

## Chapter 46: Blatant Manipulation

The chamber was large and circular, a single room rising up five storeys to a glass ceiling. Light spilled in from above, reflecting from crystal mosaics that lined the walls to bathe the room in rainbow colours. This innermost chamber was the exact opposite of the temple's plain exterior.

"That is certainly impressive."

Jason walked into the room as Gabrielle closed the doors behind him. He looked at his arms as the light played over them. In the centre of the room there was a life-sized statue of a woman holding an open book. Jason walked around it, looking it over.

"Ask, and she shall answer or not, was it?"

Jason meandered around the room, looking at the crystal mosaics that ran from the floor, up five storeys to the ceiling. They depicted what he took to be various knowledge keepers; scribes, teachers, librarians. Rendered in colourful crystal and washed with light, they looked vibrant and bathed with glory.

He remained silent as he examined the artwork on the walls. He had always been prone to talking to himself, but the idea of expecting an answer back was disconcerting. He wondered if it was a little too close to prayer for his liking, then realised it actually was prayer.

"The idea," a female voice spoke from behind him, "is that I choose whether to answer your questions, not whether you choose to ask them."

It was the same voice he had heard in the square. He didn't turn from where he was looking at the wall mosaics.

"And you're in charge?" he asked.

"Definitively," the voice said. "It is my temple."

Her voice was melodious, with a hint of amusement. There was an undercurrent within it, an aura with the force of a tidal wave. It was somehow distant at the same time, like a photograph of a wild storm.

"Your house, your rules," Jason said. "My mother had a similar attitude."

"And you left," the voice said. "You have the same option here."

Jason turned around to find the statue had been replaced with a woman. She looked much the same as the people outside in the square, at least the human ones, with colourful clothes and Mediterranean features. She was beautiful, yet there was something

detached and untouchable about her. Jason noticed that, unlike the statue, she wasn't holding a book.

"So, were you the woman, or were you the book?"

"Neither."

"Misdirection," Jason said. "That's a magician's trick."

"I'm not the Wizard of Oz, Jason."

"You know my world?"

"I am Knowledge. Everything that is, or ever was known in this world. You brought your knowledge with you when you arrived."

"What about the other gods?" Jason asked. "Knowing everything they know would be a bit overpowered."

"We deities are of this world, but do not exist within it. Therefore their knowledge is not mine."

Jason looked the goddess up and down.

"It looks like you exist within it," he said.

"If you look at a pond and see a moon," she said, "is that moon within the pond, or is it a reflection of something much greater, very far away?"

"Nice metaphor," Jason said. "Classic religious imagery, but I suppose that's part of the job. You say you're not the man behind the curtain, but for all I know, you're just some pretty lady with several judiciously-placed mirrors."

"You think I'm pretty?"

"Well that's just blatant manipulation," Jason said. "If you already know everything, then asking me questions is just pantomime."

She laughed, a pleasant, tinkling sound. It gave Jason the sense of a country stream on a warm summer's day.

"You're quite fun," she told him. "You've felt my aura. And Hero's."

"A month ago I still thought auras were made up," Jason said. "Who knows how many ways there are to trick someone like me."

"I do, as it happens," she said. "What about all the people outside when Hero appeared? Do you doubt them all? Do you think we hired actors?"

"Argumentum ad populum?" Jason said. "If you're going to convince me you're a god, you'll need to do better than a second rate apologist."

"Have you considered how well the banana fits in the human hand?"

Jason burst into laughter.

"You've got jokes," he said. "I like that."

“If it makes you feel any better, just think of me as a vastly powerful, immortal entity. No need to use the G word.”

“Then what’s the difference between a god and some crazy-powerful super-being?”

“From your perspective? Very little.” she said. “The nature of transcendent beings are not bound up in physical reality. God and goddess are mortal words.”

“It doesn’t matter until I hit the level cap, is what you’re saying.”

“Something like that.”

“Can you read my mind?”

“In a way,” she said. “My knowledge of this world is absolute. So long as you know what you are thinking, I know what you are thinking.”

“So you know what I’m going to ask?”

“I know that which is, and that which was, but not that which is yet to come.”

“I bet you make some bloody good guesses, though.”

She laughed again, the sound flooding his body with pleasant feelings.

“I know everything in this world,” she said, “yet you mortals are a constant source of surprise. I did not expect, for example, that you would turn back and save the people in that sacrificial chamber.”

“That one surprised me too,” Jason confessed. He looked the goddess up and down.

“Why do you look like a local?” he asked.

“To appear requires an appearance, and this is as good as any. When I show myself to people looking as they do, it helps form a connection.”

“Then why don’t you look like someone from my world right now?”

“Because you didn’t come here for a connection. You came in wondering what happens when an atheist meets a god, so I met you as I would anyone else here. But now we have met, and the questions you came in with were not about me.”

“Yet I can’t seem to help myself,” Jason said. “Why would a goddess even bother to answer any of my questions?”

“I am Knowledge. It is my nature.”

“That feels like a lie.”

The corners of her mouth twitched up in a slight smile.

“Call it an incomplete truth.”

Jason laughed.

“You have your own agenda,” he said

“Don’t we all?” she said. “But whatever my motivations, you still have questions, and I still have answers. If it makes you feel better, know that you are insufficiently consequential to be worth manipulating.”

“That’s a little hurtful, but kind of reassuring, I guess. Can you actually smite me down?”

“We transcendent beings are limited in our ability to affect physical reality. We can affect magic, creating essences and awakening stones. We can also affect our area of influence. I am Knowledge, therefore I can bestow any knowledge I have at will.”

“And you have all the knowledge.”

She smiled.

“So, can the god of the oceans or whatever create tsunamis and such?”

“Yes, but direct intervention is antithetical to our nature, other than to redress an imbalance. More often we work through our followers.”

“So if you wanted to smite me, you could just find the nearest silver rank on the membership rolls and point in my general direction.”

“More or less,” she said. “Of course, another god could send their own agents to intervene. It is something akin to a matter of etiquette to let our followers determine the outcome of a conflict between deities.”

“Who doesn’t love a holy war?” Jason asked. “I suppose I should get on with the actual questions I came in here with, shouldn’t I?”

“Please do,” she said.

“Alright, then. When I was brought to this world, was I chosen?”

“No, it was happenstance. While your world is magically barren, this one is magically rich. That magic builds up over time, finding various forms of release.”

“Is that why the monster surges happen?” Jason asked.

“Indeed it is,” she said. “The magic can also be released by flaring out from this world, sometimes coming into contact with another. If conditions are just right, that contact forms a connection; an inadvertent bridge across which someone can be drawn.”

“If it’s just random chance, where do my outworlder abilities come from? They feel designed.”

“They are designed,” she said. “By you. The journey between worlds altered your body, flooded it with magic. Outworlders like yourself unconsciously shape that magic into a form they can understand, to help them navigate this world using the rules of their own.”

“So, I gave myself powers?”

“It would be more accurate to say that when the power came upon you, you chose its form. A way of framing this world through your own in order to make it comprehensible. As is so often the case when dealing with the dark depths of the mind, the results are more intuitive than practical. But what I am describing isn’t what really happened to you. It is simply the closest I can get to an explanation you could understand. Trying to explain the true forces at play would be like explaining mathematics to a rock. You fundamentally lack the capacity to perceive what I would need to show you.”

The goddess held her hands in a show of helplessness.

“If you were one of my followers,” she said, “I could do better. Imbue the knowledge directly into your mind.”

“No thanks,” Jason said. “I’m all about that self-determination.”

“Our followers are free to act as they will,” she said. “We are not tyrants.”

“Of course you don’t think that. To you, being all-powerful seems natural. If you know everything I know, then you know I’ve heard all that ‘freedom within faith’ nonsense before.”

