

## Chapter 41: Vulnerable and Exposed

Jason apologised to Farrah the next day when she arrived at Jory's clinic for his training.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't realise until afterwards that I was accusing you of being callous. I can sometimes let my mouth run off on me without thinking it through, or considering the other person's perspective."

"That's very clear," Farrah said. "You weren't completely wrong, I guess. Mostly, but not completely. You do have to be a little callous, to do what we do."

"Maybe," Jason said, "but I shouldn't be judging you when I don't know what you've been through. The one thing I do know about this world is that I'm ignorant about all of it. It's just that... in my world, I'm not a person of consequence. Being one of the faceless masses isn't terrific, but there is one luxury the powerful don't enjoy."

"Oh?"

"When you're just a face in the crowd, then you can hold an ideal without being required to live up to it. But here, my decisions can be life and death. My principles are being put to the test, and I'm forced to confront what it means when they bend, or even break. Like anyone, I liked to think of myself as someone who would stand tall under the pressure. Now I'm really under it, standing up is harder than I thought. I have my own values, from my own world. They're the only thing I was able to bring with me. And sometimes, most times, it feels like this world wants to eradicate them. But if I let it, then what do I become?"

"I can't answer that for you," Farrah said. "Being good is easy when the choices are easy, but adventurers don't sign up for easy choices. Being a good person means being good when the choices are hard, and there's a price to that."

"Rufus told me something very similar."

"He might have his blind spots," Farrah said, "but his family have never been shirkers. When the time comes to stand, they stand at the front."

"Again, I'm really sorry," Jason said. "You were right that I don't know the things you've seen."

"I was, wasn't I?" Farrah said. "But I sometimes I forget how adrift you must feel, in a world you don't know."

"Adrift is about right," Jason said. "All I have to anchor myself is who I am. It feels like if I lose that, then I might never find a way home."

“You realise that doesn’t actually make sense, right?” Farrah asked.

“I’ve been in this world for three weeks,” Jason said. “I’ve been getting by on throwing myself into everything like a maniac, because if I stop moving I’m going to completely lose it. I’m one bad day from cracking like an egg.”

“So you cling to whatever you can,” Farrah said. “I can understand that. But the world isn’t going to stop and wait for you to get ready for it.”

“I know,” Jason said.

“For now, concentrate on the training,” Farrah said. “Perhaps some routine will help you keep it together.”

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Even before Farrah’s prompting, Jason instinctively understood that staying busy would keep him from flying off in every direction. He threw himself into training, from early mornings with Gary to afternoons with Farrah.

Every afternoon, when his training with the others was done, he would make his way to the balcony of his personal suite. Every day he would practice the one essence ability that he was most excited to master, yet had yet to successfully use. Each power he awakened brought with it the instinctive knowledge of how to employ it, but something about this one ability was holding him back.

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#### Ability: [Path of Shadows] (Dark)

- Special ability (teleport)
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)
  
- Effect (iron): Teleport using shadows as a portal. You must be able to see the destination shadow.

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The ability to teleport fired his imagination in ways his other abilities couldn’t match, yet it eluded him, day after day. Every afternoon he would sit under the awning on his balcony, trying to disappear into its shadow. His instincts screamed that it should be easy and natural, but there was something alien about that instinct. That feeling came from his essences, which were part of him now, but a new part. They didn’t entirely feel like a true part of him yet, and every day the sun would on another failure.

His personal suite wasn’t on the ocean side of the building, so his balcony instead overlooked one of the guild district’s wide boulevards. Sitting cross-legged in the shadow of the awning, he would try and sink into it, for hours on end. As time went on, he became

more frustrated. He could feel success was tantalisingly close, as if it brushed against his fingers, only to slip away.

As days rolled on, it felt like was moving in the wrong direction, further from success than when he first started practicing. He pulled out his starlight cloak, letting it wrap itself around him for comfort. That ability had come so easily.

“Essence abilities should come naturally,” Rufus told him, when Jason asked for advice. “This kind of problem you’re having usually appears when people are getting in their own way. In your world, abilities like this aren’t possible, are they?”

“Definitely not.”

“It may be there’s a part of you still thinks it’s impossible,” Rufus said. “Your new instincts, conflicting with your old ones. A teleport power affects you more than your other powers; it consumes you, in a way. Perhaps you feel that and instinctively draw back, like flinching from a hot stove.”

“So, what do I do?” Jason asked.

“Instead of focusing on yourself,” Rufus said, “focus on your surroundings. Farrah has been teaching you to project outside of yourself with your aura. Use that. Probe the shadows. Instead of trying to use them, just try and understand them. What they are, what you can do with them. Right now, you have this idea of what shadows are in your head, but a power telling you something different. Until you resolve that conflict, using that power will remain out of reach.”

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“You picked the basics of aura manipulation up quickly,” Farrah told Jason. “You’re slow and somewhat crude with it, but that’s to be expected. The only way to smooth the rough edges is with experience. There’s no substitute for practice.”

Jason nodded. They were Jory’s yard, sitting face-to-face on meditation mats.

“Now you have a grasp of the fundamentals,” Farrah said, “it’s time to show you the last aspect of aura manipulation.”

“I didn’t think it would be this quick,” Jason said.

“The basics of aura manipulation are exactly that,” Farrah said. “Like all essence abilities, there’s an instinctive understanding. The real difference between the capable and the incompetent is keeping up the practice. Practice is the only real secret to mastery.”

“No shortcuts,” Jason said.

“No shortcuts,” Farrah agreed. “Now we moving on to the third aspect of aura manipulation. You can perform projection and restraint to acceptable levels, so next comes suppression. Like the other aspects, the description is right there in the name; you use

your aura to suppress the auras of others. It really only works against people weaker than you, but it can be useful when you need to show dominance.”

“Alright,” Jason said.

“This is a little trickier to pick up,” Farrah explained, “because there isn’t anyone weaker than you to practise on. Even normal people won’t be far below your aura strength until your spirit attribute gets stronger. At this point I’m really just showing you, rather than teaching you. It’s something you need to know about, if only to be prepared when others use it on you.”

“So, you’re going to suppress my aura?” Jason asked. “Let me get a feel for it?”

“Exactly,” Farrah said. “I can be a disconcerting experience, so it’s best you learn what you’re in for.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “Hit me.”

“Here I go,” Farrah warned. She expanded her aura, clamping onto Jason’s and suppressing it, pushing it forcefully into his body. She looked at Jason, watching for reactions. He pulled out a small paper bag, popping a few glazed nuts into his mouth.

