"

"Knowledge does not give you the answers you want," Danielle said. "She gives you the answers you need."

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"Now is not the time to pursue this goal," Knowledge told Sophie. In the Vitesse temple of Knowledge's answer room, Sophie faced the manifestation of the goddess with the same boldness Jason once had. The goddess showed Sophie a different face to what she had shown Jason, now bearing the dark skin of the Vitesse locals.

"That's not the answer I came for," Sophie said.

"Yet, it is the answer you have received," Knowledge said. "The time will come when your companions are made whole. That will be the right time to seek out your past."

"My companions can't be made whole," Sophie said. "You know that."

"You would presume to tell me what I know? You are as insolent as Jason Asano, but not as adorable."

"Adorable?"

"It is time for you to go, Sophie Wexler. I will not set you on the path you want, but I do have one I think you will accept. The time has come for you to reunite with Clive Standish. He has found that the promises of those around him to be worth little and could use allies he can trust."

"Clive is in trouble?"

"He is making trouble. Whose influence is responsible for that I think we both know. Seek him out, Sophie Wexler, for the past can wait better than he."

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The city of Greenstone was in the far south of the continent that, in Jason's world, was called Africa. Compared to the low magic, largely empty south regions, the north was much more populous. The city of Rakesh, on the north coast, was the home of the Adventure Society's continental council. It was just one part of a sprawling campus combining the largest Magic Society and Adventure Society strongholds on the continent.

Prani Ajus was a Magic Society official who had come to visit the astral magic research wing. One of the research wing's officials, Lorelei Grantham, spotted her and moved to intercept.

"Grantham," Prani said. "I have no need of you at this time. I am going to see Mr Standish."

"He's caught up in his latest round of research," Lorelei said. "You know what he's like. This might not be the best time."

"Grantham, are you covering for him?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Lady Ajus."

"If you are going to lie, Grantham, do me the courtesy of making it vaguely plausible. Mr Standish hasn't placed one of his insistent requests for fieldwork in more than a month."

"Perhaps he has come to accept that they will be rejected," Lorelei suggested.

"That's what worries me," Prani said. "I will not permit him to go off on some aimless, ill-conceived mission of vengeance over some unimportant dead man."

"We promised him he would have the chance to take the fight to the Builder."

"Which he will," Prani said. "Vicariously. That man has an extraordinary mind and I will not allow some cultist to put a hammer through it. Now, enough delays. Take me to Standish."

Lorelei reluctantly led Prani through the building to where Clive was supposed to be working. Opening up the door to his workshop, she was surprised to find that he was. Behind a glass wall was a ritual room where Clive was standing in the middle of an elaborate ritual circle. With him in the centre of the circle was a metal arch, engraved with runes.

The glass wall was designed to restrict any magic that might interfere with the rituals inside while allowing sound to pass through easily.

"Mr Standish," Prani said. "I would like a report on your current activity."

Clive turned from where he was examining the arch to look back through the glass.

"Oh, Lady Ajus. Hello, Lorelei."

"Mr Standish," Prani repeated. "What are you doing?"

"What I was told to do," Clive said. "I'm unlocking the secrets of the astral magic the Builder cult uses. This portal arch, for example, is part of a transportation network the cultists and their church of Purity allies use to move about without drawing attention from the many people hunting them down."

"Alleged allies," Prani corrected.

"Of course," Clive said with an insincere smile.

"And how are you progressing?" Prani asked.

"Well," Clive said, "why don't we find out?"

He pointed a hand at the arch and it lit up with rainbow energy. Prani yelled as Clive stepped through immediately and she slapped her hand against the glass, which

shattered. She dashed forward with silver-rank speed as the portal went dormant again in her face. She wheeled on Lorelei.

“Open it back up!” Prani demanded.

“I don’t know how,” Lorelei said. “I’m an administrator, not a researcher.”

“We’re in the astral magic research department,” Prani said. “Find someone who is.”

## Chapter 458

### Dragon Lady

Belinda followed the signal of her magical device into a dusty desert gulch, a few dozen kilometres south of Rakesh. She roamed around, looking for the source of the signal. She and Clive had only been able to get an approximate location from the Magic Society campus and it was taking days to narrow it down.

"Where is the stupid thing?" she muttered, part of an ongoing stream of disgruntled commentary. "Roaming the whole damn desert. Sand in places that sand is not supposed to be."

The heat was not harmful to her bronze-rank body, but harmless was not the same as pleasant. After much searching, she found an old mine tunnel, filled with rocks and overgrown with scrubby bushes to disguise it. She used one of her powers, counterfeit combatant, which enhanced her strength and allowed her to toss out the large rocks.

She tossed out a light stone that floated over her head and followed the tunnel into the yellow stone rock face. It led to a chamber that she doubted was ever part of the mine. It was too large and the floor was worked smoother than any non-magical tool could manage. In the middle of the room, a portal arch was set into the floor.

Taking out some chalk, she started drawing a ritual circle.

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The Magic Society campus in Rakesh had magic in place to prevent portals from operating outside of certain designated zones. It was when Clive discovered that he was barred from those zones that he discovered exactly how 'insistent' the Magic Society was about his remaining on campus and focused on the tasks they fed him.

It seemed mild at first, as if they simply wanted him to be working as hard as possible. His repeated requests to conduct fieldwork were denied and his escalating attempts to leave the campus revealed that he was a prisoner in all but name. It felt like a stark betrayal from an organisation to which he had given a third of his life, even if he was no longer an association official.