“But the gods of this world are not remote entities that never show themselves or take action.”

Jason laughed.

“And you think that makes it better?” he asked. “I never abdicated my moral responsibility to an absentee sky wizard in my world, and I’m not doing it now that the wizard’s shown up to enforce it.”

The goddess chuckled.

“I didn’t think so, but I had to try,” she said.

“I get it,” Jason said. “Got to get those bums in pews.”

“You’re stalling,” she said. “Going off on tangents to avoid the question you’re not sure you want the answer to.”

“That’s a go-to move for me,” Jason said.

“I know. You won’t find me easy to manipulate.”

“I didn’t think so, but I had to try,” Jason said.

“We are both beholden to our natures,” she said. “Ask your question. The only real question you came in here with.”

“You already know the question,” Jason said.

“Yet you must ask it. Only then will the responsibility for hearing the answer be yours.”

Jason nodded.

“Is there a way for me to go home?”

“Do you want there to be?”

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “I mean, that should be the goal, right? But there isn’t a lot waiting for me back there. Here, I see potential. What I can become. The wonders waiting over the next hill.”

He looked at the goddess.

“You know everything, right? You tell me if I want to go back.”

“That is a question only you can answer. That is why I asked it.”

“Is it possible?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said.

“How?”

“You have possessed the means from the beginning, but you are not ready to use it.”

“From the beginning?”

Jason thought back to the day he first arrived. The first time he opened his inventory there was an object inside. An object his ability couldn’t, or wouldn’t identify, and had been sitting in his inventory ever since.

“The world-phoenix token,” he said.

“Yes. I would advise against trying to learn more about it. Anyone who would actually recognise it would be unwilling to leave it in your hands.”

“Why do I have it?”

“I am possessed of every piece of knowledge in this world,” she said, “but that is a question to which I do not know the answer.”

“That’s only mildly terrifying,” Jason said. “You said I wasn’t ready to use it?”

“Choosing to use it would require an act of faith,” she said.

“And faith is very much not my thing,” Jason said.

“of that, I am very much aware,” she said. “When circumstances dictate, the token will use itself.”

“Even if it’s my magical void storage thing?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re not going to tell me the trigger conditions, are you?”

“You were warned that I would answer or not, as I choose. In this case, I choose not.”

“So I could just be walking along the street and whoosh, back home I go?”

“If you decide that that you do not wish to return to your world, then discard the token.”

“So I have to choose if I want to stay,” he said. “Either I throw this thing away, or hang about until these mysterious circumstances to come about. What do I do in the meantime?”

“Get stronger” she said. “You will need that strength for what is to come.”

“You told me you couldn’t see the future.”

“I’ve been known to make some bloody good guesses,” she said

Jason laughed, and the goddess smiled.

“You know,” he said, “I didn’t know what to expect from a goddess. I figured, if you were real, that I wouldn’t handle it very well.”

“You could have done worse.”

“Yeah, but that’s the thing, though; I should have. When I came to this world, the magic changed me. I’m not even human, now. Did it change the way I think? Is that how I’ve been getting through all this without losing my mind?”

“No,” she said. “Your mind remains your own.”

“Really? I don’t feel like the same person I was before I came here.”

“You aren’t,” she told him. “Circumstances change, and people change with them. That is as true in your world as it is in mine. Not everything is a matter of magic.”

Jason nodded to himself.

“Alright,” he said. “Then I guess I just have one last question.”

“I do not know if the gods of your world are real,” she answered, not waiting for him to ask. “No one from your world who knows that particular truth has ever come to this one, and I only deal in knowledge. That being said, from what I do know of your world, it lacks the magic to sustain a divine entity.”

“That seems rather definitive.”

“You may interpret that as you will,” she said, “but I do not make interpretations. I deal in knowledge, and knowledge alone.”

“Wait, you said no one from my world. Are there other outworlders from my world?”

“There have been, in the past. Not for centuries, now. Those that came before either died or returned home.”

“But essence users can live for centuries,” Jason said. “Are there essence users running around my world?”

“I do not know,” she said. “Perhaps you should go back and see for yourself.”

Jason took a deep breath.

“You know,” he said, “you really dropped some bombs on me, lady.”

“People do not come to the goddess of knowledge for recipes, Jason.”

"Is that an option?" he asked.

"No."

"I guess that's everything, then," Jason said. "Do I just go, now? Is there a donation box or something?"

As the goddess laughed, the doors were pulled open from the outside by Gabrielle. The acolyte gave a curious glance at the mirthful deity.

"My lady," she addressed the goddess.

"I'm sure you can find your own way out, Jason," the goddess told him.

"You're going to talk about me behind my back, aren't you?" Jason asked. "Gabrielle, try and explain privacy to your boss. I think she might have trouble with it, given her inherent nature."

"Go away, Jason," the goddess said, and he wandered off with a chuckle and a wave.

"I think it was this way," they heard him say as he disappeared among the bookshelves.

"He seems like an unusual man," Gabrielle said.

"Yes, but also a dangerous one," the goddess warned. "Take care in your future dealings."

"He never seemed that way," Gabrielle said.

"It isn't his powers or his appetites that make him dangerous," the goddess said. "It's his ideas. He'll have you question your faith, just because it's faith. He'll have you question everything, if you let him."



## Chapter 47: Mirage Chamber

Rufus looked up as Gary emerged from his room, stretching his long arms and yawning.

"You're not breakfast," Gary said.

"You're just getting up?" Rufus said.

Farrah emerged from her own room, rubbing her eyes.

"Oh, welcome back, Rufus. No breakfast?"

"Why would I have bought breakfast? I told you to relax the training, not give it up entirely. Jason needs to develop good habits now."

"Forget that guy," Gary said.

Farrah nodded her agreement.

"He went to see the goddess of knowledge few days ago," she said. "Since then he's been like a monster. All we wanted was a few relaxing days before you got back, but he won't stop. The closest he comes to taking a break is having a drink with Jory down at the clinic, and I'm pretty sure that's only because it lets him train his resistance ability."

"Turns out booze is poison," Gary said. "I'm not going to stop drinking it, but it makes you think."

"Did you at least show him around the city?" Rufus asked.

"Oh, we showed him," Farrah said.

"Now he does an evening run each night around the Island," Gary complained.

The door opened up and Jason pushed in a trolley containing two rows of covered food trays.

"Rufus, you're back," Jason said happily. "You can join us for breakfast."

"From what these two were saying, I thought you'd be training."

"Yeah, I ate a spirit coin this morning, ran into the clinic and did some weight training. Then I ran back and got to work on breakfast. These two have been slacking off while you were away."

As he talked, Jason transferred food from the tray to the dining table. Gary and Farrah sat down, Gary rubbing his hands together.

"I'm starting to get a handle on the local food," Jason said. "I've been checking out the markets when I'm taking a break. But we can crank up the training intensity now that you're back, yeah?"

Gary's hands stopped moving.

“What do you mean by crank up the intensity?” he asked.

“We can stop slacking off. I’ve been slacking off a bit, cooking, making my way through Jory’s liquor cabinet.”

“Rest is an important part of training, too,” Rufus said.

“Exactly,” Gary mumbled around a mouthful of sausage.

Gary and Farrah were already tucking in as Jason poured out glasses of juice from a large pitcher.

“Have something to eat,” Jason told Rufus, pushing a laden plate his way. “Tell us how your field assessment thing went.”

Rufus picked up his cutlery.

“It does smell good.”

“So, I know this guy Humphrey,” Jason said to Rufus. “He was part of your group, right?”

“Humphrey Geller?” Rufus asked. “You know him?”

“We went in for induction on the same day,” Jason said. “Nice guy. How’d he do?”