“Is that it?” he asked.

“Um, yes,” she said. “You are feeling that, right?”

“Yep,” he said, holding out the bag. “Want some? I don’t know what they put on these nuts, but it’s really good.”

With a confused expression, Farrah reached out and took a couple of nuts from the bag.

“They are good,” she agreed. She looked at Jason, still under the effect of her aura suppression.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

“Feels normal,” Jason said.

“Most people find having their aura suppressed to be supremely unnerving,” Farrah said. “It leaves them feeling vulnerable and exposed.”

“Yeah, I noticed that,” Jason.

“I thought you said it feels normal?”

“That is normal,” Jason said. “I arrived in this world with no idea where I was, how I got there or why. I was literally trapped in a maze, naked, fighting monsters and dodging cannibals. Compared to how vulnerable and exposed that left me, you think giving me the evil eye will put me off my knitting?”

He let out a low chuckle.

“Ever since that day,” he said, “the more I learn, the more I realise that everything I knew or believed was either woefully incomplete or flat-out wrong. I’ve almost died several times, and there’s no telling when something will come along to finish the job. I’ve been dragged into circumstances before which I am both impotent and insignificant. I have precious-little understanding the world around me, and even less control. I’ve been living with that for every waking moment since I arrived here. So you making me feel vulnerable is like throwing sand on the beach. I only noticed the change because I watched you do it.”

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One of luxuries of the suite Farrah shared with Rufus and Gary was the balcony terrace overlooking the ocean. There was enough outdoor furniture to serve as a private dining area, so Farrah carried a large tray of food from the dumbwaiter out to the table where Rufus and Gary were already seated.

“What about Jason?” Gary asked.

“Still trying to get his shadow teleport to work,” Farrah explained as she sat down.

“I’ve seen this kind of problem before,” Rufus said. “He’ll work past it, sooner or later.”

“I think it’s possible we may have overlooked some of what he’s going through,” Farrah said.

“Really?” Gary asked. “It seems like he’s doing fine.”

“He does throw himself into things like he’s looking for a distraction,” Rufus said. “You were going to suppress his aura today, right? Did he react badly?”

“He didn’t react at all,” Farrah said. “Working for the Magic Society, I’ve taught a lot of people to use their auras, but I’ve never seen that before.”

“You think there’s something behind it?” Rufus asked.

“He said it didn’t affect him because that’s how he feels all the time,” Farrah said. “He’s isolated and alone to a degree that I’m not sure I can get my head around.”

“He has us,” Gary said.

“But from his perspective,” Farrah said, “we’re another part of the strangeness. We can propel his boat, but we can’t be his anchor.”

“Have we been pushing him too hard?” Gary asked.

“No,” Rufus said. “If anything, I suspect the structure we’ve given him is what’s propped him up for this long.”

“Then what do we do?” Farrah asked.

“What we have been doing,” Rufus said. “The stronger he becomes, the more in control he will feel. You both know what I’m talking about; that feeling of power as your

abilities grow. Normally you have to stop people from running off like they're invincible, but hopefully it makes Jason feel more secure."

"Maybe we should start showing him around a bit," Gary suggested. "Let him see this world isn't all cultists and monsters. Remember the villages we passed through? He seemed a lot more relaxed around normal people, so maybe a little dose of ordinary is exactly what he needs."

"Are you saying we aren't normal?" Farrah asked.

"I'm normal," Gary said. "You two can be kind of intense."

"It's a good idea," Rufus said. "I'll be administering the field testing for next month's Adventure Society intake. I'll need to start preparing in a few days, and then I'll be gone for a week. Relax the training while I'm gone."

"Done," Gary said.

"Not too much," Rufus said, "but give him time to explore the city. This island is surprisingly impressive for a provincial city."

"If you have the money," Farrah said.

"Which he does," Rufus said.

"You did give him a cut from the blood cult job, right?" Gary asked. "If it weren't for him we would have failed and died."

"I did," Rufus said. "The church of purity made some noise about the completion bonus, after how things went with Anisa. The contract was through the Adventure Society, though, and the job did get done. They paid up."

"Wait," Gary said. "Did I get a cut? I don't remember getting the money for that."

"Because I gave it to Farrah," Rufus said. "You know; the person who stores all your money?"

"Oh, yeah."

Because they were on the balcony, they were able to hear a sudden commotion from outside the other side of the building. There was a yell of surprised panic, followed by a crashing sound and the shouts of several people.

Unable to see the source of the commotion, the three left their own suite and entered Jason's unlocked room across the hall. The balcony he should have been practicing on was empty. Going to the edge and looking down, they saw the outside dining area of the eatery across the street. The evening patrons had been disturbed by Jason landing heavily on a table in their midst, collapsing it to the ground. All the customers had stood up, while Jason still sprawled out in the remains of someone's supper.

He groaned, moving feebly to pluck a healing potion out of the air, tipping it into his mouth where he lay. Regaining strength as the potion took effect, he pushed himself off the table, staggering as he found his feet. He looked at the people standing around him.

“Sorry about your dinner,” he said, looking down at the food smeared on his clothes. “Smells good.”

“Jason?” Rufus called down.

Jason looked up at Rufus and gave a sore, but cheerful thumbs up.

“I got the ability to work!”

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Moments earlier, sitting on the roof, Jason had been pushing his senses out and into the shadow of the awning. In defiance of what little he knew of physics, he had come to sense that shadows were more than just an absence, but something that existed in their own right. He could feel something there as he reached out with his aura. There was a depth to the shadow, an ephemeral, but very real substance. He could almost rub it between his fingers.

He felt a call from the shadow, to something that existed inside him. The power he had tried so hard to use, yet never could. He quieted his excited mind, resisting the urge to push. He relaxed, letting the substance of the shadow and the power inside him intermingle. Gently they connected, becoming one. It felt natural, and right. Then something changed.

As if dragged by a giant vacuum cleaner, Jason felt himself get sucked through shadow. As he did, he had the flashing realisation that in all the time he'd been working on the ability, he's never given much thought to a destination. He emerged from the shadow of the building across the street, reason giving way to panic as he started to fall.

## Chapter 42: This is the Pits

As Farrah and Gary walked along, Jason would step into a shadow on one side of the street and reappear on the other.

“He seems to like that ability quite a lot,” Farrah said.

“I remember someone who was quite excitable when she got her fire jump power,” Gary said.

“Shut up.”