Clive had always assumed that the Magic Society in Greenstone was an outlier in its corruption, courtesy of the man at the top. Now it seemed that the stain appeared in many places and many flavours. In Rakesh, where society was divided into castes, they apparently saw little problem with holding someone they felt lowly enough against his will.

Since he was barred from any area his portal power would work, Clive was forced to make other arrangements. No one suspected that the portal network that the Builder cult

used operated on such different principles to an essence user's portal that it would not be subject to the campus defences. The defence magic impeded the cult portal network, but with the right boosting rituals at both ends of a portal, passage could be opened up. Clive recorded this in his personal notes but left it out of the ones he made for the Magic Society.

Clive's assistant, Belinda, was not subject to the same restrictions as Clive. On the contrary, she was responsible for taking care of anything Clive needed done off-campus. She was not watched as carefully as Clive, the caste system that justified holding Clive leading them to dismiss her as unimportant. They did try to check any materials she brought in or took out, but she had a personal storage space. Even the Magic Society couldn't peek into that without killing her first.

It took the better part of two months for Clive and Belinda to devise and execute their plan, from making certain he understood the portal functionality, to building a device that could track down another portal to use as a destination. The biggest risk factor was the time between when Belinda set out to find the destination portal arch and when they activated it. If anyone looked into why she hadn't returned to the campus for however long it took, the whole plan could have come crumbling down. In the end, Clive had been forced to make a move he did not want to make.

Lorelei Grantham was the Vice-Dean of the astral magic research department, as well as the person who had recruited Clive out of Greenstone. Clive was fairly certain that the misrepresentation of what he would be walking into was perpetrated on her as well as him. Believing the lies herself made her pitch more authentic. Seemingly remorseful, she had paid close attention to Clive in the subsequent months, frequently shielding him from the attentions of Lady Ajus and other officials very interested in the research they pushed on him.

Clive took a large risk by trusting Lorelei to cover for Belinda, especially since he told her very little of what he was up to. Belinda had repeatedly warned him against trusting anyone, suggesting that Lorelei had been expertly playing him from the start. He wasn't entirely sure that trusting her was the right move right up until he escaped through the portal, right in the face of Lady Ajus.

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Immediately after stepping out of the portal, Clive and Belinda started eliminating the ritual circle around it to prevent anyone from following him through.

"We should leave immediately," Clive said as they. "There's a chance that someone there could devise a means to reopen the portal from the other end."

"Then why did you send me out to a hole in the side of a desiccated nowhere?"

Belinda complained. "I have sand and dust in places where neither are welcome."

"We had to make sure the arch was both abandoned and intact, for one," Clive said.

"All I could tell from the other end was that it hadn't been activated in years. It could have been damaged or obstructed."

"You think they can follow us without the ritual circle on this end?"

"I postulated a couple of ways it could be done before settling on this way," Clive said. "I didn't include them in my public notes but I'm far from the only good astral magic researcher they have. I rejected those methods because there's a solid chance they would extend the transmission time of the portal."

"Meaning that after you went in, it would take longer before spitting you back out?"

"Possibly," Clive said. "Another possibility is that I would have emerged from the destination arch over the course of several minutes."

"Does that mean what I think it means?" Belinda asked.

"If you think it means my body slowly oozing out of the portal like slime being pushed through a cheese grater, then yes."

"I think avoiding that was a good choice," she concluded.

"Agreed," Clive said.

They finished up and Belinda led him out through the mining tunnel. Belinda tossed out a floating glow stone while the tall Clive was forced to periodically duck his head under wooden support beams.

"I hope Lorel— Miss Grantham doesn't get in too much trouble," Clive said.

"She's probably in charge of trying to catch you," Belinda said. "You and Humphrey are way too trusting of authority figures. You don't have to be as suspicious as Sophie, but maybe take after Jason a little."

"Actually, Miss Grantham helped me cover for your absence," Clive said and Belinda stopped moving down the tunnel.

"What?" Clive asked, also stopping.

"What did I tell you right before I left?" Belinda asked him.

"To make sure I go to the right portal and don't land in a cultist camp."

Belinda gave him a flat look.

"Not to trust Miss Grantham," Clive sullenly admitted.

"And what did you do?" Belinda continued the interrogation.

"You were gone for nine days. That wasn't going to go unnoticed."

“You sent me to a portal hidden in an abandoned mine, lost in the middle of nowhere.”

“We needed one the cult and the church of Purity wasn’t using,” Clive said. “Every other portal arch in range was in active use. The point is that Lorelei covered for us. She even stalled Lady Ajus while I was activating the portal, all without ever asking what I was up to.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

Belinda rubbed her chin thoughtfully as she stared at Clive.

“I guess she wasn’t faking it,” she mused.

“Faking what?”

“The way she...”

Belinda looked at Clive, seeing genuine confusion in his face.

“You didn’t notice?” she asked.

“Notice what?” Clive asked.

“The way she looked at you.”

“What about the way she looked at me?”

Belinda gave him an incredulous look.

“Oh, that poor girl.”

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The Pallimustus equivalent of the Mediterranean Sea was called the Gramid Passage. Due to the absence of an Arabian Peninsula, Israel and Palestine, it directly connected what Jason knew as the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. Danielle teleported Humphrey and Sophie across the Gramid Passage from Vitesse to Rakesh.

“We shouldn’t keep Carlivexistrix waiting,” Danielle said. “She’s showing us a great courtesy, coming to meet us like this.”

“Clive would go mad seeing her,” Sophie said.

“She’s not a festival attraction,” Danielle admonished. “Clive will have to live with the disappointment.”