“He failed,” Rufus said. “His skills are solid and he has a good grasp of his abilities. The ones he’s awakened, at least. His problem is one of mindset.”

“What do you mean?” Jason asked.

“Humphrey’s confluence essence is dragon,” Rufus said.

“Makes sense,” Jason said, thinking of Humphrey’s familiar. “I have to imagine that’s a good one.”

“They’re all good, if you use them right,” Farrah said.

“And there’s the problem,” Rufus said. “Humphrey is considerate, thoughtful, cautious and humble. Does any of that sound like a dragon to you? He needs to be confident, bold. He knows how to use his abilities, but he’s too indecisive about doing so.”

“I get it,” Jason said. “He’s a nice guy with the powers of an arrogant prick.”

“Actually, that’s exactly it,” Rufus said. “He wasn’t alone, though. There were nineteen people and we passed six.”

“Ouch,” Jason said.

“That’s a big group,” Farrah said.

“Some of the local aristocrats were looking to make a social connection,” Rufus said darkly. “Some of the records of their recently accepted adventurers were mysteriously lost, forcing them to re-take the assessment.”

“That sounds shady,” Farrah said. “The Adventure Society let them get away with that?”

“You haven’t seen what it’s like in these outlying branches,” Gary said. “They don’t the same funding, so they have to compromise with local powers.”

“Corruption,” Jason said.

“It’s easy to call it that,” Gary said, “but sometimes compromises have to be made. You pay adventurers with money, not principles.”

“Is there going to be any backlash?” Farrah asked.

“Probably,” Rufus said. “The ones who’d passed before their records mysteriously vanished had already been working as adventurers, but after I failed them, their membership was revoked. They won’t get it back until they pass another field assessment.”

“I bet they loved that,” Farrah said.

“The Duke of Greenstone’s nephew is part of that group,” Rufus said.

“You flunked out the city ruler’s nephew?” Gary chortled.

“I did,” Rufus said. “I suspect the people I failed will have an easier time with their next assessor.”

“Have you considered that you might not be the one to take the pain for this?” Farrah asked. “You might have dropped the local Adventure Society officials right in it.”

“Actually, the branch director was urging me on. Seems she’s trying to flush out at least some of the external influence.”

“Oh,” Farrah said thoughtfully. “Good for her.”

“So, what about Humphrey?” Jason asked. “You’re all about training up adventurers, right? I bet you have plenty of ideas to get him on track.”

“Humphrey’s mother is a family acquaintance,” Rufus said, “so I’ll help him out a little. I know exactly what he needs.”

“Oh?” Jason prompted.

“I’ve seen almost every kind of would-be adventurer there is,” Rufus said, then looked at Jason. “Almost every kind. Back at my family’s academy...”

He trailed off as Jason, Gary and Farrah all picked up their glasses of juice, draining them dry simultaneously.

“What was that?” Rufus asked as Gary refilled their glasses from the pitcher.

“What was what?” Jason asked.

“Never mind,” Rufus said. “Back in my family’s academy...”

Again all three picked up their glasses and chugged back the contents.

“What is happening right now?” Rufus asked. “Wait, are you playing that drinking game?”

The other three erupted into laughter.

“What is wrong with you people?”

“It’s just juice,” Gary said, as he started refilling the glasses again. “It is just juice, right?”

“Fresh-squeezed,” Jason said.

“So, now every time I mention my family’s-”

“Hold up,” Gary said, waving his hand at Rufus. “I can only refill these so fast.”

Rufus panning his glare around the table drew fresh peals of laughter.

“I hate you all.”

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“This is where you grew up?” Jason asked as they walked through the verdant grounds of the Geller ancestral home. Jason and Rufus were being guided by Humphrey Geller and his mother, Danielle. Jason’s comment came as they walked through a tunnel of leafy vines grown into a tunnel on a bamboo framework. Splashes of sunlight stabbed through the foliage, punctuating the shade with beams of light.

“I would have loved this when I was a kid,” Jason said. “Who am I kidding? I love it now.”

“Thank you, Mr. Asano,” Danielle said.

“Jason is fine,” Jason told her.

“You’ll have to forgive Mr. Asano,” Rufus apologised. “He’s not well-versed in formality, in spite of any quite-thorough explanations he may have received earlier in the day.”

“Yes,” Jason said, “I’m not very smart and simple formalities are super-hard to figure out. It’s definitely not that I find them to be a set of arbitrary behavioural norms that serve as a tool of exclusionary tribalism and that eschewing the rituals of cultural performance facilitates the fostering of new relationships by having both sides step out of their preconceived societal modes.”

Danielle laughed while Rufus glared at Jason.

“I’m not sure how my translation ability handled that one,” Jason said.

“I should have left you in the desert,” Rufus muttered.

“Mr. Remore did mention you were an unusual man,” Danielle said. “I’m delighted to discover he was right. Please feel free to call me Danielle.”

Danielle Geller demonstrated that at silver rank, the beautifying effect of essences reached the realms of the supernatural. In addition to looking far too young to be Humphrey’s mother, she was stunningly perfect. Neither women nor men used cosmetics

in this world, but Jason realised there was little point. All the people that could have afforded it used essences, which was like air-brushing real life.

“So, have you spoken to Gabrielle, yet?” Jason asked Humphrey, who turned white and started shaking his head to silence Jason.

“Gabrielle?” Danielle asked. She may have looked too young to be Humphrey’s mother, but that tone of having latched onto a weakness was unmistakable.

“It’s nobody,” Humphrey said.

“Danielle,” Jason said, “as Rufus pointed out, my grasp of the local etiquette is limited. How does one go a-courting in local aristocratic circles?”

“Please stop,” Humphrey begged.

“That would depend on the relative status of the parties involved,” Danielle said.

“Then let me present a hypothetical, then.” Jason said. “Let’s take someone of roughly your social standing. A young member of your family, perhaps. How would they approach, say, an acolyte of the church of knowledge? I imagine there would something of a tangled nest of social, political and religious entanglements that would make it rather difficult.”

Jason and Danielle were happily walking side-by-side, with Rufus and Humphrey behind. Humphrey had his head buried in his hands, while Rufus just shook his head.

“Indeed there would be social complexities,” Danielle said. “The best approach the young man could take – I assume it is a young man in this example?”

“Why not?” Jason said.

“The best thing this young man could do,” Danielle said, glancing back at her son, “would be to inform his mother. Someone who can arrange things without youthful enthusiasm causing a political incident.”

“Oh, but you know how young people can be,” Jason said. “I bet he’d rather cut off his own arm than talk about this with his mother.”

“If only he had a friend to step in for him,” Danielle said.

“Jason and I can do some sparring, right?” Humphrey asked Rufus.

“I’ll make sure to schedule it in,” Rufus said.

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“That,” Danielle said, “is the mirage chamber.”

It was a huge dome rising out from the trees and plants, segmented like the eye of an insect. If the pathways of the estate weren’t mostly shaded by canopy, the bulging edifice would be visible from most of the grounds.

“So, what is this thing, exactly?” Jason asked. “Rufus wasn’t very clear.”

“It creates false images of monsters,” Humphrey explained, “and a false image of your body with which to fight them. Everything feels completely real.”

“That sounds fantastic,” Jason said. “Do I get a go?”

“Another day,” Rufus said. “This time you’re just here for a look. Today we set Humphrey on the path to passing the next field assessment.”

“Didn’t you say that they’d just wave everyone through next month?” Jason asked Rufus.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Danielle said. “I was speaking with the branch director yesterday morning, and she’s very happy with how things went. That said, some kind of compromise is probably necessary.”

Getting closer to the dome, Jason saw that there was a complex of buildings adjoining it.

