

Chapter 731

Stash Wakes Up From a Nap

Sophie and Humphrey made their way through the building affixed to the side of a cliff, arriving at a window wall with a gorgeous view of the rainforest below, stretching out to the distant coast. In front of the window was a huge mound of blankets. Humphrey yanked off the blankets one by one and tossed them aside as he dug his way through the pile. Finally, he revealed a dragon with rainbow-coloured iridescent scales. It was the size of a large dog and was asleep, hugging a full-sized plush replica of itself.

Humphrey struggled to maintain his stern expression for a moment before failing miserably.

“Okay, that’s adorable,” he conceded.

“Where did he get that thing?”

“From Jason. Once he gave up on the secret identity thing—”

“He was so bad at that.”

“Yes, he was. But he said that if we’re going to be famous, we should capitalise on merchandising opportunities.”

“Meaning that he wants to make toys?”

“I think so.”

“What for?”

“Money, I guess.”

“Can’t he just make infinite money?”

“He also said something about branding.”

“As in, burning an ownership mark into people’s flesh? That doesn’t sound like him.”

“He said it’s a different kind of branding.”

“So, he wants to make toy versions of us?”

“Of the familiars, I think. The one of Onslow does look pretty good. He also said something about a body pillow with Gary’s picture on it. Who would buy that?”

“I would buy that. I would buy that immediately.”

“He said he didn’t know if there was a market for it. I asked him about a body pillow with you on it but he said that would be a very bad idea.”

“It would.”

“Why?”

She turned to look at him.

“Really?” she asked.

“Really.”

She stepped in front of him and cupped his face in her hands.

“My sweet, innocent boy,” she said and then pushed up on her toes to gently kiss him. A groaning sound came from the floor.

“Eww, gross,” Stash complained sleepily, a very twelve-year-old human voice coming from the dragon.

“It’s time to get up,” Humphrey told him. “We have to hunt some monsters.”

Stash gripped a blanket in his teeth and pulled it back over himself.

“Sleepy.”

“It’s some kind of shape-changing monster,” Humphrey encouraged. “That could be fun.”

Stash flapped awkwardly at the blanket from underneath so it also covered toy Stash, then went still. Humphrey gave Sophie an exasperated look and she grinned.

“Stash,” she said in a voice so sweet that Humphrey gave a startled shake of the head. “It’s time to go see Colin.”

The blanket exploded up into the air as Stash grew to the size of a horse, tucked his toy under one arm and did a three-legged dragon gallop out of the room.

“ON SLOW!” his voice bellowed from the hall. “WE’RE GOING TO SEE COLIN!”

A certain section of Jason’s soul realm felt like an old English estate that had been abandoned to neglect. Tall hedges looked like they may have once been scraps of a hedge maze with sections variously absent or overgrown. What may have once have been topiaries were now massive thorny bushes holding the vague shape of monsters.

The grass underfoot was thick and deep green. The hedges and bushes were a deeper green, sometimes almost black around the tips of leaves or thorny protrusions. The only elements of bright colour were blood-red berries that had the enticing allure of cheese in a trap.

Gothic buildings were visible over the high foliage, the ornate dark stone crumbling around the edges. The pathways never led to them, jutting up over long tall hedges or through passages choked with inch-long thistles with wet, black tips. Like old, abandoned temples they had a few high broken windows where the remnants of stained glass showed just enough of what had once been depicted to indicate that the original images had not carried positive imagery.

Jason and his companions walked along the wide and winding grassy pathways. The tall hedges and ominous buildings meant that little direct sunlight reached them and what did was oddly muted. Given the clear sky overhead, there was a little too much gloom.

With Jason were Humphrey, Sophie and Clive, along with Clive's rune tortoise, Onslow. The last member of the group was Stash who had taken the form of a celestine child. His hair and eyes were silver with dark chocolate skin and an unusual absence of moustache. He sat cross-legged, riding atop Onslow's shell. As they moved along the wide, grassy paths, Humphrey craned his neck to take in the looming surrounds.

"Jason," he said. "I know that everything in this place is a part of you."

"It's kind of hard to miss with his aura drenched everywhere," Clive said.

"Yes," Humphrey agreed. "And I've noticed that your aura shows variations depending on which part of your soul realm we're in."