Humphrey produced floating platforms for the trio. They were flat metal disks, only just large enough to stand on. It was a common sight to see essence users riding them about as Rakesh had a sufficient level of magic to support their operation. In low-magic Greenstone, only people like Clive and Belinda, who possessed the appropriate essence ability, could use similar devices.

Humphrey had been using them since he was a child, having travelled widely with his mother. Sophie had learned to use them during their holiday in the city of Pranay, after their first excursion in the astral space that would later claim Jason's life. Seeing her stare at the platform in her hands, Humphrey realised her thoughts and placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. She reached up to cover it with her own in a gesture of thanks, gifting him one of her rare smiles.

She shook off the malaise and they got moving. The buildings of Rakesh were desert stone, plastered and painted in colourful murals. It reminded her of the Cavendish district in Greenstone that was similarly styled, especially the neighbourhood people called the Rainbow Road. Unlike the mishmash of colours in Cavendish, the murals of Rakesh were both far more expansive and far more coordinated. Travelling through the streets was a soothing passage as each district's dominant colours graduated into the next.

Activity on the streets was busy but quiet, the local culture valuing calm decorum. It was a stark contrast to the raucousness of Greenstone's Old City where Sophie grew up. Most people were on foot or using animal-drawn carriages, their normal auras marking them as the teeming citizenry of the populous city. Essence users used floating platforms, either standing ones like the trio rode on or more elaborate models. Some were simple seats on a slightly larger platform, while others were ostentatious floating palanquins.

"Sophie, be sure to manage your behaviour in this city," Danielle warned as they glided along the streets on their float platforms. "Civic order is given much more precedence here than in most places. The culture is based around strict social hierarchies and respect for authority. Divergence from that is strictly punished, both socially and legally. There are allowances made for visitors, but visitors find themselves swiftly positioned in the hierarchy by their background and behaviour."

"We're only bronze-rank adventurers," Humphrey warned her. "That means a lot less here than in Greenstone. Mother is gold-rank and has already accrued some prestige here, so defer to her."

"The Geller name is also worth something here," Danielle said. "It will help us, but we must also be careful not to tarnish it."

Danielle led them to a large area surrounded by a park of pleasant gardens and long, winding pools. Many people walked along or floated over the pathways, the park serving as a major junction for city travel. Dominating the park at the centre was a vast building with multiple wings. It was not painted but made of a rich white stone, topped by golden domes.

Sophie and Humphrey followed Danielle as she made for one of the wings, approaching a pair of huge double doors, already wide open. Inside was a large atrium filled with plants that sat in pots, grew from wall alcoves and even hung from the high ceiling, either growing out directly or sitting in hanging pots. Doors led off in multiple directions and a pair of sweeping staircases curves up to the left and right.

"What is this place?" Sophie asked, looking around. There were no people at all inside.

"I told you that this city is fixated on hierarchy," Danielle said. "This is a place for those who trying to place in a hierarchy would be an insult. Diamond rankers, mostly, but not exclusively."

A door opened and a woman came walking out, a toddler waddling alongside, holding her hand. She had the ageless beauty of the magically preserved, with milk chocolate skin typical for the local human population. The toddler let out a yelp, pulled his hand free and started running across the floor, wrapping his arms around Humphrey's leg in a hug.

"Biscuit!" the toddler yelled.

"I haven't seen you in months and that's all you have to say?"

"Biscuit please!"

Humphrey shook his head.

"Did you enjoy spending time with your mother?" Humphrey asked.

The toddler transformed into a small bird and flapped up onto Humphrey's head, where he started chirping.

"You can't say this about your mother!" Humphrey scolded, throwing an apologetic look at Stash's mother, who was now standing next to Danielle and looking on in amusement. There was more chirping from Stash.

"My mother doesn't make biscuits either," Humphrey said, "but you don't see me calling her that."

"Can you understand his chirping?" Sophie asked.

"Unfortunately," Humphrey said. "The advantages of his being a bonded familiar instead of summoned."

Stash started chirping loudly.

"I don't have any biscuits," Humphrey said.

After some more angry chirping, the bird flew off Humphrey's head, transformed into a little grey puppy in midair and landed in Sophie's arms. She took a biscuit from her jacket pocket and slipped it to him, which he happily munched on.

"You're going to spoil him," Humphrey told her.

“Sophie is the best!” the puppy said and Humphrey narrowed his eyes at it.

“Since when can you use people talk in animal form?” Humphrey asked.

“I can’t!” Stash insisted, spilling crumbs. “Er... woof?”

Humphrey ran a hand over his face and turned to Stash’s mother.

“Carlivexistrix, I apologise,” he said. “I’m not doing the best job of helping your little boy grow up.”

“Oh, that’s just how they are at that age,” Stash’s mother said. “You should have seen Danielle, here. Your mother was an absolute terror. Also, please call me Carli.”

## Chapter 459

### What Could Possibly Go Wrong

“Well?” Lady Prani Ajus demanded as she stormed into the large research room in the astral magic research department. Lorelei Grantham was there, along with a half dozen researchers poring over the notes left behind by Clive.

“We found something that Cli... that Standish left behind,” Lorelei said. “He obviously wanted it to be found. It’s a means to track portal network activity. It only gives vague locations but we can use it to at least partially monitor Builder cult travel. This could be a critical asset against the Builder cult.”

“Does it cover the theory behind the operation of the portal network?” Prani asked.

“No,” Lorelei said. “It’s a practical guide to tracking. He left us a valuable assent for—”

“Irrelevant,” Prani said. “There are people all over the world looking for ways to fight the Builder cult. What matters is unravelling the secrets behind the advanced magic they use. While the other branches waste time fighting a war that will be won sooner or later, we’ll be pushing ourselves ahead for once the war is done.”