“That’s the viewing hall over there,” Danielle said, pointing out the largest building other than the dome itself. “We try and set up scenarios our family trainees can learn from, then get them all in to watch. Rufus tells me you’re an affliction specialist, which might be interesting to work with.”

“He’s a long way from any example but bad,” Rufus said.

“Rufus,” Danielle lightly scolded.

“No, he’s right,” Jason said.

“I heard you acquitted yourself quite well at the Vane Estate incident,” Danielle said.

“Then you might want to check your sources,” Jason said. “I got laid out multiple times by a guy with a shovel.”

She raised an eyebrow in Rufus’ direction, who nodded with a wry smile on his face.

“Rufus was saying you train family members from all around the world here,” Jason said.

“We have branch families spread far and wide,” Danielle said proudly. “They all come here at age fifteen, and stay until they reach bronze rank. We also take in some non-family.”

“Our family members have a habit of picking teams even before they get their essences,” Humphrey said. “We take the team members in as well.”

Danielle led them into one of the buildings, which turned out to be a large single room. The back wall had a long glass window through which was only darkness, but Jason’s power let his eyes penetrate the gloom. Beyond the glass was the empty interior of the dome. The dome itself was made of segments; irregular metal pentagons carved with magical symbols.

Underneath the window was a rectangular stone block. Carved into the top were numerous runes and sigils, made up of sophisticated patterns. The last feature of the room were low wooden platforms the size of single beds. They lined the left and right wall, a half-dozen to a side. More mystical symbols were engraved into their surfaces.

“This is the control room,” Danielle explained. “From that panel under the window we can control everything that happens inside the chamber.”

She turned to Rufus.

“So what do you have for us?”

## Chapter 48: An Endless, Inescapable Nightmare

In the control room of the mirage chamber, all eyes were on Rufus. He walked over to the stone block under the window, which had a dizzying array of runes, sigils and intricate magical diagrams carved into it. He spent a few moments looking it over.

“Standard arrangement,” he observed. “Jason, hand me that crystal.”

Jason took a long, faceted crystal from his inventory, something Farrah had created using Magic Society resources. It looked rather like a long, narrow diamond, the facets catching the light and reflecting out flashes of rainbow colour. He handed it to Rufus, who looked around one side of the stone block, then the other, finding a hole into which he pushed the crystal.

“So, what’s with the crystal?” Jason asked.

“A mirage chamber projects things from these platforms along the walls,” Danielle said. Jason glanced again at the wooden platforms lining both sides of the room.

“If it doesn’t have direct access to something through the platforms,” Danielle continued, “you need to give it a magical imprint to replicate instead.”

“And the crystal is a storage device for the imprint,” Jason said.

“Exactly,” Danielle said.

Rufus, having inserted the crystal, was now looking over the top of the stone block.

“This mirage chamber has an impressive array of monster imprints,” Rufus said, “but Humphrey needs something a little different to a basic combat scenario. What I’ve just added in should help him climb the next wall in his development. Humphrey, you can go on in, now.”

Humphrey lay down on one of the wooden platforms. The runes under him lit up and he went still as death. Suddenly Jason spotted him through the window, standing under the centre of the dome. He glanced back down at Humphrey’s still body on the platform, then up at his other body inside the dome, which turned to look at the window.

“That’s an illusionary body?” Jason asked.

“That’s right,” Danielle said. It can only affect or be affected by other illusions created by the mirage chamber. To him, though, everything feels completely real.”

“That’s right,” Rufus said. “Right now it feels completely real to him, but nothing he suffers will affect his real body.”

“What if something happens to his body here while he’s out there?” Jason asked.



“Then he’ll be snapped awake,” Rufus said. “The illusion feels completely real, but it’s just a projection. Being unexpectedly taken out is disorienting, but harmless.”

Rufus used a finger to trace out some of the lines of the stone slab in front of him. They lit up under his finger, but the real change was on the other side of the window.

The inside of the dome went from darkness to bright and wild illumination. Segmented panels blasted the interior with a maelstrom of rainbow lights, moving and flashing from one colour to the next as the interior of the dome became a shifting kaleidoscope. Humphrey's figure looked tiny In the vast, empty space, like the flood of colour would sweep him away. Rainbow light spilled through the window and over the observers.

“That’s certainly impressive,” Jason said. “Has this ever given someone a seizure?”

“Once,” Danielle said. “It turns out they had some kind of brain sickness. We had a healer remove it.”

“Of course you can casually cure epilepsy,” Jason muttered.

“There is nothing casual about maladies of the mind,” Danielle said. “You need to remove the sickness, then restore the damaged portions of the brain with healing, like a wound. After that, it often takes them time to recover. Especially if the condition had been with them for a long time. They can lose memories, even physical skills.”

“Oh,” Jason said. “It’s oddly comforting to know magic isn’t just the instant solution to every problem.”

“Magic is a tool, like any other,” Danielle said. “Delicate tasks require care and expertise.”

As Jason and Danielle talked, Rufus' hands moved over the engravings on the stone block like he was playing a theremin. On the other side of the window, the chaos of light was slowly moving towards order.

“Is he alright in there in there?” Jason asked.

“He has experienced this many times,” Danielle said.

“Sorry this is taking so long to get in place,” Rufus said. “I need to get a handle on the nuances of your chamber design.”

“What exactly are you planning for Humphrey?” Jason asked.

“We need to motivate Humphrey to act boldly. I have an exercise designed to instil that mindset”

“You think this new addition to our mirage chamber will do that?” Danielle said.

“In my family’s academy,” Rufus said, “I’ve seen plenty of people with Humphrey’s issue. Good people, heroic, even. You can’t motivate them with glory or power, not if you want to really move them to action. It has to be with consequence.”

The light inside the dome suddenly vanished. Even Jason’s dark sight power couldn’t penetrate the sudden darkness. Then daylight lit up the space beyond the window, which was no longer the inside of the dome. It was a wide desert gorge, with Humphrey standing at the bottom, near a shallow stream. Sunlight came down from a clear blue sky. Humphrey looked around, finding a small, adorable child standing next to him.

“Holodeck,” Jason whispered in awe.

Rufus tapped a rune on the control table.

“Humphrey,” he said. “Can you hear me?”

“I can,” Humphrey said, his voice emerging from the control table. “Why is there a little girl, here?”

“That’s Ellie,” Rufus said. “You have to protect her from the monsters.”

Rufus’ hands moved over the runes again. A half-dozen monsters appeared from further down the gorge, running toward Humphrey. They looked and moved like leopards, but were the size of full-grown tigers. Behind them, their tails were long and thick, ending in a huge, talon-like claw.

As Humphrey took a stance in front of little Ellie, armour formed around his body from thin air. It looked to be made of scales, mostly sandy yellow but flecked with other colours, like rainbow droplets. In his hands, a huge sword appeared. Absurdly large and shaped like an extended dragon wing, Jason couldn’t help but question the practicality.

Staying close to the little girl and shielding her with his body, Humphrey awaited the monsters. As they arrived he started swinging his huge sword. Jason was startled at the ease and expertise with which he wielded the massive weapon. It was clearly heavy, but his footwork seamlessly shifted to manage the weight and momentum. Each blow was the end of a monster, but he couldn’t take down all six quickly enough. Two of the nimble monsters skipped around Humphrey as he dealt with the others. By the time he fought past them, Ellie’s corpse was being pulled apart in a tug-of-war between two monsters.

Even watching from a distance, Jason felt viscerally sick at the sight. Rufus tapped a rune, causing the monsters and the child to vanish. Humphrey looked at the now-empty ground in horror, the huge sword falling from his hands and vanishing.

Danielle reached over the console and tapped the rune to close communication with Humphrey.