“He can use it in quick succession,” Gary observed. “Seems cheap on mana, too; he’s been at it for a while.”

“The benefit of being restricted to shadows,” Farrah said. “Regular teleport may use more mana and be available less often, but I still think I’d prefer it. If you get caught without any handy shadows, Jason’s ability is useless.”

“I don’t know,” Gary said. “Normal teleport you have to pick your moment so it isn’t wasted. This shadow-jumping business you could use enough to make it a centrepiece of your combat style.”

“Too reliant on the environment,” Farrah said. “How often do you get to pick your battles as you like?”

Jason emerged from a nearby shadow and joined them, wincing with a low-mana headache.

“It’s still taking me too long to activate the ability,” he said.

“Are you sure that’s not just how long it takes?” Gary asked.

“It should be almost instantaneous,” Jason. “I can feel it.”

“Keep practicing,” Farrah said. “You’ll get there.”

“How far can you go?” Gary asked.

“As far as I can see, I think,” Jason said. “As long as I can spot the shadow and it’s big enough, I can jump through it. I tried going through a small one, but it didn’t work.”

A wagon rumbled past, filled with manure. Farrah turned up her nose at the stench.

“Remind me why we aren’t shopping on the Island?” she asked. “I became an adventurer to get away from the smell of dung.”

“The markets on the Island are just trying to rip off rich people,” Jason said. “Besides, I promised Jory I would swing by the clinic.”

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In the grimy heart of Old City's warehouse district was a huge stone building called the Fortress. Older even than the city walls, it had been built to last. In the earliest days of the city it had been where Greenstone's residents would take shelter during a monster surge, but those days were long past. Now it served as Greenstone's largest den of iniquity; its rooms and halls contained all manner of illicit behaviour, delights and horrors both.

The city authorities paid little attention to the goings on in Old City so long as the business interests of the city elite remained secure. That made Old City's three biggest crime lords its de facto rulers, who made sure that the Island elites had no reason to look any closer. So long as the money kept flowing, the Big Three were free to divide Old City between them.

The Fortress was neutral ground. It was the one place where the Big Three shared operation, dividing both responsibility and profit. It was also the best place in Old City to glimpse the Island elites. Whether to secure their interests or indulge their appetites, they would receive only the best of treatment in the Fortress.

Of the many itches one could have scratched in the Fortress, the fighting pits offered the greatest spectacle. Some were literal pits, others cages. At night, even adventurers could be found battling it out inside. Some sought challenge, others to pay off debts for their own costly indulgences. Some decided a life fighting monsters wasn't for them and sought to earn a spot working for the Big Three. The top enforcers of the crime lords were paid in not just coin, but also monster cores.

Among the seating arrangements at the fighting pits were a number of enclosed viewing rooms with glass fronts. These were more recent additions to the centuries-old building. Some were available to anyone with the coin, while four were permanently reserved. The Big Three each possessed one of the boxes, where they conducted much of their business. The fourth belonged to the Fortress' most frequent and prestigious patron.

Lucian Lamprey was an elf whose muscular frame was uncommon for his people. Expensive clothes aside, he would not look out of place in the fighting pits himself. He was not a member of the local elf families, instead having been banished to Greenstone for previous improprieties. He was director of Greenstone's branch of the Magic Society, a vaunted position within the city, but one for which Lucian held no respect. They could make him king of the isolated desert city and he would still yearn for what he viewed as true civilisation.

The Fortress was Lucian's consolation; a paradise to openly indulge the vices for which he was sent to Greenstone in the first place. His viewing box was more of an office

to him than the one at the Magic Society campus. He even managed to get work done, as the lower-card fights rarely drew his attention.

While the pits might operate all hours, only the essence users of the night fights got Lucian's blood boiling. Magic displayed any active fights on the giant window of his viewing box, but in the early afternoon he gave only them occasional glance. This time of day had single-essence fighters, only escalating to full-blown, iron-rank fights after sundown. Lucian would have preferred to see bronze-rankers as well, but they were too valuable to risk in the pits under any but the rarest of circumstances.

Only a precious few bronze-rankers lowered themselves to work for the Big Three, and were their most valuable assets. If they ever appeared in the pits, it was to settle grudges between the Big Three without spilling blood on the streets. Gang war meant drawing the attention of the Island authorities, which all of the Big Three knew to avoid.

Lucian's ability to use the Fortress as his office was largely due to his deputy director. Pochard Finn maintained things at the city campus while frequently travelling to the Fortress himself. He was also an elf, in his case, a local. Both elves enjoyed the relationship, as Lucian had his workload lightened, while Pochard was the de facto director of Greenstone's Magic Society. They had quickly moved from colleagues to friends as Pochard also came to enjoy the pleasures of the Fortress.

"Standish was looking for you," Pochard said, pouring himself a glass of wine. He gestured with the bottle invitingly, pouring a second glass at a nod from Lucian.

"Can't you deal with it?" Lucian asked. "He's always up in arms about something."

"He insisted on seeing you," Pochard said. "Something about spirit coins, I think."

"Tell him if he wants to see me, he can come here," Lucian said.

"I did," Pochard said, drawing a snort of laughter from Lucian.

"I would love to see that gangly moppet in the Fortress," Lucian said, then stared out the of the window-wall. "And now I have."

"You're kidding," Pochard said, following Lucian's gaze.

"He actually came," Lucian laughed. "Good for him."

Pochard groaned.

"I hope he doesn't make it a regular occurrence."

Lucian chuckled at Pochard's reaction as they watched the long-limbed Clive Standish navigate the fighting pit's viewing stands. It wasn't crowded in the early afternoon, yet the awkward man in the wildly out-of-place scholar's robe seemed to get in the way of every person he passed. Finally he reached the viewing room, opulent in its

wooden construction. Lucian and Pochard looked at each other as they heard a polite knock.

“Shove off!” Pochard yelled, prompting a belly-laugh from Lucian.

“Uh, sir?” a voice came through the door.

“Don’t just stand out there, Standish!” Lucian bellowed, and the door was pulled nervously open. Clive Standish was rather tall, but his narrow frame and hunched posture made him seem lanky and awkward. He wore voluminous scholarly robes, possibly to make him seem less narrow, but they dangling off him like they’d been hung out to dry. In the fighting pits of the Fortress, he looked as out of place as any man Lucian had seen. This was good for Clive, as it left Lucian in a better mood than Clive normally found him.

“Pochard tells me you have some kind of spirit coin problem,” Lucian said.

