

## Chapter 460

### Kind of His Thing

Clive drove the flying, open-top carriage through the skies of Vitesse, docking halfway up one of the garden towers covered in flowers and greenery. He disembarked onto a balcony, along with Humphrey and Sophie, where they were met by an Adventure Society attendant.

"Young Master Geller, Mr Standish, Miss Wexler," he greeted. "Welcome back to the city, and congratulations on reaching silver rank."

"Thank you, Ernest," Clive said, handing over the control crystal for the carriage. "Do you know where we're meant to go?"

"I believe Mr Cotezee is waiting for you."

"Thank you, Ernest."

The trio made their way through the Adventure Society building to Miles Cotezee's office. He was a senior administrator, his silver rank coming entirely from cores. His paper, knowledge, rune and scribe essence combination was more suited to battling bureaucracy than monsters. They found the man in his office behind a desk piled high with papers in a series of trays. He looked up as they entered, his sudden grin looking especially manic on his frazzled expression.

"Clive! And friends, obviously. How did we do?"

Miles stumbled out of his chair and hurried around the table as Clive gave him a wary look. The man looked like he was ready to snap if he got bad news.

"Success," Clive said. "You can set up a presentation."

"Already did," Miles said. "It's in..."

He fished a watch from his pocket to check the time.

"...a little over three hours. You should take some time to have some lunch and relax beforehand."

"You might want to join us," Sophie suggested. "You look like you could use a break."

Miles let out a mad cackle.

"Break? That's a precious dream. Just be back here in two and a half hours. Oh, and wear your guild pins. It'll lend a little authority to what you have to say."

"What do we need more authority for?" Sophie asked. "Clive cracked the cult's portal network; how much more respect does he need to earn before people listen to him?"

"However you look at it, you're freshly minted silver-rankers," Miles said. "I love you kids, I really do, but you're not in Greenstone anymore. If you want people to listen to you

in this town, power is king. If you don't get it from your rank, get it from your name, your guild or wherever you can."

Miles frowned, remembering something.

"Where's your familiar?" he asked Humphrey.

Humphrey held open his jacket to reveal the head and paws of a mouse sticking out of the lining pocket.

"G'day bloke," the mouse said.

Humphrey shook his head and closed his jacket. The trio left Miles' office and made their way to one of the tower's many open balconies. Magical energy emerged from the rune tattoo on Clive's chest, passed through the cloth of his robe and coalesced into a tortoise the size of a sport utility vehicle, floating in the air beside the balcony. The tortoise's gently curved shell was covered in brightly glowing runes in a cornucopia of colours.

This was Clive's rune tortoise familiar, Onslow. The trio stepped off the balcony and onto his shell, at which point the familiar started descending through the air. They alighted in a public park where they hopped down from Onslow's back. Clive fed him a lettuce leaf while scratching the back of his head.

Clive was about to return Onslow to the tattoo when he spotted some children pointing. The rune tortoise was a non-threatening figure, despite its size, and covered in colourful, glowing runes that made him popular with children. Humphrey and Sophie shared a knowing look.

"We'll get you something to eat and come back," Sophie told Clive, patting him on the shoulder.

When they returned with a basket of sandwiches and drinks, Sophie and Humphrey found a gaggle of children riding Onslow around as he slowly floated around the park, just above the ground. Their parents were all gathered around Clive. In these situations, Sophie and Humphrey used to play a game where they guessed which ones were single mothers based on their body language but it had become far too easy to tell. Sophie pulled out a recording crystal and tossed it into the air where it floated over her head.

"What are you doing?" Humphrey asked.

"I thought Lorelei might like to see this," Sophie said innocently.

"You are just trouble, head to toe," Humphrey told her.

Eventually, Clive noticed them and dismissed Onslow, the families going on their way. The trio sat on a blanket and enjoyed lunch, although they still had time to spare

when they were done. They decided to walk a roundabout path back to the Adventure Society tower rather than fly. Teleporting into the tower wasn't possible.

On their way back, they saw a priest in full regalia robes sprinting down the street like monsters were chasing him. Sophie and Clive looked around and saw that no one seemed to be paying him any attention.

"Does that guy need help?" Clive asked.

"No," Humphrey said. "He's a priest of Lust. I bet there's a..."

He trailed off as a priestess, also in elaborate robes came running around a corner in pursuit of the priest.

"Come back!" she yelled after him. "I'll help you with your ritual!"

"BEGONE, WOMAN!" the priest yelled back over his shoulder.

"Is that...?" Clive asked.

"A priestess of Fertility, yes," Humphrey confirmed.

"This is a fun city," Sophie said.

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Riding one of the elevating platforms up through the tower Sophie, Humphrey and Clive took out their guild pins, affixing them to their clothes. Each one depicted violet flames in the shape of a flower. The shimmer of the magical material from which they were made gave the impression of dancing purple fire.