"Are you trying to traumatise my son?" she asked Rufus, her tone a clear warning that his answer had best be a good one. Rufus calmly turned to face her as she stepped forward to confront him.

"Yes," Rufus said. "I am trying to traumatise your son. During the field assessment, I could see clearly the training he had been through. His skills are exceptional, but it was equally evident you have coddled him to the point of a critical deficiency. The reason I failed him isn't that he lacks the ability. It's because he doesn't understand the duty of being an adventurer. You taught him to handle killing, but not how to handle failure. He hesitates in critical moments because you've taught him to be too perfect."

Jason watched Humphrey's forlorn figure through the glass. He agreed with Humphrey's mother that Rufus' training was essentially emotional abuse, and thought Rufus' speech sounded suspiciously like a pot critiquing a kettle. From what he could tell, Rufus and Humphrey had similar upbringings. He wondered if Rufus had been through the same exercise himself.

"He'll stop to look for the optimal path when what he needs to do is act," Rufus continued. "If you want Humphrey to act quickly and decisively, he needs to understand the price of not doing so. I can let that slide with the other adventures in this city, but you wanted him to meet my standards. These are my standards."

Danielle was a head shorter than Rufus, but she got right up into his space, tilting her head back to glare at him.

"Is this how you treat people in your famous academy?"

"Yes," Rufus said. "It is."

Rufus turned back to the control table and reopened communication.

"Get ready, Humphrey," Rufus said. "We're going again."

Jason watched Danielle, seeing she was on the edge of stepping in to stop it. In the end, she took a step back. Inside the dome, a small boy appeared next to Humphrey.

"What about Ellie?" Humphrey's voice came from the control table.

"Ellie's dead," Rufus said coldly. "She was torn apart by monsters. This is Ben."

Jason winced, looking once again at Danielle. She was looking sternly at Rufus but didn't say anything.

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Humphrey's real body stirred on the wooden platform, the runes under him fading. He swung his legs off the side and sat up, face pale, eyes wide and shaking. He had failed to protect every new child Rufus had placed with him.

“How was that?” Rufus asked.

“A nightmare,” Humphrey said weakly. “An endless, inescapable nightmare.”

“Not inescapable,” Rufus said, devoid of sympathy. “You had the power to protect those children. It was your hesitation and doubt that doomed them. You need to understand that sometimes the best action is the immediate one. You’ll do better tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” he asked weakly.

“And every day, until you stop getting the children killed.”

“I... I don’t know if I can do that.”

“Yet you think you’re ready to do it when the people are real?” Rufus asked.

“Adventurers aren’t hunting monsters recreationally, Humphrey. We are the shield for those who can’t protect themselves. Yes, there are adventurers who only care about money and status. But the real ones, and I know you want to be one of the real ones, care about duty. You have the heart for it, but until you have the mindset to match, all you’re going to do is fail.”

Rufus placed a hand on Humphrey’s shoulder.

“Only you can decide how much you’re willing to go through to do the right thing.”

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Rufus and Danielle sat in the shade with a pitcher of iced drinks on a picnic table. Danielle had suggested Humphrey lead an enthusiastic Jason in the direction of the orchards.

“I’m sorry if you feel I went too far,” Rufus said. “You’re a good adventurer. You know the things he’ll be facing sooner or later.”

Danielle nodded.

“My father always said I shield him too much from the realities,” Danielle said. “But he was always such a good boy. It’s like there’s something inside him that makes him want to help people. I didn’t want to break that.”

“Did you consider something for him other than adventuring?” Rufus asked. “There are other ways to help people.”

“Not in our family, there isn’t. Gellers are adventurers, with all the good and bad that comes with it. And he has talent.”

“He does,” Rufus said. “If he can get past this obstacle, he could be one of the greats one day.”

“You have similar hopes for your friend, Jason, yes?”

“I’m sorry about him,” Rufus said. “He has a habit of saying whatever pops into his head.”

“No he doesn’t,” Danielle said. “You should pay more attention.”

“What do you mean?”

“Haven’t you noticed the way he seizes control of a conversation? The way he provokes people out of their comfortable patterns? He has a very political mind, but he applies it quite unlike anyone I’ve met. I do hope Humphrey can learn from him, a little.”

“You want Humphrey to be more like Jason?” Rufus asked incredulously.

“Humphrey is too straightforward a thinker for that,” Danielle said. “I’d just like him to understand that things are more complicated than he realises. Social survival training, if you will.”

“I think you may be overestimating Jason. You might be conflating unpredictability with cunning.”

“Perhaps,” Danielle said. “I will acknowledge he’s hard to predict. You know, I heard an interesting thing while you were off doing the field assessment.”

“Oh?”

“A god appeared in Divine Square.”

“They do that all the time,” Rufus said.

“There were a couple of interesting quirks in this particular instance.”

“Which god?” Rufus asked.

“Hero,” Danielle said. “Interesting god. Did you know he’s the only core deity not to have subordinate gods?”

“I did, actually.”

“That’s right,” Danielle said. “Your uncle is a member of Hero’s clergy, isn’t he? How is he doing?”

“Very well. I’ll tell him you asked after him.”

“Please do. What really caught people’s attention about Hero’s appearance, though, was that when everyone kneeled before the god, one man did not.”

Rufus put a hand over his eyes, groaning wearily.

“Jason has something of an issue with religion,” he said.

“I did hear some rumours about that priestess you were working with,” Danielle said.

“She has some unkind words about you, by the way. But you can see why I wasn’t startled at Jason’s lack of formality. What is the deference due an aristocrat when you won’t bow to a god?”

Rufus narrowed his eyes at Danielle.

“You seem to know a lot about Jason for someone who just met him,” Rufus said. “It’s hardly a surprise for someone of your influence to hear about the Divine Square incident, but you were certain it was Jason. You’re investigating him, aren’t you?”

“I am,” Danielle said. “At your father’s request.”

Rufus groaned.

“Thousands of miles away, and he still can’t let me chart my own path.”

“He’s concerned about the man arresting so much of his son’s attention,” she said. “A man who seemingly fell out of the sky. Imagine my surprise to discover he did almost exactly that.”

“You know he’s an outworlder.”

“I do,” Danielle said. “Very exciting.”

“How?”

“It was a fanciful guess until I met him. He’s so obviously a man out of place. The way he talks, the way he thinks. The way he looks at things. He doesn’t fit.”

“The way he looks at things?”

“Like a man who doesn’t expect to recognise anything.”

“Have you told my father what he is?”

“I did,” Danielle said. “It won’t be hard for anyone to put the pieces together once people start looking for them. Which they will, when they realise you’re training him.”

“It’s inevitable, I know,” Rufus said. “I wanted him to reach the point where his skills at least weren’t an embarrassment. Jason doesn’t seem to embarrass, though.”

“Oh?”

“He can be frustrating to teach,” Rufus said. “He’s driven, but he has this habit of already knowing the lessons he was meant to learn through hardship.”

“How do you think he manages that?”

“I advise strongly against ever asking him to explain. Something about an old man making a boy put wax on a carriage, then take it off again, because people were mean to him at his school. I think Jason’s world must be a very strange place.”

“Sounds rather intriguing,” she said.

“Then feel free to ask him about it,” Rufus said. “Just do it when I’m somewhere else.”

Danielle laughed.

“When will he find his way into the mirage chamber?” she asked.

“Sooner, rather than later. I want him to use a martial arts skill-book first. I’ve been holding that off to prepare him as best I can, but he’ll need at least a few weeks to

consolidate before his field assessment. So, in a few days, most likely. In the meantime, do you need me to keep coming for Humphrey?"

"No, our family has trainers enough with the stomach for it," Danielle said. "When you bring Jason by, we can have them spar a little."