“Not exactly a problem, sir,” Clive said. “More like a curiosity that I believe warrants further inquiry.”

Clive rummaged through his robes to produce an iron-rank spirit coin.

“This coin, and several other like it have been found in circulation over the last couple of weeks. You’ll note the unusual embossing of a man holding up his thumb,” Clive said. Pochard leaned over to peer at the coin in Lucian’s hand.

“On the back,” Clive continued, “there is an inscription. Thus far, we have failed to identify the language.”

“Don’t you have a translation ability?” Pochard said.

“I do,” Clive said, “although that only tells us what it says, not the language in which it says it.”

“So?” Lucian asked, impatiently. “What does it say?”

“It reads, ‘product of Jason,’ and ‘good day, friend.’ The second part is contextualised as a greeting.”

“It’s certainly odd,” Lucian said. “It’s a real coin?”

“I’ve had every coin we’ve found tested, sir,” Clive said. “They’re all real.”

“You checked it against the registry?”

Clive nodded.

“It definitely didn’t come from a registered spirit coin farm,” Clive said.

“You think someone’s set up an unregistered farm?” Pochard asked.

“It’s possible,” Clive said. “Certainly worth looking into. But we haven’t seen a lot of these coins, and most shady coin farms try to imitate a registered imprint. Given the idiosyncratic nature of these coins, and the fact that we’ve only found a few, I think there is an alternative explanation.”

“Oh?” Lucian asked.

“You are, of course aware, that some essence users develop an ability to loot monsters without the use of the usual harvesting rituals,” Clive said. “Usually the prosperity essence is responsible, often in conjunction with a human awakening one of their racial gifts. Such abilities are known to produce spirit coins.”

“What’s the legality of that?” Pochard asked.

“If it’s an ability, then it’s perfectly legal,” Clive said. “Fascinating, but insignificant on an economic scale. That’s just conjecture, however. If it does turn out to be an unregistered spirit coin farm, then it obviously needs to be found and shut down.”

“Alright, Clive,” Lucian said. “You came all the way here, dressed like that, so I’ll go along with it.”

“This is how I always dress,” Clive said.

“Oh, I know,” Lucian said. “Pochard, put up a contract with the Adventure Society to look into an off-the-books farm. Try and get them to put it up as a three-star contract, so we get someone who’ll actually do the work. Adventurers get lazy with open-ended contracts.”

“If it involves the spirit coin farms, the Adventure Society will make it three-star,” Pochard said.

“Good. As for you, Clive, I’ll authorise you to use Magic Society resources to pursue your other idea. If these coins are just some guy with an ability, find him, so we can put the issue to bed.”

“Thank you, sir,” Clive said.

“You want some wine, Clive?” Lucian asked.

“Ah, no, sir. Thank you. I’d best get back.”

“You’d better shove off, then,” Lucian said. “Anyone staying here has to drink.”

## Chapter 43: Nightingale

“This is nice,” Jason said.

“Certainly better than meditating in a dirty back-lot,” Farrah said.

The Island was divided in various districts, all connected by the subterranean, submarine transit line. The locals called it the loop line, or the loop, but Jason thought it deserved something more impressive. His thinking had gone as far as naming it the sub-sub way when he realised the loop wasn't so bad a moniker.

Farrah and Jason had taken the loop to the park district, which as the name suggested, was dominated by parkland. It was like someone had curated the delta, with paths and gardens winding around ponds and streams. Palm trees and vibrant tropical flowers punctuated open spaces of lush grass, while pathways vanished into shady areas of dense bushes.

Almost everywhere in the park district was open to anyone on the Island. The only private space was the walled-off residence of the city's ruler, the Duke of Greenstone. Jason and Farrah picked out a pleasant spot for their afternoon training. Farrah had suggested a more tranquil environment for meditation than Jory's back yard.

“I still need to go in to the clinic, though,” Jason said. “I promised I'd come in again this afternoon.”

“You realise that once you're an adventurer you won't have as much time for that,” Farrah said.

“I know,” Jason acknowledged, “but I'd like to make time, where I can. The idea is to help people, right? Killing some monster can do that, but so can turning a room full of sick people into a room full of healthy ones.”

“You know,” Farrah said, “Maybe there are some things worth holding onto in those values of yours.”

“Good to hear,” Jason said. “Does this mean you're going to stop trying to make me kill people?”

“We're not trying to make you kill people,” Farrah said. “We just want to prepare you for the inevitable. You make it sound like we're drugging random strangers, stashing them in a hidden location, handing you a large axe and locking you up with them, promising not to let you out until one of you is dead.”

“That was weirdly specific and detailed.”

“Shut up and meditate.”

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Underneath the Old City fight pits in the ancient Fortress were a series of hallways and chambers. Fighters and other interested parties used them to prepare for upcoming fights. This included a large number of enforcers to make sure the enthusiasm of would-be participants didn't suddenly wane before their match.

One such chamber contained two women, one of whom was getting ready to fight. Instead of loose, cool clothes, she wore a form-fitting outfit that mixed protective treated leather with tough, but flexible fabric. She had one foot up on a stone bench as she wrapped a cloth around her knuckles.

Her skin was chocolate, her hair shining silver. Her sharp eyes reflected the colour of her hair exactly, the matching metallics a giveaway trait of the celestine race. Normally shoulder length, her shimmering hair was tied back in a simple and practical ponytail.

"Do you want me to knot it?" the other woman asked, glancing at the hair.

The fighter shook her head, saying nothing. Her gaze was locked on the wall in front of her as she put herself in the headspace to fight. Her companion looked on with disapproval. She was a human, with short, scraggly hair and cute features. Her mouth pouted as she glanced at the door.

"I can't believe she's making you do this," she said.

"Lindy," the fighter said, her voice firm. "We knew we wouldn't like it going in. But without her protection, we'd be in a worse situation than this."

"But putting you back in the pits?" Belinda complained. "Soph, you already earned your way out of this place."

"Under Silva's father," Sophie said. "Now that he's gone, the most important thing is staying out of Silva's hands. This is the price we pay for that."

"Except that you're doing all the paying," Belinda said.

"Ventress doesn't care about the fighting," Sophie said. "She just cares about provoking Silva by showing me off. Once that's done, she has no reason to keep us here."

"Will Silva even know?" Belinda asked. "You still only have the one essence. Does anyone pay attention to these low-card fights?"

"He'll know," Sophie said. "Sooner, rather than later."

