

Chapter 462

Connotations

A bird fluttered out of Humphrey's jacket, then transformed into a puppy as it landed on the table and started pawing at the projector. Humphrey scooped him up and petted him gently.

"It's alright, little buddy," he cooed soothingly.

"That's it?" Neil complained as the recording ended. "That didn't tell us anything. I'm so glad he's alive and I can go back to hating him."

"Neil," Humphrey scolded.

"What?" Neil asked.

Clive shook his head while Belinda snorted a laugh. Jory was contemplating the return of the crystal wash vampire while Sophie was looking shell-shocked. Humphrey reached out to her but she flinched away. He looked hurt and she winced apologetically.

"I..."

Sophie couldn't get out any more words and left in a half-run. Humphrey moved to follow but Belinda placed a restraining hand on his arm.

"You'd do more harm than good at this point," she told him. "She needs a friend, not... whatever you are."

"I have to do something."

"You had plenty of time to do something," Belinda said, the barbs in her voice dripping venom. "If you'd mustered up some courage any time in the last two years then she wouldn't have been stuck between a ghost and a coward. Now the ghost is coming back, so it's time to give it up or rummage around those fancy pants and see if you can't dig out some balls."

She snatched puppy Stash from Humphrey's arms and marched off in Sophie's direction, leaving a crestfallen Humphrey behind her.

Rufus and Gary were looking at one another as if asking for permission to hope. Seeing Jason alive was one thing, but hearing about Farrah without seeing her had a fearful unreality to it. They shared the fear of their hope being cruelly snatched away.

"Mr Standish," Dawn said. "Perhaps you can join me for a lengthy discussion."

Farrah groaned as she watched Jason go through a meditative sword dance. Again. They were on a terrace in Jason's spirit realm, the rainbow lights of the world link washing over them.

“How long until we get back?” she complained.

“I told you that I don’t know,” Jason said, his smooth, graceful movements continuing uninterrupted. “If that changes, I’ll let you know.”

“Are you going to meditate all day, every day? I know training is important but you’re getting worse than Rufus.”

“I’ve been on Earth too long,” Jason said. “Standards are going to be higher than I’m used to and I have no intention of falling behind. It wouldn’t hurt you to do a little practise yourself.”

“Fine,” Farrah conceded. “At least change it up a bit, though. How about a spar?”

“As in a practise fight or a fizzy bath?” Jason asked.

“There’s a spa bath here?” Farrah asked, perking up.

“There can be,” Jason said. “How about we do both?”

Farrah was disoriented as she suddenly found herself standing in front of Jason in a wide-open duelling area. She looked down to find her Earth clothes had been replaced with a training gi.

“Did you use your tin-pot god powers to change my clothes?” she asked.

“Nope,” Jason said. “You were wearing that the whole time.”

Farrah conjured her sword.

“I’m going to enjoy this.”

Belinda walked through the dark outside the town, her way lit by a floating silver lantern shedding a clean, white-blue light that gave a refreshing feeling as its aura replenished her mana. This was Shimmer, her astral lantern familiar.

She found Sophie sitting on a rock on a small rise, staring up at the night sky. She sat next to her friend, leaning into her by way of greeting.

“I’m not looking to talk,” Sophie said.

Belinda passed Stash into Sophie’s lap and plucked a bottle of amber liquid from her storage space. She took a swig and handed over the bottle.

“Who said anything about talk?” she asked.

They sat in silence, passing the bottle back and forth as Sophie scratched the napping Stash behind the ears.

“I don’t... gods damn it,” Sophie said.

“I haven’t seen you in how long and that idiot still hasn’t done anything,” Belinda complained. “Humphrey’s an idiot.”

“He’s not an idiot.”

“You’re both idiots,” Belinda said. “Since when do you dance about instead of taking what you want?”

“You know since when,” Sophie said. “It’s like Jason has been sitting between us this whole time and now...”

Sophie took a big gulp, letting the silver-rank liquor burn her throat.

“And now he’s coming back,” Belinda finished as Sophie handed her the bottle.

