

## Chapter 662

### Unquestionably Authoritarian

Neil was checking the low-priority patients at his triage station. The more critical cases were already stashed on bunked recovery beds, with the remainder those who were comfortably self-mobile. These were the people that had endured the best and gotten the most from what Sophie and Humphrey's aura powers offered. In most cases, this was the handful of iron-rankers who had lived in the town. Not adventurers, but agriculture specialists with essences like earth and plant.

Sophie continued to assist Neil while the rest of the team returned to the cage room and the last of the prisoners there, where one cage still contained people. Unlike the townsfolk, who were all elves, this group of five had only two elves, plus a human, a celestine and a smoulder. They weren't just caged but unconscious and chained up, with magical seals on the shackles around their wrists, ankles and necks, chaining them to the cage. The cage itself was also the most heavy-duty one in the room.

The shackles were suppressing their auras, which had allowed them to go unnoticed until the team found them while shuffling out prisoners. They were stripped naked and filthy, but the athletic physique and attractive features of essence users shone through. They reminded Jason of when he had first met the infuriatingly handsome Rufus, who had looked good even after climbing out of a cannibal's cage.

"An adventuring team?" Humphrey posited.

"We need to get those shackles off to check their rank," Clive said. "Lindy, think you can pop them?"

"Hold on," Jason said and pushed his senses out. He forced his aura through the suppressive effects of the shackles to touch their souls directly.

"Bronze rank," he said, the others turning to look at him.

"What?" he asked.

"I might have to ask Lord Pensinata if I can join in that aura training," Rufus said.

Belinda entered the cage, the door having already been yanked off by Humphrey. She examined not the shackles first, but the people.

"Drugged, I think," she said. "These shackles seem to be preventing Sophie's aura from purging whatever they've been dosed with."

She then moved on to the bindings themselves.

"Usual suppression shackle situation," she said. "Forcibly remove them and it'll kill the wearer. Straightforward locks, though. Generic keys should handle it."

Belinda took out a set of magic keys, similar to ones Jason had occasionally crafted in the past. In addition to Belinda's being higher rank, the craftsmanship was far superior to Jason's crude efforts. She used the keys on the shackles, setting loose the probably-adventurers. Humphrey took blankets from his inventory to cover their nakedness as they started to stir. Sophie's aura was now affecting them, eliminating the toxins keeping them knocked out.

"Let's leave them to the friendly guy," Rufus said. "Waking up to a bunch of silver-rankers looming over them probably won't be helpful."

"Who's the friendly guy?" Humphrey asked, prompting the others to all turn and look at him. "It's me?"

"Yes, Humphrey it's you," Jason said. "You're nice and handsome in a way that makes others feel comforted. Which is way better than someone so handsome you just look at them and feel bad about yourself as a person."

"That is the single worst compliment I have ever gotten," Rufus said.

"And what makes you think I was talking about you, Mr Vain?"

"They're waking up," Humphrey said. "Go away."

Jason snorted as he turned to leave.

"Rude. So much for being the nice one."

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The team had little more to do than wait, trying not to let their minds dwell on the dead, scattered in piles throughout the town. Humphrey got the story from the adventurers, whose tale was as expected. The group had arrived at the town and quickly sensed something off about the residents. Investigating, they were ambushed by the silver-rank messenger and subdued to await implantation.

The one piece of new information was that they were being prepared to host worms that were not the same as the others. As the team had yet to come across any worms outside the norm, they suspected them to be in a lower level of the basement workshop, through the hidden door in the floor.

The team took the adventurers for Neil to give a thorough examination. By the time he was done, Shade had notified Jason that the Church of the Healer had arrived at the Yareh campgrounds and started clearing space for a refugee camp. It was intended to accommodate not just the people rescued by the team but by all the scout teams sent to investigate the towns and villages of the southern region. Reports were already coming in to confirm that worm infestation was not an isolated incident.