"Yes, I've been cataloguing the differences," Clive said. "The differentiation was quite marked at first, but the zones have become more varied and complex over time."

"Like this vampire manor estate," Humphrey said.

"Vampires have creepy gothic castles in this world too?"

"Only really in stories," Humphrey admitted. "If they all lived in decrepit manors and abandoned churches then adventurers would find them a lot easier."

"I guess people who sleep through the day and feed on blood tend to inspire certain narratives," Jason reasoned. "I think it's mostly an act, though. My friend Craig is a vampire and he just plays it up so that naïve, attractive women will let him suck their blood."

"And you accept that?" Sophie asked.

"I checked it out," Jason said. "He never feeds too much, and they are *extremely* into it. Most vampires from my world were like that before the old ones woke up and everything went nuts. They had more of a 'luring people into their creepy mansion' vibe."

"Jason, your aura is never what I would describe as friendly," Humphrey said. "Not unless you're masking it. But it also seems to have that vibe that you mentioned. Domineering, predatory. Ominously well-suited to this particular environment."

"It makes sense," Jason said. "Dark essence, blood essence. I can see why my soul knocked out a place like this. Plus, this is where I store Colin's excess flesh pile."

"Excess flesh pile," Humphrey repeated under his breath, shaking his head. Jason watched him with a grin.

"You could have just called it biomass like you usually do," Clive pointed out.

“Yeah, but where's the fun in that?” Jason asked. “Oh, and I'd avoid getting too close to the bushes from here on in. They can be a bit hungry.”

“What do you mean by hungry?” Humphrey asked.

“Hungry. You know, wanting to eat things. Namely us. Well, you. Colin has a lot of influence on this area, and while he's a good boy, he does also yearn to devour every living thing on the planet.”

The others all turned to look at him.

“A bit,” Jason qualified. “He yearns a bit. It's like when you have a hobby you're really into. Knitting, for example. Sometimes life gets busy and you might go for a while without finding the time to sit down for a good knit. You yearn to do some knitting. Just a bit. It's like that with Colin.”

“Except, instead of wanting to knit,” Clive said, “he wants to wipe the world clean in a nightmare of hunger and flesh and blood.”

“Exactly,” Jason said. “You get it. And Farrah says I'm bad at explaining things.”

“I really hope you are,” Sophie said.

“Why would you hope that?” Jason asked her.

“Because, Jason,” Clive said, “your tone suggests you think you're saying something sensible when you're saying that you look at an apocalypse the way other people look at knitting.”

“Which is not sensible,” Sophie clarified.

“It's all perspective, I suppose,” Jason said.

“Yes,” Sophie agreed. “It is a matter of perspective, but let me try and explain it in a way that might sink in: One perspective is the sandwich and the other perspective is the mouth.”

“You're suggesting I'm losing the ability to see the point of view of the one that's about to get eaten?”

“None of us are foolish enough to claim knowledge of what's going on in your head, Jason,” Humphrey said. “But I remember those talks we used to have back in Greenstone. About right and wrong. About duty and responsibility. I remember that you have a habit of representing yourself or taking a position that doesn't reflect your actual beliefs, just to make a point.”

“Is that what I'm doing?” Jason asked lightly.

“Unless, a couple of minutes ago, you genuinely stopped caring about the deaths of everyone on the planet. And we both know that isn't the case, which leads to the question of what point are you trying to make?”

“Well, you mentioned those talks we used to have. When you boil them down, what was every one of those talks about?”

“Power,” Humphrey said. “Who has it, and who should. What’s done with it and what should be done.”

“Exactly,” Jason said, throwing out his arms to indicate the soul realm. “Every day, the power I have in here gets a little closer to being the power I have out there. I’m twenty-nine years old. By the time I’m thirty-nine, we’ll be gold rankers. How old will I be when we reach diamond?”

“You just casually assume that we’ll all reach diamond,” Clive said.

“Yep,” Jason confirmed. “And once I reach that point, there won’t be any limits on Colin’s natural power anymore. He’ll have the full strength of an apocalypse beast. I’ll probably be worse, but let’s put that aside for the moment and focus on just my familiar. If I tell him to wipe out a planet, will he say no? Wiping out planets is kind of his thing.”

Jason stopped walking and let out a sigh. The others stopped as well.