“What do I do, Lindy?” Sophie asked, her voice uncharacteristically small.

“The thing about death,” Belinda said, “is that we don’t look back at things the way they were. We tell ourselves the stories we want to remember and act like they’re real memories. After a while, we forget that they aren’t.”

“What are you saying?”

“That he’s coming back and it’s not about the stories anymore. I knew Jason better than you, Soph, because I wasn’t tied up in nine kinds of mess the way you were. You hated him, and then you... I saw what he was, Soph, while he was always one story or another to you, even before he died. You thought too little or too much of him and never what he really was.”

“Which was what?”

“Some guy. He was kind of amazing and kind of a turd, but he was just some guy. But now he’s some myth in your head and you can’t expect him to live up to that.”

“I don’t seem to be coming off well in this description,” Sophie said, taking the bottle back.

“You weren’t in a well place, Sophie. And Jason never really knew you, either. You spent your whole life building a fortress and he was long gone before you took it down. He was going through his own stuff, too. If you think either of you are the same people you were then you’re deluding yourself.”

Belinda pushed herself off the rock, wobbling with drink.

“In the end, Humphrey and Jason don’t matter,” she said. “It’s about you. Be who you are. Make sure you’re chasing what you want and not what you think you should want. That will only hurt everyone, yourself most of all.”

Belinda staggered off into the darkness in the vague direction of the town, her familiar bobbing after her.

“What if I’m already hurt?” Sophie whispered.

“...which is why Jason’s return to our world will trigger the monster surge,” Clive concluded. Some of the villagers had stopped to listen in with initial fascination, only to drift away as Clive started explaining astral magic to the group.

“Did the explanation have to be that long?” Neil asked. “The monster surge isn’t happening because of a bad magic thing that some stupidly powerful whatever made. Jason, being Jason, heard ‘stupidly powerful,’ immediately decided to annoy it and blew up its magic thing. Now the monster surge is back on, with a bonus invasion, and Jason’s coming here to probably get us all killed.”

“I wouldn’t characterise that as entirely accurate,” Clive said.

“Why is Jason building this bridge to this place anyway?” Neil asked. “Where even are we?”

“He’s not coming to this place,” Dawn said. “What he’s doing is outside of even my experience. He may arrive at the same place he arrived the first time, somewhere completely random or at a location equivalent to one of his...”

“What is it?” Clive asked after Dawn trailed off.

“Some things are better not said aloud,” she said. “Suffice to say, any potential location for Jason’s arrival would be a guess on our part.”

“Then what are we doing all the way out here?” Neil asked. “Does this town even have a name?”

“Of course it has a name,” Jory said.

“What is it?”

“I don’t exactly remember,” Jory admitted.

“Mr Xandier was here,” Dawn said. “I needed his help and this place has fewer eyes and ears. I had enough influence with the Adventure Society to send you all here, so I did.”

“You’ve been warning the Adventure Society,” Humphrey said.

“Yes,” Dawn acknowledged. “This will not merely be cultists snatching away astral spaces. This will be war.”

Dawn departed from the group to resume her work preparing the Adventure Society as best she could. Rufus returned to Greenstone, both to settle his affairs before Jason’s arrival and in case it was the place he arrived. With no better plan than to wait, the others left for the city of Zartos. Home to Gary’s mentor, Virid and the diamond-ranker’s personal smithy.

“It’s the best place to forge a great work,” Virid said.

Gary and Virid spent days examining the sword, seeking to understand it. They carefully selected the supplemental materials they would use and familiarised themselves with the soul echo bonded to the weapon.

The forging was a collaboration, not just between Gary and Virid but also Jason. In many ways, it was the soul-bond that guided the most critical aspects of the work and shaped the final result.

Zartos was a subterranean city built around an underground river, largely populated by celestines. While Gary and Virid worked, the others enjoyed their reunion. None of them had felt entirely whole as a team since Jason's death. As with Rufus and Gary, the loss of a friend and companion had led to them taking separate paths where previously they would have resisted.