"I will," Rufus said. "But first, I need to have a talk with my father."

## Chapter 49: A Voice From Home

The Adventure Society offered a limited, if valuable, array of services. The Magic Society, by contrast, provided all manner of magical amenities to anyone with the money to pay for them. The main lobby of the Magic Society services building was quite large, with many comfortable chairs. Those who could afford their services were accustomed to luxury.

An elven man in expensive clothes approached. Rufus noted a brooch in the shape of hand inside a circle, the Magic Society emblem.

"Lord Remore," the man said. "Such a pleasure. I'm Pochard Finn, deputy director of the Magic Society here in Greenstone."

Rufus stood up and shook his hand.

"It's just Mr Remore," Rufus said. "One of my ancestors made rather a point about refusing title, and it's become something of a family stance."

"Very principled, I'm sure," Pochard said. "Please, allow me to be your guide to our humble branch. Not as magnificent as what you are used to, I'm sure."

"I wouldn't want to trouble you," Rufus said.

"No trouble at all," Pochard said. "If the director were not indisposed off-campus, I have no doubt he would greet you himself. He certainly wouldn't want you waiting out here with the ordinary people. Title or not, I can comfortably assert that you are far from an ordinary visitor."

"I'm just here to use a communications channel," Rufus said. "I wouldn't want to miss my father because I was socialising."

"Your father," Pochard said. "Will he be visiting our fair city?"

"He will not," Rufus said firmly.

"A shame," Pochard said. "At least allow me to guide you to our speaking chambers."

"Very well," Rufus said. "Lead on."

The speaking chambers were accessed from a long hallway, where a series of doors led into each chamber. Pochard showed no hesitation in explaining how excellent they were

"A man of your background is naturally familiar with speaking chambers," Pochard said, "but were you aware the very best chambers are constructed from watergreen marble? We may just be a remote branch, but our speaking chambers are a point of pride."



“Watergreen marble?” Rufus asked.

“Watergreen marble is one of the higher-grade stones quarried right here in the Greenstone region. It has a strong water affinity, which makes for an excellent connection.”

Rufus thought that Pochard was just talking up his facility, but when he stepping into his assigned speaking chamber, it really was grander than he anticipated. It was larger than others he'd seen, although the layout was normal. Half the room was covered in a pool of water, the dry half with a low, circular platform to stand on. Rather than the usual surfaces, the floor was covered in blue and green tiles, the marble walls had lush plants set into alcoves, while the roof was a colourful mosaic in shades of green and blue. The light in the room was shimmering blue-green, the source of the light being located under the water pool. The air was moist, but fresh and pleasant, with the scent of the sea. Walking into the room felt like stepping onto the ocean floor.

"Mr Pochard," Rufus said. "I must confess, I didn't give much credence to your claims about your speaking chambers. Consider this my apology for doubting your words."

“Gratifying to hear, Mr Remore. I will leave you to your call.”

Rufus turned and shook Pochard’s hand before the elf departed.

“Thank you,” he said with a smile.

Pochard left, closing the door to the chamber behind him. Rufus stood on the circular platform on the floor and waited, enjoying the pleasant atmosphere. He’d spent enough time in plain, cramped, humid speaking chambers to genuinely appreciate the difference.

Finally, the pool of water started stirring, indicating the connection was being made. The light coming through the pool started wildly shimmering. The water rose up from the pool, surging into the shape of Rufus’ father. Colour appeared in the water as if someone had tipped dyes into it, fleshing out the image to a rather excellent facsimile of his father’s features.

Pochard hadn’t been understating the quality of the connection. The image of Rufus’ father, Callum Remore, was startlingly lifelike. When the image shifted from water statue to animation, it replicated his expressions and body language with startling accuracy.

“Son,” the water representation of Callum said. “Good to see you.”

“Father,” Rufus said.

“I know that tone,” Callum said. “What did I do?”

“You’ve been spying on me.”

“Of course I have,” Callum said. “You almost died out there on some nothing contract.”

“Which you only knew about because you were spying on me!”

“It wasn’t spying,” Callum said. “I was only having a few updates sent back. Then you almost got yourself killed and I started spying. I’m surprised Danielle told you.”

“She didn’t tell me,” Rufus said. “I figured it out.”

“Son, if that woman doesn’t want you to know something, you’ll be as ignorant as a newborn babe. If you figured it out, it’s because she led you to water. You only think it was your idea to drink.”

“Well, you need to stop.”

“Of course, son.”

“Did you just lie to me?”

“Of course, son.”

Rufus let out a weary groan.

“So,” Callum said. “Tell me about this outworlder of yours.”

“He’s a bit odd,” Rufus said.

“They’re all odd,” Callum said. “What’s he actually like?”

“Do you remember the first time you told me about outworlders?”

“Hmmm. Wasn’t it when we had that one stay with us at the academy? The pretty one that you-”

“I remember the one, Dad.”

Callum’s water image let out a gleeful chuckle.

“This is a good connection,” Callum said. “I can see you scowling.”

“Dad, do you remember when you told me there were two kinds of outworlders?”

“I do,” Callum said. “The ones that die immediately, and the ones that survive and thrive.”

“Jason is definitely the die immediately type,” Rufus said, “but he survives and thrives anyway.”

“That is odd,” Callum said. “Sounds like trouble.”

“Are you telling me to back off?” Rufus asked. “Because I won’t.”

“Of course you won’t,” Callum said. “Heading for trouble is the whole point of being an adventurer. Otherwise, what’s all the training for?”

“Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that,” Rufus said. “I have a proposal for the academy.”

“Oh?”

“Not having someone looking over my shoulder has been an education,” Rufus said. “As an adventurer, I’ve gone from thinking I knew everything to realising how much I don’t.”

“That’s good,” Callum said. “A few close scrapes, some costly mistakes. It’ll turn you into a real adventurer.”

“That’s exactly my point,” Rufus said. “It wasn’t until you released me into the wild that I realised how far I have to go. It’s why the Gellers keep training their family here at the south end of nowhere. They can let them loose to make their own mistakes.”

“So, you’re proposing we start sending people there?” Callum asked.

“I am,” Rufus said. “We could establish a graduate station here. The Geller family facilities are well developed, and we could arrange an exchange. They help us get off the ground, and we help them refine their training programs.”

“Have you put this to the Gellers, yet.”

“No,” Rufus said. “I wasn’t going to reach out before clearing it with Grandad. Not to mention that I’d also need specifics to take to them. I’d never make an approach without knowing what I could and couldn’t offer.”

“Good lad,” Callum said. “Alright, I’ll float it to the family. For now, you and I can start having weekly meetings. Being our man on the ground will be a good chance for you to step up in the academy. A project like this won’t be small or quick.”

“I’m not sure how long I’ll be here,” Rufus said. “Emir could arrive any day. I suppose could extend my stay; I don’t have to go back with him when he’s done.”

“Oh, uh...,”

Callum started sheepishly rubbing his chin.

“I was meant to tell you,” he said. “Emir won’t be there for a little while.”

“How little a while are you talking about?” Rufus asked. “And why? We found what he was after.”

“Well, we know you think you found it,” Callum said. “But can you really be certain? One of his other teams found something really promising in the Godspear Islands, so he’s heading there to check it out. So... two months?”

“Two months!”

“Three, at the absolute most,” Callum said. “Well, maybe not the absolute most. And that’s from when he leaves here, obviously. Call it four months.”

“Four months,” Rufus said incredulously.

“Well now you have your project, that works out,” Callum said.

“He doesn’t know that. Did you say he hadn’t left Vitesse yet? What is he doing?”

“There’s been a lot going on,” Callum said. “It’s a busy time.”

Rufus narrowed his eyes at his father’s projection.

“Isn’t it time for the flower wine festival?”