“No one should have that power,” Jason said. “But I will. What happens if I decide that an apocalypse isn’t any more important than knitting?”

“Then we’ll slap you on the head until your head gets right,” Sophie said, exasperation in her voice. “You told us about your world. Did a culture not based on lording it over people with personal magic make things better? Or did people just pick something other than magic to be the power and use that to exploit the people without it?”

“The second one,” Jason admitted.

“Then knock off with the sad-boy brooding,” Sophie said. “I know it’s kind of your thing, but in case you hadn’t noticed, you have a habit of making enemies. The sort of enemies where having an apocalypse in your back pocket might not be enough.”

“That’s a good point,” Jason acknowledged. “Balance of power. I shouldn’t worry about me when so many things that are more powerful than me and suck more than I do.”

“Good,” Sophie said. “Now, can we get on with waking up your familiar?”

“We have to get Clive first,” Jason said.

“What are you talking about?” Clive asked. “I’m right here.”

“What is that?” Humphrey asked as he turned to look at Clive. Humphrey had spotted a vine that had crept close to Clive’s foot. The vine, as if having heard it was noticed, sprang to life, wrapping around Clive’s shin. It toppled him over as it withdrew, Clive yelping as he was dragged into a hedge.

“I told him not to get too close,” Jason said.

“You’re a bit covered in thorn marks there, Clive,” Jason pointed out. “It looks like an extremely aggressive form of chicken pox. To the point that the little dots bleed a bit.”

Clive was sitting on the grass, using Onslow's shell as a backrest as he glared at Jason.

“Jason, this your soul,” Clive said.

“It is,” Jason conceded.

“Then maybe you should avoid having your soul drag me into thorn bushes that try to eat me.”

“That's all automatic,” Jason said. “You know more than most about souls. If you could just change things because you want to, I'd have eye beams right now.”

Finally, they reached a path to a cluster of buildings that wasn't blocked by a hedge or Clive-eating bushes. There was a large open square made of the same dark brick as the buildings. Clock towers sat at each corner, but the clock faces were warped. Instead of numbers, there were symbols in the old tongue, the language older than the planet they were standing on. The hands of the clock were actual hands, moving and grasping at the air.

“Those symbols instead of the numbers,” Clive said. “I think they’re some of the basic patterns that Gordon uses for that strange ritual magic of his.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “Shade and I have been discussing how that magic is linked to me.”

“We should talk about this,” Clive said, opening his rune portal to pluck out a notebook and pencil.

“Not the time, Clive,” Humphrey said. “That’s not what we’re here for.”

Clive grumbled but put his notebook away and they moved into the square.

In the middle of the square was a massive, round metal door set horizontally into the ground. As they approached, the metal door started sliding out of sight, revealing a deep shaft some thirty metres across and twice that deep.

They moved to the edge and looked down. Instead of continuing the brickwork of the square above, the shaft's walls were rough-hewn stone, obsidian black. Set into the wall like pegs were stone stairs winding their way down. At the bottom was what looked like a roiling pool of blood, glowing with an internal light that painted the bottom of the shaft red. A strong stench of coppery blood rose up to greet them.

“Jason,” Clive said. “This looks a lot like that chamber you took us to that one time.”

“The place where they tried to sacrifice you,” Humphrey said.

“Yep,” Jason confirmed. “It’s where they summoned a sanguine horror that we killed and I looted the awakening stone that let me summon Colin. Now it’s his flesh pit.”

“I really prefer the term ‘biomass storage,’” Clive said.

“Clive, look at it,” Sophie said. “That’s a flesh pit. Or a blood-flesh soup. I’m not sure if that sounds better or worse.”

Jason looked up just as a massive glass sphere floated into view over the buildings and hedges. Inside was a red mass that glowed from the inside, pulsing like a heartbeat.

“It’s time,” Jason said.

Cracks started appearing on the glass like an egg starting to hatch. Each glass fragment dissolved into nothing as it fell away, larger and larger shards breaking off until the fleshy mass inside started poking out. The flesh looked like a giant heart, not the love kind but the meat kind. Finally, the weight of it broke through the remaining glass and it fell into the hole like an offcut tossed away by a butcher.

The mass dropped through the shaft, splashing into the pool below.