

Chapter 456

I'm the Bait in Question

At the Adventure Society dock in the city of Greenstone, Emir Bahadir's cloud palace had been replaced with a cloud ship that would dwarf an ocean liner. Humphrey, Sophie and Neil boarded via a cloud dock that led directly into the side of the ship where one of Emir's staff led them inside. They were taken to the owner's stateroom, which was less a room and more like three storeys of typical Emir excess.

In an office larger than most homes, Emir was sitting behind a desk under a transparent ceiling that showed off the blue desert sky. The elevating platform deposited the trio as Emir was completing a meeting with the Deputy Director of the Adventure Society, Genevieve Picot. She was an elf whose appearance was uncharacteristically aged for a silver-rank essence user.

Emir stood to shake her hand and she walked away, passing Humphrey, Sophie and Neil as they departed the elevating platform and she stepped onto it. Neil and Humphrey wore diplomatic expressions, while Sophie openly glared. Genevieve has been party to the political machinations that had made Sophie into a pawn, endangered with death and worse.

"Steady," Humphrey murmured.

"Don't worry," Sophie told him. "If I go after her, it'll be a better plan than jumping her during some random encounter."

"Sophie," Humphrey admonished.

"Most people only think it through to the actual killing," Sophie said casually as they walked across the office that was more like an ostentatious town square. "It's planning what comes after that matters. That's where you get caught."

Humphrey shook his head as Neil snorted a laugh. Behind them, the staff member that escorted them up was descending with the Deputy Director. Emir moved forward to greet the three. The formal office furniture dissolved into cloud-stuff before reforming into a comfortable lounge suite.

"Sit, please," Emir invited. Despite the appearance of ordinary armchairs and couches, the engulfing plushness of their true nature was luxuriously felt as the group sat.

"The time has come to leave," Emir said, getting straight to the point. "Jason's memorial is behind us and the Adventure and Magic Societies are finally done pulling you in for questions."

"It's our duty to do everything we can," Humphrey said.

“Incredibly tedious duty,” Sophie said. “They kept asking the same things, over and over. I know an interrogation when I’m in one.”

“They weren’t interrogations,” Humphrey said.

“Just because they were too weak-willed to pull out the pliers doesn’t mean it wasn’t an interrogation,” Sophie shot back.

“What kind of life choices did you make?” Humphrey asked her.

“They weren’t choices, rich boy.”

“That brings us to the main topic of discussion,” Emir interceded.

“It does?” Neil asked.

“Indeed it does,” Emir said. “Miss Wexler, how much do you remember about your life before Greenstone?”

“Not much more than flashes,” Sophie said. “I was barely more than a toddler when we came across. I remember the shipwreck and being found by adventurers and taken to Greenstone. Things before that are just fragments.”

“Do you even know the name of the city you were born in?” Emir asked.

“No.”

“It was Kurdansk,” Emir told her. “In the People’s Holy Federation of Dreisil.”

Humphrey snorted derision in an uncharacteristic display of contempt.

“People’s Holy federation,” he muttered. “The more they try to make a nation sound free and righteous, the more tyrannical and corrupt it is.”

“You’ve been?” Neil asked.

“I was travelling with my mother, not long before I first received my essences. Our airship docked there to resupply and the port master extorted the captain for so-called docking fees. I wanted to speak up but Mother stopped me. Said that’s just the way it was, there. Bribes and graft, baked right into the civil structure of the city.”

“Have you not been to Old City?” Neil asked, Sophie nodding.

“At least the criminals in Greenstone have the decency to not pretend they’re anything else.”

“Did you not hear the Duke just made the surviving member of the Big Three crime bosses the mayor of Old City?” Neil asked.

“Adris Dorgan’s goal is legitimacy,” Humphrey said. “He needs to go straight in order to fulfil his ambitions. I don’t like it, but it will take someone like him going legitimate to get Old City’s into line after years of default criminal rule.”