“Is it?” Callum asked, innocently. He wouldn’t meet his son’s eyes, even through the projection.

Rufus ran a hand over his face.

“Alright, Dad,” he said wearily. “Weekly meetings?”

“I’ll send you a message with the times.”

“No, I’ll send you a message. You can work around my schedule.”

“Son...”

“Give my love to Mum. See you next week, Dad.”

Rufus stepped off the circular platform and the image of his father broke apart, splashing into the pool.

“Four months,” he muttered to himself. “Alright, then.”

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Rufus stormed through the back gate into Jory’s courtyard. Jason was seated in a meditation pose on a mat while Farrah sat on a chair reading. Gary was cooking meat skewers on a grill fuelled by magic fire.

“Farrah,” Rufus said sharply, “get the book out.”

She glanced at the book in her hands.

“Not that book,” Rufus said. “I mean... the book.”

“The *book* book?” she asked.

“Yes,” Rufus said. “The book book.”

“What’s the book book?” Gary asked.

Jason opened his eyes.

“Why is everyone making chicken noises?” he asked.

“It’s time for you to get your hands on a martial art skill book,” Rufus told him.

“Ooh, nice,” Jason said, getting up and brushing his legs with his hands.

“Wait, that’s what you want the book for?” Farrah asked.

“What book?” Gary asked.

“You know,” Farrah said. “The book. From under the lake.”

“Didn’t we decide to give that to Emir?” Gary asked.

“We did decide that, yes,” Farrah said.

“The contract from Emir wasn’t to find a book,” Rufus said.

“Giving it to Emir was your idea,” Farrah said to Rufus. “You talked us into it.”

“That’s true,” Gary said, prodding at the cooking meat with a fork. “We wanted to sell it.”

“Well, Emir won’t be here for four months, so he’s missing out,” Rufus said.

Gary, poised to shove a whole skewer in his mouth, stopped to look at Rufus.

“Four months?” he asked.

“From when he leaves,” Rufus said.

“He hasn’t left?” Farrah asked.

“Flower wine festival,” Gary mumbled around a mouthful of meat. “You weren’t kidding about this marinade, Jason.”

“One of the others teams has a promising lead,” Rufus said. “He’s going there to check it out first.”

“Which team?” Farrah asked.

“Godspear Islands.”

“Are you kidding me?” Farrah asked. “Mirabelle and her army of idiots? Of course, they think they found it.”

She got up from her chair and started pacing.

“That isn’t the place,” she said. “This is the place. We found the place.”

“I know,” Rufus said.

“What place?” Jason asked.

“It isn’t like we’re just confident this is the place,” Farrah continued. “This is the place.”

“It is,” Rufus said.

“Then why is Emir sailing off in the wrong direction?”

“Well,” Rufus said, “they know we *think* we found it, but...”

“I hope his boat sinks,” Farrah said.

“That’s pretty unlikely,” Gary said.

“So the book?” Rufus asked.

Farrah’s stone chest erupted out of the ground. She opened the lid, reached in and came out with an absurdly large book. It seemed like she should be staggering about, but her small body contained a powerful strength. She slammed the lid of her storage chest down and dropped the book onto it with a resonating thud. It was almost as large and thick itself as the stone chest lid on which it was resting. Bound in thick leather, embossed into the front of the book were the images of two scythes crossed over a skull.

“That’s a hefty and sinister tome you’ve got there,” Jason said, moving to look closer.

“We each agreed to give you a gift,” Rufus said, “as thanks for saving us. Farrah’s you’ve already received. If the others don’t object, I’d like this to be mine.”

"Works for me," Gary mumbled.

"Well, you were always going to get him a skill book," Farrah said. "I have to assume this one is better than most."

"It's obviously special," Jason said. "Where did it come from?"

"We can't tell you that yet," Rufus said.

"You're giving him the book," Farrah said, "but saying where it's from is where you draw the line?"

"The book wasn't in the contract," Rufus said. "Keeping our mouths shut was."

"So, can I use this?" Jason asked, reaching a hand towards the book.

"Not so fast," Rufus said. "Now that we'll be here for a while, we don't have to be in such a rush. I can make sure you're ready before letting you use it."

"And when will that be?" Jason asked.

"I told you when we started," Rufus said. "There's going to be a test."

## Chapter 50: The Full Keanu

Rufus swung the staff horizontally, Jason swaying back so it passed in front of him. Rufus kept the momentum, bringing the staff up and over into a downward strike. Jason kept control of his balance, shifting to the side without disrupting the centre line of his body. Rufus kept pushing, not too swiftly, but relentlessly. Jason handled the pressure without tripping or stumbling, even as Rufus started ramping up the speed. Just as Jason thought it would be too much, Rufus stopped.

“Why am I happy?” Rufus asked, neither looking or sounding happy.

“Because you finally got me to learn a lesson the hard way?” Jason asked, turning Rufus’ gaze into a glare.

“What is the lesson?” he asked.

“That the all exercises you put me through; the balancing, the handstands, the footwork. They were never about making me faster, or more agile. It’s about being in full control of my body.”

A slight smile forced itself onto Rufus’ lips.

“Good,” he said.

“Good?” Jason asked.

“Good,” Rufus said.

Jason’s eyes moved over to the huge book still waiting atop Farrah’s stone chest.

“Does that mean I get the book?” Jason asked.

“You’ve clearly been working hard in my absence,” Rufus said. “Unlike some people I could mention.”

“I think he means you,” Gary mumbled at Farrah from around a meat skewer.

Jason walked over and reached out for the massive book.

“Wait,” Rufus said.

“What?” Jason asked.

“Before you use that book,” Rufus said, “you have to understand what it is. By which, I mean, you have to understand what it isn’t.”

“Okay,” Jason said.

“The thing you need to understand about the skill book,” Rufus said, “is that it isn’t going to teach you how to fight.”

“That sounds a bit dodgy,” Jason said. “Isn’t that exactly what the book is for?” Jason asked.

“No,” Rufus said. “It will teach you technique, not how to use it. It’s a shortcut that saves you years of repetitive exercise, but that isn’t fighting. Any martial system, at its core, is a method of effectively leveraging strength. That makes it a tool useful for fighting, but the one who does the fighting must still be you. Even the best hammer doesn’t push the nails in itself.”

“There isn’t a magic hammer that does that?” Jason asked.

Rufus gave him a disapproving look.

“Jason, there’s a time to be clever pendant, and a time to shut your mouth for once and learn something.”

“Sorry,” Jason said.

“So, martial arts are a tool,” Rufus continued. “Your physical attributes and essence abilities will impact how that tool is used, but only experience will teach you how to turn form into function. Only using it against actively resisting opponents will let you make it your own, instead of something a book gave you.”

Rufus walked over to where Jason was standing next to the book and placed a hand on it.

“The book will give you the techniques,” he said. “We will show you how, when and why to use them.”

“By beating it into me,” Jason said.

“That’s right,” Gary said from behind the cooker. “We’re going to beat you like a drum.”

“Suddenly I’m a lot less excited,” Jason said. “Couldn’t you just let me have my moment of happiness?”

“I just don’t want you to think learning martial arts from a book will magically make you good at fighting.”

“That’s a disappointment,” Jason said, “given its literal purpose is to magically make me good at fighting.”

“Like I said,” Rufus told him. “We’ll teach you to understand the difference.”

“With our fists,” Gary added. “And our knees, elbows, and such.”

“Can I just use the book, now, please?”

“Go ahead,” Rufus said.

Taking a deep breath, Jason reached out and placed a hand on the book.