The door to the chamber was pushed open by a huge leonid. Coming in behind him was a woman with dark, cascading hair and a walk so sultry she was almost swerving. Clarissa Ventress only looked a few years older than the two women she was walking in on, but command clung to her as tightly as her satin dress.

“Are we just about ready, ladies?” Ventress asked. Belinda opened her mouth to respond, but was silenced by a gesture from Sophie.

“Good,” Ventress said. “I’ve arranged a match up that Silva should hear all about. Put on a good show and we might only need the one.”

“What’s the match up?” Sophie asked.

Ventress had the smile of a snake who just found a nest full of eggs.

“Fire Fist,” she said.

“Are you kidding?” Belinda burst out.

“It’s fine,” Sophie said, voice flat and calm.

“Do you know what he does to people?” Belinda asked, wheeling on her friend.

“I know,” Sophie said.

“He does have a reputation,” Ventress said. “That works in our favour. And this is fun; it turns out he always wanted to fight you. You got out of the pits right when he was getting started, and apparently he views it as a missed opportunity. Seeing how enthusiastic he was, I just had to go and arrange a cage match.”

Sophie put a hand on Belinda’s shoulder to stop her from erupting again.

“You want a show?” Sophie asked. “You’ll get one.”

Ventress gave another serpentine smile.

“Precisely what I wanted to hear. Belinda, dear, why don’t you come and watch from my viewing box?”

“Go with her,” Sophie said. “I need to get my head in the right space.”

“Soph…”

“I’ll be fine,” Sophie said with grim determination. “You just watch.”

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Lucian arrived at his viewing room with a contented sigh. Trailing behind him was Cassowary Finn, the son of Lucian’s deputy, Pochard. Cassowary spent much of his days working as a go-between for the two men, a key role in allowing Lucian to work out of the Fortress. Some tasks could only be done in person, however, which forced Lucian from his preferred habitat.

“I’m glad that’s over with,” Lucian said. “Maybe there’ll be a good fight on.”

“I did see them bringing out the cage,” Cassowary said. Always lurking near his father and Lucian, Cassowary was picking up on their taste for vicarious violence.

“Might be something interesting,” Lucian said. “Put it up on the window.”

Each private viewing room was fronted with a solid sheet of glass, enchanted to project images from the various fighting pits. It could show several at once, or focus on

one, all controlled by touching runes set into the wall. Cassowary did so, bringing up the image of Fortress personnel bolting together the walls of a large metal cage.

“Any idea what this is about?” Lucian asked. One of Cassowary’s tasks was to keep abreast of fights that might interest Lucian.

“If they’re bringing out the cage at this time of day,” Lucian said, “It’s probably the Fire Fist.”

“Fire Fist?”

Lucian rarely paid attention to the early fights, relying on Cassowary to dig out any worthwhile nuggets.

“I think you’ll like him,” Cassowary said. “He usually fights in escape the cage matches, which don’t end until one fighter leaves the cage. Fire Fist likes to toy with his opponents before he leaves.”

“Sounds fun,” Lucian said. “Why haven’t I heard of him before?”

“He doesn’t appear very often,” Cassowary said. “As you might imagine, they have trouble finding people willing to go up against him. They tried forcing people for a while, but that didn’t make for interesting fights.”

“So, this should be a good one,” Lucian said.

The fighting pits were, as the name suggested, a series of shallow pits in a wide area surrounded by tiered seating. Because the pits were shallow for people to see in, there would occasionally lead to casualties in the audience. It could be from an essence ability gone astray, or the crowd pleasing spectacle of a competitor trying to escape through the audience. The organisers had taken no steps to redress the issues in the many years the pits had been operating.

Lucian looked on as an announcer walked into view with a voice-projecting stone in hand. The viewing window picked up sound as well as vision, and those in the viewing rooms could hear the fights better than audience members at the edge of the pit.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the announcer proclaimed. “Today we have a very special match. As you may have very well surmised from the cage behind me, we will have the pleasure of welcoming a favourite back to the arena. Please join me in welcoming the savage, all-consuming Fire Fist!”

There were stairwells leading down to the chambers below, placed to allow fighters to emerge and parade before the audience on the way to their chosen fighting stage. Fire Fist was tall and lithe, with red and yellow streaks of hair that was either dyed or the result of some essence power. He wore only a pair of red silk pants with a yellow flame motif, his



muscled chest bare. His hands, held leisurely at his side, were wreathed in flames that danced up his arms as he strutted through the open door of the cage.

“Fire Fist, ladies and gentlemen!”

Fire Fist held up an arm to acknowledge the crowd, which was large for the time of day. Word of the match-up had clearly gotten around. The announcer waited for the audience to quiet down before his next introduction.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the announcer said. “For those true aficionados among you, there is a yet greater treat in store. Years ago, this arena was graced with the sweet flights of a beautiful bird. Sadly, she winged away from us, but today, ladies and gentlemen, she had returned. I give you the grace and beauty of... THE NIGHTINGALE!”

A dark beauty with silver hair marched up and out of the stairwell, without so much as a glance at the crowd. She stopped by the announcer, looking up and over the crowd to glare at one of the viewing rooms before heading into the cage.

In his own viewing room, Lucian stood up so fast he knocked over his chair. He walked around his desk and down to the window where he stroked his fingers over her face.

“Who is she?” he asked.

“I’m not sure, Mr. Lamprey. “I’ll find out.”

“See that you do.”

## Chapter 44: Complimentary Ointment

“I always wanted to fight you,” Fire Fist said to Sophie as they faced one another in the cage. “I was just starting out when you left. You were a legend.”

Sophie knew what he was doing. The audience like some banter before a match. Not the crowds who couldn't really hear, but the big names in the viewing rooms would. They were the ones he wanted to impress.

“They don't schedule legends to fight just after lunch,” she said. “You're overestimating our value to them.”

“I'm going to earn more essences,” Fire Fist said. “I'm not a debt-slave like you were.”

“I'm no-one's slave,” Sophie said.

“No?” Fire Fist asked. “Then why are you back here? Two years and no more essences than when you left.”

“Because the guy looking to enslave me doesn't want me for fighting.”

“I can understand that,” Fire Fist, eyes roaming over Sophie's body. “We have some time together, once I put you on the ground. Until I leave the cage, we can have all the fun we want.”

“I was just going to beat you,” Sophie said. “For that, I'm going to hurt you.”

“Think you have the skills, little girl?”

“I've seen you fight,” Sophie said. “It won't take that much skill.”