Lorelei looked at Prani with disdain.

“Do you have a problem, Vice-Dean Grantham?” Prani asked.

Lorelei choked back the bile-filled response struggling to escape.

“No, Ma’am.”

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“Carli was much more approachable than I expected,” Sophie said. “That’s not what I expected from a dragon at all.”

“Everybody needs friends they can be relaxed with,” Danielle said. “My family have been companions to Carlivexistrix since we first came to Greenstone. Her last child is still running around with my diamond-rank ancestor somewhere, as far as I know.”

They were standing in the precisely cultivated gardens of the Magic Society campus, waiting for Clive and Belinda. Thus far, they had the distinct impression of being given the runaround. Instead of Sophie and Humphrey’s team members, what they got was a stern-looking Magic Society official. Humphrey and Sophie moved to meet her, while Danielle remained where she was, casually examining a water feature.

“You’re Standish’s team members?” the official asked. “I am Lady Prani Ajus.”

She spoke to Sophie and Humphrey, but her gaze lingered uneasily on Danielle.

“Also Belinda’s team members,” Sophie added.

“Why is it that no one will so much as tell us where they are, let alone lead us to them?” Humphrey asked.

“The situation is complicated,” Prani said, earning a derisive snort from Sophie.

“The situation is shady as shi—”

“Sophie!” Humphrey barked, cutting her off. “I apologise, Lady Ajus, but I hope you can take it as an expression of our frustration.”

“I’m afraid that Mr Standish is currently engaged in a delicate matter,” Prani said. “He won’t be available for contact for some time.”

“Porky pies!” puppy Stash yelled out. “Stick it up your bum, lady.”

“Stash!” Humphrey scolded. “Who taught you to talk like that?”

“Telling people to bugger off is kind of my thing,” Stash said proudly. Humphrey and Sophie went stiff at the reminder of their lost companion.

“Lady Ajus, I apologise,” Humphrey said after an awkward moment. “We will take our leave.”

Prani’s expression showed exactly what she thought of the group’s lack of decorum, but again her gaze glanced over Danielle and she said nothing, turning and walking away without another word.

“What do you two think you’re doing?” Humphrey hissed at Sophie and Stash as they walked back towards Danielle. “What did my mother tell you about decorum?”

“That woman just lied to our faces.”

“Yes,” Humphrey said. “And how effective do you think your approach was in helping us find Clive? We’ll probably need to leverage Mother’s influence, which will not be made easier when the people she contacts hear about our behaviour.”

“You mean my behaviour,” Sophie said.

“No, I mean our behaviour,” Humphrey told her. “We’re a team, Sophie. We stand and fall together.”

They reached Danielle, who gave them a casual look.

“You will need to learn to control your impulses better,” she told Sophie.

“No I don’t,” Sophie said. “I need to get powerful enough that when some woman tries to hide my friends from me I can hold her upside down and shake her until she talks without people getting all whiny about it.”

Humphrey very carefully didn’t smile. His blank expression didn’t fool his mother, who gave him a weary, disapproving head shake.

“Power,” Danielle said to Sophie, “is certainly an intrinsic part of being an adventurer. As you rise through the ranks, however, you will find that so is diplomacy. This is why you're still only a one-star adventurer.”

“What do we do now?” Humphrey asked. “Head for the local Geller family and have them apply some pressure?”

“I think we should hear out the priest first,” Danielle said.

“Priest?” Humphrey asked.

“Behind us,” Sophie said. Humphrey turned and spotted a cleric in church of Knowledge regalia walking towards them.

“Good day, sir priest,” Humphrey greeted. “I am—”

“He knows who we are, Humphrey,” Sophie cut him off. “Church of Knowledge, remember?”

“Miss Wexler is correct,” the priest said, taking a small tube from within his robe and holding it out for Humphrey to take. “My goddess simply asked that I deliver this.”

“What is it?” Humphrey asked.

“The current location of Clive Standish and Belinda Callahan.”

The priest bowed and retreated without saying any more.

“What was that about?” Sophie asked as they watched the man turn and hurry away.

“If Knowledge seeks you out,” Danielle said, “it's because she knows where you need to be.”

Humphrey opened the tube and pulled out a map.

“Somewhere south of here,” he said, looking it over.

“Well, good luck,” Danielle said. “I'm going to teleport back to Vitesse.”

“You're not helping?” Humphrey asked.

“There's only so much time I'll willing to spend coddling my son. You can teleport yourself around just fine, so I'm going home. I have my own affairs to take care of.”

Humphrey looked down at the map in his hands.

“This is the middle of nowhere. I can't teleport there.”

“Neither can I,” Danielle said. “You think I've been to every random patch of wilderness and can just teleport wherever?”

“Kind of, yeah,” Sophie said as Humphrey nodded his agreement. Danielle shook her head in exasperation.

“Ask Carlivexistrix to take you,” Danielle told them. “Her territory is to the south and she'll be leaving today.”

Humphrey's eyes went wide.

“Riding a dragon?”

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Humphrey threw out his arms and let out a whooping noise.

“You’re going to fall off,” Sophie yelled so he could hear him over the rushing wind as the dragon underneath them rocketed through the air.

Carli’s true form was that of a vast and majestic dragon, whose scales were not just rainbow colours but shimmered and changed in a magnificent display of beauty. Humphrey and Sophie sat side by side on her broad back without any form of harness, just an oddly grippy blanket Carli had provided them.

“Are you really going to act like this isn’t amazing?” Humphrey yelled.