The building seemed oddly busy, even for the Adventure Society. As they made their way to Miles' office they saw people rushing frenetically through the halls. In his office, Miles was somehow even more agitated than he had been just hours before. He was standing over his desk running his hands through his hair as he looked at the papers in front of him like they'd slept with his wife. As the trio came in he looked up at them, wild-eyed.

"What is it?" Humphrey asked.

"Is there a problem with the presentation?" Clive followed up.

"Presentation's cancelled," Miles said.

"Cancelled?" Humphrey asked. "We've been scouting out that dam for two months. Clive finally figured out what—"

"Doesn't matter right now," Miles said, moving around the table to close the door.

"Something big is going on. I'm not sure what exactly, but rumour is that the monster surge is finally about to start."

"And these rumours spread since we got here three hours ago?" Sophie asked.

"The high-ups are keeping their cards close right now, but yeah," Miles said. "From what I've heard, there's some undisclosed source of information that says the surge is going to begin within the next few months."

"People have been saying that for years now," Sophie said.

"Yet none of those people triggered what's going on now," Miles said. "The Adventure Society has had the Magic Society cancel every booking on the water link chambers and all but taken them over. Almost all activities are being cancelled or rescheduled and orders are going out everywhere. Including for you three."

"The Adventure Society doesn't give orders," Sophie said. "It gives contracts."

"The society is going into monster surge rules, Miss Wexler. Try turning down a directly issued contract today and see where that gets you."

"What's the contract?" Humphrey asked.

"All three of you need to travel to some small town on the far side of nowhere," Miles told them, turning to search through the unruly papers covering his desk.

"And then what?" Sophie asked.

"No idea," Miles said. "The contract just says to go there. All three of you. That's the entire directive."

He found what he was looking for, handing them a sheet of paper each with what little details there were.

"This is a nothing contract," Sophie says. "It just says head off to some little village."

"I don't know any more than you do," Miles said, "except for one thing. This contract didn't come down through normal channels. It came down from on high, and I mean proper high. The kind of people your mother couldn't get in to see, Mr Geller. People who shouldn't even know who any of you are. So I strongly recommend you take the contract and do exactly what it says without making a fuss."

"Why is everyone looking at me?" Sophie asked.

"What about the dam project?" Clive asked. "If I gave someone else the details, maybe they could take over."

"Take over?" Sophie said, wheeling on Clive. "After all the work we put in? This is your win, Clive."

"As long as the work gets done," Humphrey said, "it doesn't matter who does it."

"Yes it does," Miles said. "Miss Wexler is quite right to be concerned. Reputation is everything in this town. I know you're very enthused about the civic responsibility of adventurers, Mr Geller, but there's only so much good you can do if no one takes you

seriously. If you want to fight the good fight, and I know you do, then you need to step out of your mother's shadow to be taken seriously in your own right."

"Which is exactly what I meant," Sophie said. "Also, I'm not letting some random person take all the credit."

"Tell us about this village they're sending us to," Clive said. "What makes it special?"

"No idea," Miles said. "My very strong suggestion is to go there and find out. There has to be something there. Oh, and someone will be going with you. He's being portalled in as we speak."

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A small town on the far side of nowhere was having a celebration feast inside their new, reinforced walls. As evening fell, a trio of visitors arrived in search of a blacksmith. Jory, Belinda and Neil were startled to discover that the blacksmith was someone they knew.

They hadn't seen Gary in two years, since Jason's memorial. The previously crestfallen leonid had regained his boisterousness, gathering all three of them into a bone-crushing hug before dragging them all off to the feast.

"What are you even doing here?" Gary mumbled through roasted meat. He had bitten it from a whole leg he was waving around that was the size of Belinda's arm.

"I'm out here trying to figure out how to make cheap potions with the local materials," Jory said. "I should be teaching people how to do it for themselves but that's a process that takes time we don't have right now. What about you?"

"Same thing, but for weapons, armour and fortifications," Gary said.

"A strange lady told me there was a blacksmith that could meet our needs here," Jory said. "Belinda needs a full refresh of her gear."

"Strange lady?" Gary asked. "Strange how?"

"She was too high rank to be out here," Jory said. "Even though I couldn't sense her aura, I could tell. Her clothes and the way she carried herself. A celestine, with hair like rubies."

"Are you sure it wasn't a man?" Gary asked. "I haven't seen a woman like you're describing, but there's a guy roaming about making trouble."

"Unless it was disguise magic, I'm sure," Jory said. "I figured she must have been sent out here because a gold-rank monster manifested."

"Makes sense," Gary said, then tore off another meat strip with his teeth. With his huge head and leonine features, it was somewhat terrifying to watch.

"I haven't heard about any gold-rank monster, though," Gary said, still spraying slivers of meat as he turned to Belinda. "So you need a set of silver-rank gear? I was set to pack up and move on tomorrow, but I can take a day."

"I need a lot of gear," Belinda said. "A lot. A day might not be enough."

"Don't underestimate your friend, here," a smooth voice said. An immaculately groomed man in out-of-place city fashion sat down next to Gary. "His skills have advanced in leaps and bounds in the last year or so."