Fire Fist lunged forward, leading with the burnings fists from which he took his name. Sophie swayed around his straight punch and grabbed him by the wrist. The flames on his arm seared into her hand but she ignored the pain, yanking his arm and forcing his balance onto his forward leg. He yelled out in pain as her palm smashed into his elbow, trying to bend his arm the wrong way. The yell became a scream as her boot tried the same on the side of his knee. He collapsed to the ground, where a swinging leg smashed him in the face. Disoriented, he rolled with the blow, trying to scramble to his feet. Halfway up he found a hand on either side of his head, pulling it down into a rising knee.

Sophie dragged Fire Fist to the side of the cage by the hair.

“You realise they call you Fire Fist because that's all you have going for you, right?” she said. “You're a mediocre fighter with a gimmick that makes people flinch. I don't know what kind of ambitions you have, but I wouldn't bother. This is the highest stage you'll have any real accomplishment, and your reputation is about to take a big hit.”

The cage had both vertical and horizontal bars, like a mesh, with gaps barely large enough to fit a hand or part of a foot. That was to slow down climbing, so a downed opponent had time to recover and prevent an escape. Sophie hoisted Fire Fist up, forcing his hands through a pair of the small gaps before dropping him again. He was left dangling by the wrists as they caught on the bars. She raised an elbow up and smashed it down on one of his forearms, producing a loud crack and horrifying shriek of pain. She did the same to the other arm, then left him hanging as she climbed out of the cage.

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The Adventure Society campus had a marshalling yard where larger groups could assemble. Rufus arrived to find a large group waiting for him. He had two employees of the Adventure Society with him; the paunchy functionary, Albert, and an official who, like Rufus, was bronze rank. Originally Rufus would be administering the field test alone, but the Society had assigned another person to assist. Seeing the almost twenty participants, he now understood why.

“Are the groups normally this large?” Rufus asked Albert.

“No, sir, they are not,” Bert said, handing over a clipboard. Good luck sir, although I’m sure you won’t need it.”

“Why so many?” Rufus asked the Adventure Society official. He was a man in his late twenties, of rather distinctive appearance. He wore practical wear for the delta, tough but loose and breathable fabric. He had a bronze brooch in the shape of the Adventure Society emblem, which was standard for upper-tier officials. His practical clothes were topped with an impractical hat, broad-brimmed with an ostentatiously colourful feather. Overshadowing even that, however, was a moustache unlike anything Rufus had ever seen. Glistening with wax, it twirled its way out past the sides of the man’s head.

The official’s name was name was Vincent Trenslow. His appearance gave Rufus pause, but his manner in their short acquaintance had been nothing but professional.

“It seems there was some manner of grand administrative error,” Vincent explained unhappily. “More than half of these people already passed the field assessment and were admitted to the Society, but the records of their assessment were lost. Despite multiple copies of such records having been made and kept separately. It was decided that they should undertake the field assessment again.”

“In my experience, the Adventure Society is meticulous with their records,” Rufus said. “Even if they weren’t, what kind of solution is this?”

“The kind of solution you get when the error in question disproportionately affects members of the aristocracy,” Vincent said. “The kind aristocracy looking to make a connection with an important adventurer visiting from distant lands.”

“I see,” Rufus said darkly.

“The Director asked me personally to extend her apologies,” Vincent said. “She is new to the role and has a long way to go when it comes to purging outside influence. She made rather a point of inviting you to assess these applicants with, and I quote, ‘punishing rigour,’”

Rufus grinned.

“And what are your thoughts on this, Mr. Trenslo?”

“I may have a few suggestions that would interest you.”

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“Thank you so much,” the woman said, still shaking Jason’s hand.

“No worries,” Jason said, extricating his digits from the woman’s grip.

“Make sure you drink a lot of water when you go home,” Jory told her. “Eating some fruit would be good as well.

“Oh, I’ll be drinking, alright,” she said as she left the clinic.

“That’s not the kind of drinking I meant,” Jory called out. “And she’s gone.”

He sighed.

“Well, that’s the last one. How about you and I have a drink?”

“Sure,” Jason said.

“You have a good night, Janice,” Jory said to his teenage receptionist.

“See you tomorrow, Mr. Tillman. Mr. Asano.

“Goodnight, Janice.”

They wandered into Jory’s office, sitting down on either side of Jory’s desk. He pulled out two bottles, and two glasses. He poured a bright green liquid into a glass and pushed across the desk to Jason.

“This stuff is a bit more potent,” he said, “so it should get past that poison resistance of yours. It’s also horrifyingly sweet, the way you like it.”

“Thanks.”

He took a sip, nodding appreciatively, at the taste.

- 
- Special attack [Plime Fruit Liqueur] has inflicted [Alcohol] on you.
  - You have resisted [Alcohol].
  - [Alcohol] does not take effect.
  - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
- 

Jason sighed.

“No?” Jory asked.

“No,” Jason said. “Tastes good, though.”

“That’s not what booze is for,” Jory said, pouring himself something amber from the second bottle.

“You look kind of tired,” Jory said “I thought feeding on the sick freshened you up. Which is still creepy, by the way.”

“I’m not tired,” Jason said. “Or creepy. Weary, maybe. That woman had cancer, and I just took it away like it was never there.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Jory asked.

“Of course it is,” Jason said. “But back where I come from we don’t have essences. Or alchemy, for that matter, although we have something similar, I guess. We just call it pharmacology.”

“You don’t talk about where you’re from, much,” Jory said. “I remember you said there wasn’t a lot of magic. No monsters, right?”

“Never even heard of a monster surge until I came here,” Jason said.

“That’d be nice,” Jory said. “Like most things, the poor take the brunt of a monster surge. What happens when people get sick in your homeland?”

“We have medicine,” Jason said, “but without magic it has limits. Recovery can take a long time, and a lot of the options are bad. Take cancer, for example. Now I can just suck it out of people, but back home it isn’t that easy. They slice people open, try and cut it out of them. Poison them and hope the cancer dies before they do.”

“That sounds barbaric.”

“We don’t have better options,” Jason said. “I think about what I could do with the power I have now. All the people I could help.”

“Are you going back?” Jory asked.

“If I can,” Jason said. “Home is very far away, and I have no idea how to get there.”

“How did you get here?” Jory asked. “You said something about a magical accident?”

“A summoning spell went awry,” Jason said. “It reached into my magically desolate home and plucked me right out of it. That’s how I met Rufus, Gary and Farrah. I got dumped right into the middle of their mess.”