“It’s just flying, Humphrey.”

He looked at her with a disbelieving expression.

“No one is that jaded,” he told her. “You won’t break if you admit to having some fun, you know.”

He gestured around them at the vast desert panorama expanding in every direction below, with white sand, yellow stone and the winding line of blue and green that marked the river and the narrow strip of fertility it brought.

“It’s alright to admit to enjoying something,” he told her. “It won’t stop people from thinking you’re very tough.”

Underneath them, Carli jerked once then again, leaving Sophie pressed up against a mortified Humphrey.

“Sorry,” Carli’s rumbling dragon voice cut through the wind. “Air pocket.”

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“I don’t see how you aren’t angrier,” Belinda said. “They were holding you prisoner.”

She and Clive were riding a skiff through a desert river canyon that towered over their heads. It was magically propelled but not especially fast. Clive had chosen it at the small village they bought it from because the low magic profile made it harder to track if they were being followed.

“From their cultural perspective,” Clive said, “they were acting within appropriate boundaries.”

“So you think it’s fine?”

“They lied to me, lured us into their territory and kidnapped me,” Clive said. “Of course that’s not acceptable, which is why I escaped. I won’t say I’m not disappointed in the Magic Society, but we can’t blame the whole organisation for the actions of a few.”

“That’s crap,” Belinda said. “The fact that you even think like that is how it keeps happening. After Greenstone and Rakesh, have you ever been to a Magic Society branch that wasn’t shady as shi... what is that?”

Belinda pointed at two figures moving through the air above the canyon. They were both mostly human-shaped, although one had huge wings. She and Clive extended their senses and then both broke out in grins.

“What are they doing here?” Clive asked. “How did they even find us?”

Sophie and Humphrey glided down through the canyon, Humphrey with his wings and Sophie riding the air. She alighted onto the skiff with no more impact than a falling leaf while Humphrey's landing almost tipped Clive over the side.

“What was that?” Sophie demanded after Belinda had righted the boat and Clive had recovered.

“It wasn’t my best landing,” Humphrey sheepishly admitted. “I’m more used to dropping down to attack things.”

“Like Clive,” Sophie said.

“I wasn’t attacking Clive.”

“It looked like you were attacking Clive.”

“I wasn’t attacking Clive!”

Clive and Belinda shared a glance as they watched the pair. With the skiff stabilised, Belinda stood up and snatched Sophie into a warmly returned hug. The last few months was the longest time the pair had been separated since they were children.

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“We’ll lodge protests with the Adventure Society and Magic Society branches when we reach another city,” Clive said. “I’m not going back to Rakesh any time soon.”

“You should,” Sophie said. “We should burn down that Ajus woman’s house.”

“I’m in,” Belinda said. “It’s probably made of stone but there’s magic. We’ll figure it out.”

“No one is burning down anyone’s house,” Humphrey said.

They were in the courtyard of a tavern at a riverside town, deciding on their next move.

“Maybe we could go find Jory,” Sophie said. “Sounds like he could use some help. Neil’s probably with him already.”

“Jory?” Belinda asked, sitting up straight in her chair. “He told me he was going to be giving out lectures, not fighting. He should have let me know.”

“When was the last time you got a letter from him?” Clive asked. “It’s possible Lady Ajus was intercepting our mail.”

“I think we should revisit the burning her house down plan,” Belinda said. “We should take a vote.”

“We keep following the river to the border city of Oleyu,” Clive said. “Until we get there, we’re still in the Rakesh Magic Society branch’s area of influence.”

“There will be a temple of the Healer there,” Humphrey said. “We can find out more about Jory’s situation from them.”

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The city of Oleyu was unremarkable. It wasn’t as big and important as Rakesh or Vitesse, or unusual like Greenstone. It was a pleasant, prosperous and moderately sized city built on river trade, with a mid-range level of magic.

Clive, flanked by Sophie and Humphrey, was in the Magic Society building lodging a protest over his treatment by the Rakesh branch. He wasn’t optimistic about results as the Rakesh branch was one of the most powerful on the continent. Any official with authority stationed there had power and connections, so any consequences they faced would come from the Adventure Society, rather than other Magic Society branches.

The Adventure Society didn’t take kindly to its members being exploited, but for a bronze-ranker like Clive, it would take time before his complaint was given attention. As the monster surge precursor signs grew worse and the Builder cult remained a threat, inter-organisational conflict was a low priority.

Belinda, meanwhile, was contacting Jory through a water link chamber. Communicating through watery clones was the most accessible form of long-distance communication and a major use for the magical stone that Greenstone exported. The green stone of the chamber Belinda was led into was a reminder of home.

She stood on a small platform in front of a water pool and waited. It took a few minutes before the water flowed up into the shape of a person. The water took on colour until a somewhat wobbly replica of Jory stood before her, the blank expression turning into a grin as the connection was formed.

“Lindy!”

She smiled at him, about to answer but he started babbling.

“I was so relieved when I heard you were alright. After you didn’t respond to my last letter I tried contacting you but the Magic Society said that you were on some job with Clive and couldn’t be contacted. I kept trying to get in touch but they stopped listening to me altogether. I was about to try contacting Emir Bahadir to see if he could help but –”

“You do realise this chamber lets both of us talk?” she interrupted. Jory let out a sheepish laugh.

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After regrouping in the private dining room of a high-end tavern, Belinda explained Jory’s situation to the others.

“Jory isn’t doing anything dangerous,” she said. “He’ll just be in some isolated rural areas where his guards will need to handle monsters they come across. The areas are all low magic, so he should be fine. Mostly bronze and silver-rank monsters.”