Gary and Virid were sealed away in Virid's smithy for nineteen days before they finally emerged. The sword Gary showed the team was wholly unlike what it had been before. Before even its appearance, the blade had a domineering aura that gave a sense that even looking at it was somehow a transgression. There was a benevolence as well, but one looking down from above.

"That's quite a weapon, Gary," Humphrey said. "A real aura from a weapon is quite a feat, especially an aura that strong."

"The aura comes from the soul bond, and Virid covered many of my flaws," Gary confessed. "He pushed me to heights I could not reach alone. The soul bond also guided me. It's like the sword knew what it wanted to be."

The hilt was a simple design of milk-white metal with onyx embellishments and bone grip. The blade was a black so dark as to be unnerving, as if looking upon it was forbidden. Symbols were carved into the blade, starkly contrasted in white.

"That's the same language used in the brand Jason inflicts with his spell," Clive said. "The one that applies the mark of sin affliction."

"That brand was on me once," Sophie said. "It actually means something?"

"It's an ideographic language," Clive said.

"A what?" Sophie asked.

Like Jason, Clive had the power to speak and read all languages. Unlike Jason, he had used it as a springboard for study.

"It's a language where a single symbol can embody a complex concept," Clive explained. "Whether a symbol is alone or contextualised by others can hugely impact the meaning. The symbol from Jason's brand translates to sinner, which makes sense. It's accompanied by an affliction called the mark of sin."

“Are these symbols Jason’s native language?” Belinda asked.

“No,” Clive said. “This is something much older.”

“I don’t even know what it says,” Gary admitted. “It just kind of felt right to mark them on the blade as I was working it. It’s the soul bond. I named the original sword Dread Salvation, but I think it might have renamed itself and that’s what we’re looking at. What does it say, Clive?”

“Hegemon’s Will.”

“You said one symbol conveys a complex concept, right?” Sophie asked.

“It can,” Clive said. “This language has the primary, conceptual symbols, and the secondary, contextual symbols.”

“The sword has six symbols,” Sophie said. “That seems like a lot of context for a short name.”

“There are connotations,” Clive said.

“What kind of connotations?” Sophie asked.

“You felt the aura,” Clive said. “That kind of connotations.”

“Oh, great,” Neil said. “Sounds like Jason’s time away gave him the humility he so badly needed.”

The journey was proving immensely valuable to Jason. The tiny bubble of his spirit realm was a projection of his soul being cast through the infinity that was the deep astral, only the world link it clung to saving him from drifting helplessly forever. His soul was immersed in magic at its most pure and powerful, with even simple meditation accelerating his insights into the most fundamental aspects of cosmic power.

His most common meditative technique was the dance of the sword fairy that Rufus had taught him. Jason was trying to use it to get a better grasp of entering the combat trance state, which he was still struggling to fully master. More than just a simple battle trance, he sought oneness with the cosmos that he was closer to now than he was likely to ever be again.

“You’re not Luke Skywalker,” Farrah called out from her lounge.

“Shut up,” he said, continuing his sword dance uninterrupted.

“Anakin, maybe. Prequels, not Clone Wars.”

Jason stumbled.

“That’s just low,” he muttered as she laughed.

Farrah was less enamoured than Jason of the journey. For her it was more waiting, which she’d done plenty of while Jason was in the two transformation zones. She became

increasingly agitated as her home, family and friends grew closer, yet felt so far away. Days turned into weeks as they continued their passage through the astral.

Jason went back to his meditative dance as she was listening to music on a recording crystal, lounging in a deck chair made of clouds.

“This is not traditional meditative music,” Jason commented.

“If you don’t like Laura Branigan, that’s not my problem.”

Jason stopped his sword dance again.

“I’m the one who... you didn’t give her essences as well, did you?”

“I wouldn’t do that without telling you.”

“No? Do we need to discuss Pat Benatar?”

“Who told...? I mean, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I should have worked harder to get you back home,” Jason said, shaking his head as he tilted it back to look helplessly at the rainbow sky. “I think you’ve gone native.”

His eyes narrowed, still looking up.

“Was that a tree?”