“Have you tried the goddess of knowledge?” Jory asked. “If anyone knows the way home, she does. There’s no guarantee she’ll tell you, but anyone can go to her temple and ask questions.”

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “I’m not really the religious type.”

“Even if there might be a way home?” Jory asked. “What will it cost you to try?”

“That’s the sort of question someone asks right before you they bury you in debt.”

Jory laughed.

“That’s fair,” he said. “But give it some thought.”

“I will,” Jason said. “Thanks.”

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“I can’t believe you hid it from me,” Belinda said.

“It’s not a big deal,” Sophie said. “I had gloves on.”

“Heat goes through gloves. Your hand is the wrong colour.”

“It does feel a bit weird.”

They went through the door of the Broadstreet Clinic to find the receptionist packing up to go.

“Didn’t this place used to be full of people?” Belinda said. “I remember coming in here of an evening and was still packed to the door.”

Janice looked up at the pair.

“Since Mr. Asano started coming we get through everyone quicker,” she explained, “even with the all extra people.”

“Why are there extra people? Belinda asked.

“We just need some healing unguent,” Sophie said.

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” Janice said. “I’ll go see if Mr. Tillman is available.”

After a few moments they heard a voice loud with drink.

“Janice, why are you still here?”

“I wanted to finish up the records before I went home,” they heard Janice reply as she led Jory out from the back. His unsteady gait and expression of general bewilderment said he’d was well on his way through a bottle.

“I should pay you more,” Jory told his receptionist.

“You just started paying me more, Mr. Tillman.”

“Yeah? Good on me, then.”

He looked up at the two women.

“Ladies!” Jory greeted. “It’s been a while. Hello, Lindy. What brings you to my door?”

“Sophie’s fighting again,” Belinda said.

“Well, that’s no good,” Jory said.

“It is what it is,” Sophie said.

“Then I suppose I’ll be seeing more of you,” Jory said, beaming at Belinda. “That’s nice.”

“We just need some ointment,” Sophie said.

“Here,” a voice said. A tin was sailing through the air, Sophie reaching out to catch it. The man who threw it was human, but neither woman recognised his ethnicity, meaning he was unlikely to be local. His frame was narrow and his features were a little too sharp to be handsome. His dark hair had a silkiness to it, but it was hard to see cropped short as he had it.

“That’s not one of mine,” Jory said to the man. “Where did you get that?”

“From a monster,” the man said.

“You can’t just give random monster goo to two beautiful women.”

“It’s healing ointment. I’ve used a lot of it myself.”

“Sounds sketchy to me,” Jory said. “Janice, find me a jar of the good ointment.”

Sophie pulled the lid off the tin and sniffed at the contents.

“It’s fine,” she said, putting the lid back on. “What do we owe you?”

“On the house,” the man said. “It lets Janice go home instead of updating the inventory.”

Sophie nodded and back out the door.

“Soph, wait...” Belinda said. “And she’s gone. Bye Jory. Thanks, person I don’t know.”

“Bye Belinda!” Jory called out with a wave as the door closed behind them.

## Chapter 45: So Much For Atheism

Jason had not explored many of the Island's districts. He took the loop to one he had never visited before; the temple district. His new world had no shortage of gods, which as a long-time atheist was more than a little disconcerting. He had been assured that gods existed, but he'd been hearing much the same from his Great Aunt Marjory for years. He wanted to see for himself.

Walking out of the loop terminal, he immediately saw a sign with directions to the Divine Square. Following it, he walked down a street where temples lined both sides of the road. Looking at the prominent signs and banners, Jason quickly gained a sense that gods had hierarchies of their own. The Temple of Roads, he saw, was nestled behind the larger and more impressive Temple of Journeys.

Soon the street opened up onto the square itself. It was a huge, crowded space. Green stone was prominent everywhere in the Island, but in the Divine Square even the flagstones were made from high-grade material. The square was filled with booths and tents, most of which seemed to be hawking religious paraphernalia to the faithful.

"Kind of the same, wherever you go," Jason mused to himself.

There were people proselytizing to anyone who would listen, and street thieves cutting purses. Jason had originally kept a small pouch of coins hanging from his waist so he didn't draw attention by plucking coins out of thin air. After the second time it was stolen in as many days he stopped bothering. Even if using his inventory drew attention, there were enough people with similar abilities around that it wasn't a lot.

Jason bought a sandwich from a street vendor, some kind of meat with cheese and a spicy sauce. Food was one of the ways in which Jason was most reminded he was on a different world. While the preparation was often similar, like bread, soup, sandwiches or cake, the ingredients were more often different than the same. Farms raised different animals and grew different crops. Trees sprouted different fruit. The bread was heavier than he was used to, the beer lighter. The meat was all different. Most of it came from the large lizards Jason had seen roaming in the delta. Even the crossovers, like apples, were not varieties he recognised.

He realised he was stalling, distracting himself with little details instead of following his actual purpose in coming to the temple district. Confronting a challenge to long-held beliefs wasn't easy. His objective wasn't the throngs of people in the square, but the temples around the outside. The buildings immediately abutting the square were the most



prominent houses of worship in the city, and the effort put into their designs seemed to reflect it. They seemed to be competing in grandiosity, each clearly an achievement in architecture and engineering.

There was a towering cathedral, a columned temple and other buildings the likes of which Jason had never seen. Oddly, there was one building that forwent the ostentation of the buildings around it, looking more like a public school library. It was a square, grey block, with the only ornamentation a picture of a scroll over the double-doors.

“I wonder if that’s what I’m looking for.”

While each building competed to catch the eye, in Jason’s opinion there was a clear winner. It was a huge tower in the shape of an arm thrusting into the sky. Most buildings in the city topped out at five storeys, and while it was not the only temple to breach this limit, the giant arm more than doubled it. At the end of the arm was a fist clenching a giant, bearded head. The head gazed down on the square, fiercely glaring at any with the courage to meet its stare.

“Well, that’s only completely horrifying.”

With all the people around it was easy to ask a passer-by about the unusual temple. The man Jason talked to was short and stocky, with skin of such a deep blue it was almost black. He had no hair at all and was covered in what looked like tattoos of various colours, which glowed faintly. Jason knew the markings were actually natural, a feature of the race known as the runic. They were a rarity in Greenstone, and while Jason had seen them around, this was his first chance to speak with one. Going by his clothes, the man was more likely a local than a visitor.

“That’s the temple of Dominion,” he explained as Jason pointed out the strange temple.

“Dominion over what?” Jason asked.