“That might not be the case if these monster surge precursors keep getting worse,” Humphrey said. “Joining him might not be a bad idea.”

“I’m not against it,” Belinda said, “but I think it would be better off with only me joining Jory and Neil.”

“We just met up,” Sophie said. “You want to run off again straight away?”

“You’ll get bored senseless playing guard duty, Soph, and you know it’s good that you haven’t had many chances in life to get bored. You know what happens.”

“You’re blowing things out of proportion,” Sophie said.

“Am I? Remember Charles and the moss cat?”

“How was I meant to know it wouldn’t grow back?” Sophie asked.

“It was growing off of a cat, Soph. It very obviously wasn’t a real tomato.”

“It wasn’t a real cat!”

“I believe Belinda’s point,” Clive said, “is that she thinks you’ll do better working with me.”

“On what?” Humphrey asked.

“I’ve been working on something that might help us catch the Builder cult by the tail,” Clive said. “I’ve managed to tap into the portal network that the Builder cult has been using to move around.”

“That’s amazing,” Humphrey said. “That will be a huge weapon against the Builder.”

“If I can use the information the way I think I can,” Clive said. “Every request I made to do reconnaissance and field testing was denied. I eventually realised that the Rakesh Magic Society wasn’t interested in the fight against the Builder. All they want is access to the cult’s advanced astral magic, which is what they really recruited me for.”

“The Adventure Society will take a very different view,” Humphrey said.

“Yes,” Clive agreed, “but after Rakesh, I’m not willing to take that on faith. They might dismiss me as just some bronze-ranker from a provincial city. I want to walk into the Magic Society with everything on a plate, so they can’t push it aside.”

“Will we get to kick the crap out of some cultists?” Sophie asked.

“She means will we *have to* fight any cultists,” Humphrey corrected.

“If everything goes right, then no,” Clive said. Then an uncharacteristically malevolent grin crossed his face. “And what could possibly go wrong?”

## Chapter 460

### Kind of His Thing

Clive drove the flying, open-top carriage through the skies of Vitesse, docking halfway up one of the garden towers covered in flowers and greenery. He disembarked onto a balcony, along with Humphrey and Sophie, where they were met by an Adventure Society attendant.

"Young Master Geller, Mr Standish, Miss Wexler," he greeted. "Welcome back to the city, and congratulations on reaching silver rank."

"Thank you, Ernest," Clive said, handing over the control crystal for the carriage. "Do you know where we're meant to go?"

"I believe Mr Cotezee is waiting for you."

"Thank you, Ernest."

The trio made their way through the Adventure Society building to Miles Cotezee's office. He was a senior administrator, his silver rank coming entirely from cores. His paper, knowledge, rune and scribe essence combination was more suited to battling bureaucracy than monsters. They found the man in his office behind a desk piled high with papers in a series of trays. He looked up as they entered, his sudden grin looking especially manic on his frazzled expression.

"Clive! And friends, obviously. How did we do?"

Miles stumbled out of his chair and hurried around the table as Clive gave him a wary look. The man looked like he was ready to snap if he got bad news.

"Success," Clive said. "You can set up a presentation."

"Already did," Miles said. "It's in..."

He fished a watch from his pocket to check the time.

"...a little over three hours. You should take some time to have some lunch and relax beforehand."

"You might want to join us," Sophie suggested. "You look like you could use a break."

Miles let out a mad cackle.

"Break? That's a precious dream. Just be back here in two and a half hours. Oh, and wear your guild pins. It'll lend a little authority to what you have to say."

"What do we need more authority for?" Sophie asked. "Clive cracked the cult's portal network; how much more respect does he need to earn before people listen to him?"

"However you look at it, you're freshly minted silver-rankers," Miles said. "I love you kids, I really do, but you're not in Greenstone anymore. If you want people to listen to you

in this town, power is king. If you don't get it from your rank, get it from your name, your guild or wherever you can."

Miles frowned, remembering something.

"Where's your familiar?" he asked Humphrey.

Humphrey held open his jacket to reveal the head and paws of a mouse sticking out of the lining pocket.

"G'day bloke," the mouse said.

Humphrey shook his head and closed his jacket. The trio left Miles' office and made their way to one of the tower's many open balconies. Magical energy emerged from the rune tattoo on Clive's chest, passed through the cloth of his robe and coalesced into a tortoise the size of a sport utility vehicle, floating in the air beside the balcony. The tortoise's gently curved shell was covered in brightly glowing runes in a cornucopia of colours.

This was Clive's rune tortoise familiar, Onslow. The trio stepped off the balcony and onto his shell, at which point the familiar started descending through the air. They alighted in a public park where they hopped down from Onslow's back. Clive fed him a lettuce leaf while scratching the back of his head.

Clive was about to return Onslow to the tattoo when he spotted some children pointing. The rune tortoise was a non-threatening figure, despite its size, and covered in colourful, glowing runes that made him popular with children. Humphrey and Sophie shared a knowing look.

"We'll get you something to eat and come back," Sophie told Clive, patting him on the shoulder.

When they returned with a basket of sandwiches and drinks, Sophie and Humphrey found a gaggle of children riding Onslow around as he slowly floated around the park, just above the ground. Their parents were all gathered around Clive. In these situations, Sophie and Humphrey used to play a game where they guessed which ones were single mothers based on their body language but it had become far too easy to tell. Sophie pulled out a recording crystal and tossed it into the air where it floated over her head.

"What are you doing?" Humphrey asked.

"I thought Lorelei might like to see this," Sophie said innocently.

"You are just trouble, head to toe," Humphrey told her.