"This would be the guy roaming around making trouble," Gary introduced. "Virid, these are my friends. "Belinda, Neil and Jory, this is Virid."

"A pleasure," Virid said. "I'm also curious about this unusual woman you mentioned. I didn't feel anyone like what you're describing and my senses are... quite prodigious."

The three looked over Virid, just as alien to the remote town as the woman Jory described.

"What is going on out here?" Neil wondered aloud.

"Good question," Rufus asked. "What are you all doing here?"

Everyone at the table turned to face the new arrival and Gary leapt up, claspng Rufus in a huge hairy hug, the meat in Gary's hand getting oil down Rufus' back.

"I seem to recall you not being a hugger," Rufus gasped.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Gary said with a laugh. "What are you doing here?"

"Adventure Society sent me," Rufus said. "They came to the training annex, told where to go with nothing about why and portalled me halfway around the world. The others are still caught up at the town entry checkpoint."

"Others?" Gary asked, as arguing voices drifted in their direction, loud enough to be heard over the ongoing feat.

"You were lucky I was able to talk them down," Humphrey said. "All you needed was a little patience."

"How was I meant to know they wouldn't take a bribe?" Sophie complained. "Since when do village guards have integrity?"

"Small town people are good and decent folk," Humphrey said. "They deserve our respect."

"And city people don't?" Sophie demanded.

"In fairness, Sophie," Clive interjected, "would you trust you?"

"That's not a terrible point," Sophie admitted. "Lindy?"

Belinda rushed to catch her friend in a hug.

“What is everyone doing here?” Clive asked.

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Jason’s old team, plus Rufus, Gary and Gary’s mentor Virid were gathered at a picnic table left from the previous night’s feast. They were discussing how they all ended up in the same place at the same time, in the middle of nowhere.

“The only clue we have to what brought us all here is this mysterious woman?” Rufus asked. “Why us? Why here and why now?”

“Aside from Gary’s new friend,” Clive said, “there is something that connects us. Greenstone.”

“And the person we all met there,” Sophie added.

“The location may be a matter of discretion,” Virid suggested as the other fell into a sombre silence. “Large cities have eyes and ears that even I can’t escape, while the arrival of someone like me in a small one becomes fast news. Here, there is no one to tell.”

“Quite astute,” a female voice said. The group turned to see a celestine with alabaster skin, her crimson eyes and hair shining in the morning sun. They stood up arraying themselves in front of her. Virid was wary, not sensing her aura. He pushed out with his senses, turning whiter than she was at what he found.

“I’m, uh... I’m going to go,” he said.

“No,” Dawn told him. “You’re not. Sit back down.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Gary watched the terrified Virid with shock, being the only one who knew that he was a diamond ranker. What did that make this woman? She looked Virid up and down.

“You don’t look it,” she told him, “but you’re a smith?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. Mr Xandier’s skills may not be quite where I need them, so collaborating with you may bridge that gap.”

“I don’t suppose you’d care to explain why you brought us all here?” Rufus asked, stepping to the fore.

“I need Mr Xandier to reforge a weapon for me,” she said.

“The rest of us aren’t smiths,” Rufus said. “What do you want?”

“To fulfil a promise,” she said. She took a weapon from the dimensional bag at her waist and held it out. Gary moved forward and took it, turning it over in his hands.

The sword was bent almost in half. The craftsmanship was familiar, yet alien.

“What did this?” Gary asked. “How did the blade not snap?”

Gary's examination went deeper than simply looking. His forge essence abilities gave him insights into the nature of worked metals.

"It's soul-bonded," he said. "The sword bends but doesn't break, because so does the owner."

He looked up at Dawn.

"Which isn't you."

"No. I promised the owner I would have it ready and waiting when he arrived and only one man can reforge it."

"This feels like my work," Gary said, "but I don't remember this sword."

"It's been modified," Dawn said. "It wasn't soul-bonded when you made it, and it was ranked-up, being a growth item. Look again."

Gary looked back down at the sword in his hands, pushing his senses to the limit. Finally, he recognised it and his eyes went wide. His face came up filled with fury and he let out a roar that cracked the stone wall of the smithy next to him. Dawn's hair and clothes whipped around her like she was standing in a hurricane, but she didn't so much as lean back. The friends behind Gary covered their ears, deafened despite not being in the direct blast.

"Why do you have this?" Gary demanded, marching up into Dawn's face and waving the sword in front of her. "How do you have it?"

"I told you," she said calmly. "I promised the owner I would have it waiting for him."

"I don't know who soul-bonded this weapon," Gary growled, "but the real owner is dead. So you'd best tell me who gave you this or you're going to join him. I don't care who or what you are. I'll find a way."

"Gary, no!" Virid warned, standing up.

"Sit," Dawn barked and he plopped back down.

"The owner died, yes," she said. "But as it turns out, coming back from the dead is kind of his thing."