The man looked at Jason curiously.

“Over everything,” the man said. “Dominion issues the divine right to kings and nobles. It is he who determines who rules, and who serves.”

“Oh. That explains the creepy, overbearing temple.”

“You seem very easy with blasphemy,” the man said warily.

“I am,” Jason said absently. “Mostly to annoy my Aunt Marjory, but also recreationally. Does this world have little cartoon booklets that explain you’re going to hell if you eat between-meal snacks or whatever?”

The man shook his head in wonderment.

“What do you get out of that?” he asked. “Does it make you feel better to disrespect things others find meaningful?”

“Sorry,” Jason said, feeling like an idiot. “Where I come from, the gods aren’t real.”

“The gods are everywhere in this world.”

“So I’ve heard,” Jason said. “I find that a bit disturbing, to be honest. I mean, look at Dominion. I don’t like the idea of an infinitely powerful being whose job is to make sure people know their place.”

“Then venerate a different god,” the man said. “No deity is absolute. If you dislike the message of Dominion, seek out Liberty. They don’t get along.”

The man flashed Jason a cheeky grin.

Jason held out his hand and the man shook it.

“I’m Jason.”

“Arash,” the man introduced himself.

Jason was asking Arash if the plain-looking building was the Temple of Knowledge when a glorious light appeared in front of one of the temples. All through the square people started falling to their knees, Jason’s new friend included. Looking over, Jason saw a towering figure that looked human, but stood twice as tall as Gary. He looked rather like an adventurer, clad in light armour with a sword at his side.

Up to that point, the strongest aura Jason had encountered was that of a silver-rank adventurer he had seen at the Adventure Society. He had sat next to the man on the loop line and found the presence of his aura overpowering. He realised at the time why Farrah said that containing one’s aura was good manners.

The aura from the far side of the square made that experience inconsequential; it was comparing a candle to the blazing light of the sun. Jason had no doubt if the aura of that towering figure were truly unleashed, everyone in the square would drop dead.

“So that’s a god,” Jason said. “Honestly, I was hoping to be less impressed, but that is something to see. So much for atheism, I guess.”

“Get down!” Arash hissed, kneeling next to Jason. Looking around, Jason certainly stood out as the only person still standing. The god turned to Jason. Not knowing what else to do, Jason gave him a casual wave. It was hard to tell from across the square, but he thought he saw a smile tug at the god’s mouth.

“What’s he the god of?” Jason asked.

“That’s Hero,” Arash said. “Get down!”

“I think that ship has sailed my friend,” Jason said. “So, the god of heroes is called Hero. They really stick to that straightforward naming convention, don’t they?”

“Such a shame,” a melodious voice came from behind Jason. “I was hoping to be your first.”

Jason looked around, but didn’t see where the voice came from. He caught a hint of perfume in the air, fresh and clean like a sea breeze. Within it he sensed a fleeting, put potent aura, every bit the equal of the god across the square.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Jason muttered.

At this point Arash was yanking on Jason’s sleeve, trying to get him to kneel. The other people around them were looking at Jason with disdain.

“Calm down,” Jason said, tugging his shirt free of Arash’s grip. “Did you hear that woman?”

“What woman?” Arash said. “Get on your knees and show your respect for the god!”

“Just me, then. Kneeling isn’t how you show respect, Arash. That’s how you show obedience.”

“Obedience to a god is respect!”

“They say that where I come from, too,” Jason said. “Never really got onboard with the idea. I think I’m going to head off, Arash. All the people here are giving me the evil eye.”

“You are a fool!” Arash hissed after him.

“I can’t argue with that,” Jason said with a laugh. He started making his way across the square, but all the people who had dropped to their knees made for something of an obstacle course.

“Sorry. Pardon me. Excuse I.”

One of the people near Arash leaned over as he watched Jason wander off.

“Do you know that man?” the person asked.

“Absolutely not,” Arash said.

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As Jason had guessed, the Temple of Knowledge was the plain, blocky building.

“Is there actually a public library in there?” he wondered. “That would make sense.”

The double doors in front of him were pushed open from the inside as he approached, revealing a pretty young woman. It the same acolyte who had tested his essences during his Adventure Society intake.

“Good day, Mr. Asano.”

“Gabrielle, right?” Jason asked.

“That’s right,” she said. “It’s lovely to meet you again.”

“Likewise.”

Jason thought he should catch up with Humphrey, curious if the young man had made an overture since Jason gave him Gabrielle's name. Then he remembered Humphrey was off with Rufus for the field assessment.

"Why does it feel like you were waiting for me?" Jason asked Gabrielle.

"My lady told me you were arriving and sent me to guide you."

"Your lady?"

"The goddess. Follow me, please."

She led Jason inside and he felt an aura wash over him. It was unlike the aura of a person, more like an undercurrent that belonged to the building itself. It wasn't overbearing, but he could feel a vast power behind it. It also had the flavour of the fleeting aura that accompanied the disembodied voice he heard in the square.

They were walking between row after row of books, occasionally passing someone reading at a table. Some of the shelves, instead of books, held ornate tubes.

"Scrolls," Gabrielle explained, seeing Jason's curious glance. "The manuscripts here in the library are all copies. The originals are preserved in the archive."

"So, does your boss talk to you a lot?" Jason asked.

"My boss?"

"The goddess."

"Of course," Gabrielle said. "I may be only a junior member of the clergy, but I am a member, nonetheless. I see and hear my lady every day."

"That must be reaffirming. It doesn't work that way where I come from."

"Your world must be very strange. People serving gods that do not exist. How does that work, if I might ask?"

"Not really sure," Jason said. "They seem to lean heavily on metaphor. You know I'm from a different world?"

"The lady has imparted some knowledge. It is her nature."

"Her nature could use a privacy disclosure agreement. Where are you guiding me to, exactly?"

"The temple has a room for questions. Ask, and the lady will answer or not, as she chooses."

"She'll answer in person?"

"Answers come in many forms."

"Sounds like she's leaning on heavily metaphor, too."

Gabrielle gave Jason a confident smile.

"You will soon see for yourself," she said.

She led Jason to a set of double doors. They were larger than the ones that were the entrance to the temple, but just as plain. They were carved from wood, aged and unadorned but for a simple handle on each. Jason had the strange feeling they were older than the building in which they were affixed. Gabrielle pulled open the heavy doors with an ease that belied her small frame.

“This is as far I take you,” she said, gesturing for Jason to continue on. He passed through the doors and she pushed them closed behind him.