Eventually, Clive noticed them and dismissed Onslow, the families going on their way. The trio sat on a blanket and enjoyed lunch, although they still had time to spare

when they were done. They decided to walk a roundabout path back to the Adventure Society tower rather than fly. Teleporting into the tower wasn't possible.

On their way back, they saw a priest in full regalia robes sprinting down the street like monsters were chasing him. Sophie and Clive looked around and saw that no one seemed to be paying him any attention.

"Does that guy need help?" Clive asked.

"No," Humphrey said. "He's a priest of Lust. I bet there's a..."

He trailed off as a priestess, also in elaborate robes came running around a corner in pursuit of the priest.

"Come back!" she yelled after him. "I'll help you with your ritual!"

"BEGONE, WOMAN!" the priest yelled back over his shoulder.

"Is that...?" Clive asked.

"A priestess of Fertility, yes," Humphrey confirmed.

"This is a fun city," Sophie said.

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Riding one of the elevating platforms up through the tower Sophie, Humphrey and Clive took out their guild pins, affixing them to their clothes. Each one depicted violet flames in the shape of a flower. The shimmer of the magical material from which they were made gave the impression of dancing purple fire.

The building seemed oddly busy, even for the Adventure Society. As they made their way to Miles' office they saw people rushing frenetically through the halls. In his office, Miles was somehow even more agitated than he had been just hours before. He was standing over his desk running his hands through his hair as he looked at the papers in front of him like they'd slept with his wife. As the trio came in he looked up at them, wild-eyed.

"What is it?" Humphrey asked.

"Is there a problem with the presentation?" Clive followed up.

"Presentation's cancelled," Miles said.

"Cancelled?" Humphrey asked. "We've been scouting out that dam for two months. Clive finally figured out what—"

"Doesn't matter right now," Miles said, moving around the table to close the door.

"Something big is going on. I'm not sure what exactly, but rumour is that the monster surge is finally about to start."

"And these rumours spread since we got here three hours ago?" Sophie asked.

"The high-ups are keeping their cards close right now, but yeah," Miles said. "From what I've heard, there's some undisclosed source of information that says the surge is going to begin within the next few months."

"People have been saying that for years now," Sophie said.

"Yet none of those people triggered what's going on now," Miles said. "The Adventure Society has had the Magic Society cancel every booking on the water link chambers and all but taken them over. Almost all activities are being cancelled or rescheduled and orders are going out everywhere. Including for you three."

"The Adventure Society doesn't give orders," Sophie said. "It gives contracts."

"The society is going into monster surge rules, Miss Wexler. Try turning down a directly issued contract today and see where that gets you."

"What's the contract?" Humphrey asked.

"All three of you need to travel to some small town on the far side of nowhere," Miles told them, turning to search through the unruly papers covering his desk.

"And then what?" Sophie asked.

"No idea," Miles said. "The contract just says to go there. All three of you. That's the entire directive."

He found what he was looking for, handing them a sheet of paper each with what little details there were.

"This is a nothing contract," Sophie says. "It just says head off to some little village."

"I don't know any more than you do," Miles said, "except for one thing. This contract didn't come down through normal channels. It came down from on high, and I mean proper high. The kind of people your mother couldn't get in to see, Mr Geller. People who shouldn't even know who any of you are. So I strongly recommend you take the contract and do exactly what it says without making a fuss."

"Why is everyone looking at me?" Sophie asked.

"What about the dam project?" Clive asked. "If I gave someone else the details, maybe they could take over."

"Take over?" Sophie said, wheeling on Clive. "After all the work we put in? This is your win, Clive."

"As long as the work gets done," Humphrey said, "it doesn't matter who does it."

"Yes it does," Miles said. "Miss Wexler is quite right to be concerned. Reputation is everything in this town. I know you're very enthused about the civic responsibility of adventurers, Mr Geller, but there's only so much good you can do if no one takes you

seriously. If you want to fight the good fight, and I know you do, then you need to step out of your mother's shadow to be taken seriously in your own right."

"Which is exactly what I meant," Sophie said. "Also, I'm not letting some random person take all the credit."

"Tell us about this village they're sending us to," Clive said. "What makes it special?"

"No idea," Miles said. "My very strong suggestion is to go there and find out. There has to be something there. Oh, and someone will be going with you. He's being portalled in as we speak."

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A small town on the far side of nowhere was having a celebration feast inside their new, reinforced walls. As evening fell, a trio of visitors arrived in search of a blacksmith. Jory, Belinda and Neil were startled to discover that the blacksmith was someone they knew.

They hadn't seen Gary in two years, since Jason's memorial. The previously crestfallen leonid had regained his boisterousness, gathering all three of them into a bone-crushing hug before dragging them all off to the feast.

"What are you even doing here?" Gary mumbled through roasted meat. He had bitten it from a whole leg he was waving around that was the size of Belinda's arm.

"I'm out here trying to figure out how to make cheap potions with the local materials," Jory said. "I should be teaching people how to do it for themselves but that's a process that takes time we don't have right now. What about you?"

"Same thing, but for weapons, armour and fortifications," Gary said.

"A strange lady told me there was a blacksmith that could meet our needs here," Jory said. "Belinda needs a full refresh of her gear."

"Strange lady?" Gary asked. "Strange how?"

"She was too high rank to be out here," Jory said. "Even though I couldn't sense her aura, I could tell. Her clothes and the way she carried herself. A celestine, with hair like rubies."

"Are you sure it wasn't a man?" Gary asked. "I haven't seen a woman like you're describing, but there's a guy roaming about making trouble."