Jason portalled through to assist with the setup. The camping grounds where foreign adventurers left their magical mobile homes had ample open space for a camp, once the vehicles were cleared out. The church started kicking people out to commandeer ground and Jason returned the land yacht to the cloud flask.

The church officials were initially not interested in using Jason's cloud palace, as Jason himself was an unknown quantity. Things changed when gold rank members of the church, Arabelle and Carlos, both stepped up. Jason then produced a cloud palace specifically designed for the intake of people into the camp being organised.

The church officials weren't ecstatic about the cloud palace after sensing Jason's aura permeating it. They were quickly forced to acknowledge, however, that the amenities of the palace were exceedingly useful. Also, while Jason's aura was unquestionably authoritarian, the benevolent protectiveness of it proved comforting to people in desperate need of feeling safe.

Jason and Clive started portalling people in, Humphrey not using his teleport. Mass teleportation was less convenient than portals, being better suited to strategic than utility purposes. As most of the people were normals, the two portals were more than sufficient.

Once the former prisoners were all transferred, the team returned to the workshop and the hidden floor opening. The exception was Neil, who stayed with his fellow Healer Church members. Not only had he started building a rapport with the prisoners, but he understood the amenities the cloud palace offered. Even so, a portal was left open so he could rejoin the team at need. The team were expecting more vats with some speciality worms, but if something nasty leapt out instead, they wanted their healer able to swiftly come to their aid.

In the workshop, the rest of the team stood around as Belinda went to work on safely opening the hidden floor panel.

"I'm curious about these special worms that those adventurers mentioned," Clive said.

"I'm just looking to crush them underfoot," Sophie said.

"Assuming they fit under your feet," Jason said. "For all you know, we've got a 'worms of Arrakis' situation going on down there."

"Is that a monster from your world?" Humphrey asked.

"Not my world. It's one you want to stay away from. The worms are bad enough, but what you really have to watch out for is an oily Sting."

"You mean a monster with an oily stinger?" Humphrey asked.

"No," Jason told him. "No, I do not."

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The opening in the floor of the worm-breeding workshop turned out to be an elevating platform that descended a long shaft. It came to an end in an alcove set into the wall of another chamber, another plain room with the same slate brick. Glow stones were set into the ceiling, revealing the worm vats they had been expecting. The central vat was too large to fit on the elevating platform, the glass sides filled with murky yellow fluid. This made it hard to see what was inside. The other five vats were smaller, each into its own alcove around the walls.

The team quickly took stock of the chamber, spotting no immediate threats as they swept the area. They then turned their attention to the vats, starting with the large one in the middle.

"This vat is way too big for the platform," Clive observed. "My guess would be that this large worm is some kind of brood queen, brought down here when it was smaller. The vat would have either been built here or carried in dimensional storage."

They saw something shifting inside the liquid and it wasn't long before they saw what they were dealing with. It was a massive worm, forced by its size to coil up, even in a vat several metres across. The lack of room often left it pushing against the glass, which is how the team could see it through the ghastly yellow fluid.

The worm was quite unlike the ones they had dealt with so far, but size was far from the only difference. Where the others had been thin, this one was bloated into obesity, with corpse-pale skin. It also lacked the drill-bit head of its smaller brethren. Instead, it had a flat, fleshy head with a puckered sphincter. The team also spotted a few normal worms swimming in the goo, and they watched as one crawled out of the big worm's sphincter.

"Is that its face or its... other end?" Belinda asked.

"It seems to be some kind of brood queen," Clive assessed. "Not to mention the ugliest worm we've run into, although that fluid it's in doesn't help. It seems to be a more concentrated version of what we saw in the vats above."

He then turned to the other vats, which were smaller cylinders, also with glass sides. Jason found himself ominously thinking they were the perfect size to hold children, but did not voice the macabre thought. Inside each vat was a single worm, much closer to the normal worms than the bulbous queen. Only slightly larger than normal, they retained the drill-bit heads. The most notable difference was that each one was a bright colour: blue, green, red, yellow and green.