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Item: [Way of the Reaper: Five Forms I] (iron rank, legendary)

*A magical book detailing the foundational techniques for all five forms of the Way of the Reaper (consumable, skill book).*

- Requirements: Ability to use skill books.
  - Effect: Imparts iron-rank techniques of the Way of the Reaper's five forms.
  - You are able to use skill book [Way of the Reaper: Five Forms I]. Use Y/N?
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Jason stood still, hand on the book, eyes closed. He took another deep breath.

"Something wrong?" Rufus asked.

"I'm just not rushing this," Jason said. "It's a big moment for me. I'll probably go the full Keanu."

"What does that mean?" Farrah asked.

"It means be quiet and let me have my magic kung fu moment."

"Kung fu is what they call punching people where Jason comes from, right?" Gary asked.

"What's happening?" Jory asked, wandering out from the clinic's back door.

"Jason's about to use a skill book," Farrah said.

"Will everyone please shut up!" Jason barked, taking his hand off the book and glaring at the others.

"Just give him his quiet moment," Rufus said. "He won't take the book in as well if he's agitated."

"That's true," Farrah said. "Sorry, Jason. Try clearing your mind, like you're going to meditate. It might help."

"Thanks," Jason said. He placed his hand back on the book, closing his eyes. He did as Farrah suggested, emptying his mind and calming his emotions.

"Do you think he's going to take long?"

"Shut up, Gary," Farrah said.

"I'm just wondering if I should grill some more meat."

There was a sizzling sound, followed quickly by a yelp of pain.

"What did I say about lava in the yard?" Jory asked.

Jason let the sounds drift away, letting only the rhythm of his breathing occupy his mind. He felt his body drift away from the world, floating through nothingness. All sensation left him, except for the leather of the book under his hand.

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➤ You are able to use skill book [Way of the Reaper: Five Forms I]. Use Y/N?

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He mentally assented and the huge book floated up off the chest to hover over Jason's head. The ponderous cover flipped open and text started rising from the page, disembodied runes turning from black to glowing gold. There was a sizzling sound, like meat on a grill as the text transmuted. The first page of the book turned itself over as the last of its text floated off and the second page began disgorging its contents into the air. With each page, the process grew faster and faster, the glowing jumble of text in the air forming a thick cloud. Even with the increasing pace at which the pages were beginning to turn, it was taking a long time to make it through the massive tome.

"Do skill books normally take this long?" Jory whispered to Farrah.

"No they don't," Farrah said, "although I've never seen a skill book that big before."

The cloud of text kept growing, spreading down until Jason was completely obscured. Finally, the sizzling stopped. They couldn't see the heavy book any more, but they heard it hit the ground with a thud. The cloud of golden text started darting about like a swarm of angry bees. Inside, they could hear Jason grunting in pain.

"Hold on," Rufus called out. "Try and last out the whole thing."

"Is he alright?" Jory asked.

"Using a skill book is strenuous," Farrah explained. "The more it's trying to teach you, the greater the strain."

"People often pass out while using them," Rufus said, "but the information isn't passed on as well once they're unconscious. It takes them longer to consolidate what they've learned afterwards."

The cloud shrank over time until they could once again see Jason. He was staggering in place, arms out to keep balance. They watched the golden text diving into his body.

"You're doing good!" Gary cheered him on.

"Hold on as best you can," Rufus encouraged.

Finally the last of the text sank into Jason, leaving him standing unsteadily, but still upright. He took in a sharp breath.

"Whoa," he croaked.

"Still standing," Rufus said. "You've done well."

"How do you feel?" Farrah asked.

Jason stood up straight, eyes gleaming in triumph.

"I know kung fueeeaaauugh..."

Vomit spewed out of him and he fell to his knees, coughing up more before toppling onto his side, unconscious.

“Is he alright?” Jory asked.

“For Jason,” Gary said, “this is actually pretty good.”

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In the fighting pits of the fortress, two women were squaring off inside a steel cage. The first was Sophie Wexler, the Nightingale. The other was called the Queen of Thorns, for the thorny whip manifested by her power. It had length enough that no part of the cage was safe, and being a power rather than a weapon, the Queen had devilish control over it. Sophie was cut and bloody from numerous wounds, but the weakness of the whip was its inability to deal critical damage. So long as it failed to ensnare an enemy, it couldn't deal a finishing blow.

Sophie's ability was speed. Not only was she fast, but she could run up walls or even over water. She was boxed in by the cage, but she pushed her reflexes to the limit to avoid being entangled. She had suffered lashes, but the whip had never managed to tie her down.

Sophie ran up the side of the cage as the whip lashed under her, flipping off and into a kick, but her opponent jumped back out of reach. Having missed the kick, Sophie landed off-balance. Seeing her chance, the Queen flung the whip quickly, wrapping it around Sophie's forearm. Grinning triumph at Sophie, she only found resolution on her enemy's face. Too late, she realised she'd been baited.

Sophie shifted her seemingly-unbalanced stance, bracing her weight and yanking on the whip with both arms. The Queen stumbled forward and Sophie ducked behind, looping the slack whip around the Queen's neck to choke her with her own power. The Queen dismissed the whip and Sophie acted quickly before the Queen had a chance to conjure it up again.

Sophie swept the Queen's unbalanced feet out from under her, grabbed her by the hair and smashed her face into the floor. The hard-earth floor of the Fortress was practically stone and Sophie smashed the Queen's face into it a second time and a third, over and over until there was a sharp crack and the Queen's body went limp.

Skin painted red, silver hair matted with sweat and blood, Sophie left the cage without looking back.

“Your winner, ladies and gentlemen... the Nightingale!”

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Three viewing boxes, normally empty in the early afternoon, all had occupants watching Sophie's match. In one as Cole Silva, the newest member of the Big Three crime lords of Old City. With his father's passing, the old man's protection could no longer keep Sophie from his grip. Just as he had been closing his fingers around her, she had run to Clarissa Ventress. Now Ventress had Sophie fighting ever more-dangerous opponents. There was every chance she would be ruined before he could snatch her back into his clutches. Watching her bloody form stride away from the cage, he slapped the fruit platter in front of him across the room.

In her own viewing box, Clarissa Ventress was happily imagining the look on Silva's face. She was less happy with Sophie's friend, Belinda.

"You can't keep doing this!" Belinda said. "You're going to get her killed."

Clarissa sighed, her good mood deflated. She responded to Belinda without deigning to look at her.

"The arrangement," Clarissa said, "was that dear Sophie would help me provoke Silva into the kind of rash action that his father always kept him from making."

She turned her head toward Belinda.

"The form that provocation takes is for me to decide," Clarissa continued. "How Sophie survives it is for her to figure out."

"You filthy..."

Belinda cut herself off as Clarissa's enormous bodyguard stirred. Darnell had the predatory features universal to leonids, and Belinda took a step back.

"That's what I thought," Clarissa said. "I don't want to hear your pitiful whining again. Go tend to your injured friend."

Belinda desperately wanted to tear a chunk out Clarissa's throat, but she was not the match of Clarissa or her bodyguard, two of the criminal underworld's rare bronze-rankers. She also knew Sophie would be awkwardly applying medicine right now and making a complete mess of it, so she turned and left.

The third box in which the match had been closely viewed belonged to Lucian Lamprey. Old City might be the territory of the Big Three, but as Director of the Magic Society, he might as well have been the sky above them. If nothing else, as a silver-ranker he could personally tear through Old City's strongest enforcers like they were mewling children.

Outside Lamprey's viewing box, Cassowary Finn hesitated before knocking on the door. As the son of Lucian's friend and deputy, Pochard, Cassowary had been installed as Lucian's dogsbody and normally enjoyed the man's favour. His lack of progress in finding

information on the Nightingale had turned that favour on its head. Hoping that was about to be rectified, he knocked on the door.

“Enter!” Lucian’s voice barked from inside.