"Unless it was disguise magic, I'm sure," Jory said. "I figured she must have been sent out here because a gold-rank monster manifested."

"Makes sense," Gary said, then tore off another meat strip with his teeth. With his huge head and leonine features, it was somewhat terrifying to watch.

"I haven't heard about any gold-rank monster, though," Gary said, still spraying slivers of meat as he turned to Belinda. "So you need a set of silver-rank gear? I was set to pack up and move on tomorrow, but I can take a day."

"I need a lot of gear," Belinda said. "A lot. A day might not be enough."

"Don't underestimate your friend, here," a smooth voice said. An immaculately groomed man in out-of-place city fashion sat down next to Gary. "His skills have advanced in leaps and bounds in the last year or so."

"This would be the guy roaming around making trouble," Gary introduced. "Virid, these are my friends. "Belinda, Neil and Jory, this is Virid."

"A pleasure," Virid said. "I'm also curious about this unusual woman you mentioned. I didn't feel anyone like what you're describing and my senses are... quite prodigious."

The three looked over Virid, just as alien to the remote town as the woman Jory described.

"What is going on out here?" Neil wondered aloud.

"Good question," Rufus asked. "What are you all doing here?"

Everyone at the table turned to face the new arrival and Gary leapt up, clasping Rufus in a huge hairy hug, the meat in Gary's hand getting oil down Rufus' back.

"I seem to recall you not being a hugger," Rufus gasped.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Gary said with a laugh. "What are you doing here?"

"Adventure Society sent me," Rufus said. "They came to the training annex, told me where to go with nothing about why and portalled me halfway around the world. The others are still caught up at the town entry checkpoint."

"Others?" Gary asked, as arguing voices drifted in their direction, loud enough to be heard over the ongoing feat.

"You were lucky I was able to talk them down," Humphrey said. "All you needed was a little patience."

"How was I meant to know they wouldn't take a bribe?" Sophie complained. "Since when do village guards have integrity?"

"Small town people are good and decent folk," Humphrey said. "They deserve our respect."

"And city people don't?" Sophie demanded.

"In fairness, Sophie," Clive interjected, "would you trust you?"

"That's not a terrible point," Sophie admitted. "Lindy?"

Belinda rushed to catch her friend in a hug.

“What is everyone doing here?” Clive asked.

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Jason’s old team, plus Rufus, Gary and Gary’s mentor Virid were gathered at a picnic table left from the previous night’s feast. They were discussing how they all ended up in the same place at the same time, in the middle of nowhere.

“The only clue we have to what brought us all here is this mysterious woman?” Rufus asked. “Why us? Why here and why now?”

“Aside from Gary’s new friend,” Clive said, “there is something that connects us. Greenstone.”

“And the person we all met there,” Sophie added.

“The location may be a matter of discretion,” Virid suggested as the others fell into a sombre silence. “Large cities have eyes and ears that even I can’t escape, while the arrival of someone like me in a small one becomes fast news. Here, there is no one to tell.”

“Quite astute,” a female voice said. The group turned to see a celestine with alabaster skin, her crimson eyes and hair shining in the morning sun. They stood up arraying themselves in front of her. Virid was wary, not sensing her aura. He pushed out with his senses, turning whiter than she was at what he found.

“I’m, uh... I’m going to go,” he said.

“No,” Dawn told him. “You’re not. Sit back down.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Gary watched the terrified Virid with shock, being the only one who knew that he was a diamond ranker. What did that make this woman? She looked Virid up and down.

“You don’t look it,” she told him, “but you’re a smith?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. Mr Xandier’s skills may not be quite where I need them, so collaborating with you may bridge that gap.”

“I don’t suppose you’d care to explain why you brought us all here?” Rufus asked, stepping to the fore.

“I need Mr Xandier to reforge a weapon for me,” she said.

“The rest of us aren’t smiths,” Rufus said. “What do you want?”

“To fulfil a promise,” she said. She took a weapon from the dimensional bag at her waist and held it out. Gary moved forward and took it, turning it over in his hands.

The sword was bent almost in half. The craftsmanship was familiar, yet alien.

“What did this?” Gary asked. “How did the blade not snap?”

Gary's examination went deeper than simply looking. His forge essence abilities gave him insights into the nature of worked metals.

"It's soul-bonded," he said. "The sword bends but doesn't break, because so does the owner."

He looked up at Dawn.

"Which isn't you."

"No. I promised the owner I would have it ready and waiting when he arrived and only one man can reforge it."

"This feels like my work," Gary said, "but I don't remember this sword."

"It's been modified," Dawn said. "It wasn't soul-bonded when you made it, and it was ranked-up, being a growth item. Look again."

Gary looked back down at the sword in his hands, pushing his senses to the limit. Finally, he recognised it and his eyes went wide. His face came up filled with fury and he let out a roar that cracked the stone wall of the smithy next to him. Dawn's hair and clothes whipped around her like she was standing in a hurricane, but she didn't so much as lean back. The friends behind Gary covered their ears, deafened despite not being in the direct blast.

"Why do you have this?" Gary demanded, marching up into Dawn's face and waving the sword in front of her. "How do you have it?"

"I told you," she said calmly. "I promised the owner I would have it waiting for him."

"I don't know who soul-bonded this weapon," Gary growled, "but the real owner is dead. So you'd best tell me who gave you this or you're going to join him. I don't care who or what you are. I'll find a way."

"Gary, no!" Virid warned, standing up.

"Sit," Dawn barked and he plopped back down.

"The owner died, yes," she said. "But as it turns out, coming back from the dead is kind of his thing."