"I'm more concerned about these colourful worms than with the chunker in the middle," Jason said.

"Why?" Clive asked.

"My first concern was getting caught up in a gritty *Power Rangers* reboot, but then I remembered something far more terrible. One of the most famous and deadly monsters in my world is called a Dalek. A while back, a bunch of Dalek variants in bright colours like this turned up, and it was... not good. Like these worms, they were created by those caught up in hubris, willing to inflict terrible damage in the pursuit of their own mad ideas. Just took one look at those things and you immediately knew someone had undertaken a truly horrifying act of creation."

"What happened?" Humphrey asked.

"We managed to go on, and eventually, the people behind it were removed from power. But as these things so often go, someone else took their place. Someone who would go on to do worse things than we imagined possible."

Jason turned away, looking off at nothing with a haunted expression.

"Jason," Clive asked.

"Yes, Clive?"

"Are you talking a bunch of crap again?"

"Yes, Clive," Jason said gravely. "Yes, I am."

Clive shook his head and turned his attention back to the vats.

"These are obviously the specialty worms that the messenger was breeding for the adventurers," he said. "It seems that the messengers cultivate different worms for different purposes, and I wonder how expansive that program is. Do they just have these for implantation into higher-rank hosts, or is it more? Are there speciality infiltration worms that can do a better job of pretending to be people? Is Yaresh already facing an infestation?"

"A grim thought, but one for the Adventure Society to explore," Humphrey said. "I'm just glad we didn't face adventurers with enhanced worms inside them while we were cleaning out this place."

"How powerful do you think they would be?" Jason wondered. "According to Carlos, most conversion processes rank-up whatever they convert, but they're relatively weak for their rank. At least compared to essence users."

"Well-trained essence users," Rufus corrected. "These world-taker worms would tear through Greenstone like a sickle through grass."

"I have to imagine these specialty worms are stronger than the ones we encountered thus far," Humphrey said. "They were little more than corpses being thrown at us. Most likely, these would be closer to vampires, or the Builder's clockwork converted."

"Which would have made fighting through the worm hosts an uglier affair," Rufus said. "If we had to deal with anything that posed an individual threat, we could have been easily overrun."

"It would have been uglier for the adventurers in question," Belinda pointed out. added. "They aren't in great shape, but these worms look fully grown, or close to it. It might not have been long before implantation."

"Maybe," Clive said. "We can't be sure how large they are fully grown."

"Carlos said that the hosts they occupy are for a secondary incubation cycle," Jason said. "It wasn't relevant to the fight, so I didn't bring it up, but they are inside people trying to turn into something else. He didn't know what, though. Anywhere that finds out tends to be eradicated."

"Perhaps something to do with how the worms self-propagate," Clive guessed. "Something that will allow them to spread without needing breeding centres like this one."

"Or maybe they just turn into fatties, like this one," Belinda said, tapping on the glass of the tank. She placed her palm against the glass. "It's warm. Feels gross."

"We know that the worms can consume heat," Clive said, also shifting his gaze to the central vat. "It might be part of the reproductive cycle."

"That would make sense," Jason said. "Did you notice how all the buildings had been magicked-up to radiate heat? I bet that's part of the incubation cycle."

"I wonder if the aspects of intelligence we saw all came from the larger worm," Clive said. "Colin has a decentralised hive mind, but I suspect the world-taker worms operate differently. My guess would be that any higher-order mental capacity comes from this queen worm, and she directs the worms like a general."

"But we didn't see a lot of intelligence from the worms," Belinda pointed out. "They made one strategic move the whole time, and it was a very simple one."

"Maybe it needs these," Rufus suggested, tapping one of the smaller vats. "Maybe they serve as officers under the general."

"Relay nodes, able to mediate between mindless worms and the higher mind of the queen," Clive said. "That would make sense. But this is all speculation. Whether the queen is truly sapient or just possesses some level of animal cunning I can only guess. With study—"

"No study," Sophie said. "We kill every one of these things we can find."