“That’s an oddly reasonable position,” Neil said. “Your mother tell you that, did she?”

“No,” Humphrey said, his gaze flickering downward. “Jason did. Well, then Mother said the same thing.”

“Jason and your mother always did think alike,” Neil said. “She was classy, while Jason was... Jason, but behind the curtain, I think his mind worked a lot like hers.”

“I noticed that too,” Sophie said.

“You know, Humphrey,” Neil said, “your father might be lucky Jason’s not around anymore. I think we all saw where that thing with your mum was going.”

“Wha...?”

Humphrey puffed up with rage, his eyes going wide. Sophie reached over to place a gentle, restraining hand on his arm.

“Neil, don’t be an arse,” she said, turning to face him so Humphrey wouldn’t see her trying not to laugh. She turned to Emir, who was watching leisurely as Humphrey sat glaring at Neil, who sat with a chastised expression but laughing eyes. She forcibly put the conversation back on track.

“Emir,” Sophie said. “How do you know what city I’m from when even I didn’t?”

“Do you recall last week when I told you that I would like to dig into your background?” Emir asked.

“You’ve been doing it for six months, ever since we went into the astral space?” Sophie guessed.

“I have, yes,” Emir said. “If we’re going to catch the Order of the Reaper by the tail, we can’t just keep following the trail they’re marking for us. We need to find something they didn’t put in our path and you’re the only thing we’re confident about fitting that description.”

“So, what?” Sophie asked. “You want to send me to this city and parade me around until someone tries to kill or recruit me?”

“Our plans are a little more nuanced,” Emir said, “but, essentially, yes. We intend to go fishing, Sophie, with you as the bait.”

Humphrey leaned forward, his hostility switching immediately from Neil to Emir.

“What makes you think we’ll let you use our team member like that?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Neil agreed. “We’ve had our fill of sketchy plans with no margin for error. They’ve cost us enough already.”

“I realise that,” Emir said, “but—”

“I’m not sure you do, Mr Bahadir,” Humphrey said. “You never lost a team member. Your adventuring stories are hilarious anecdotes about fighting monsters with ducks or accidentally kidnapping princes while robbing royal treasuries.”

“Exactly,” Neil agreed, suddenly in lockstep with Humphrey. “Ours are about paying in blood and death so that our homes and families aren’t annihilated by some god monster’s version of a land grab,” Neil added.

“Down, boys,” Sophie said. They both turned to look at her, half out of their seats. She raised her eyebrows at them and they sat back down.

“I’m the bait in question,” she told them. “Let’s at least hear the man out.”

“Oh yeah,” Neil yelled with angry sarcasm. “Let’s all be human bait.”

He was sprinting alongside Humphrey through a maze of narrow alleys, dodging piles of rubbish and old crates as their feet moved rapidly across the rain-slicked cobbles.

“The choice was Sophie’s to make,” Humphrey yelled back. “Also, she’s not human. Neither are you, for that matter.”

“It’s an expression!”

“How about we get less arguing and more speed,” Sophie suggested. She was in front of them, lightly jogging backwards as she went slow to keep pace with the others. “I know you don’t have a lot of experience being chased but yelling loudly is not going to help. I suppose it’s the fault of your upbringing.”

They emerged from an alley onto a busy street, in the middle of a raucous parade. They slowed down and merged into the boisterous crowd, letting the flow take them away.

“What do you mean, upbringing?” Neil asked loudly to be heard over the parade.

“You two were brought up wealthy,” Sophie explained. “You were raised being told that you’d get everything you want by yelling loudly.”

“I believe,” Humphrey said, “that your prejudice against the well-to-do is showing, Sophie,” Humphrey said. “I cannot speak for Neil, but I was raised in no such manner.”

“Well, I can speak for me and I wasn’t,” Neil said.

“Then why is it that rich people always end up yelling loudly about the things they want when they aren’t just given them immediately?” Sophie asked.

“We do not!” Neil yelled, then slumped as Sophie gave him a pointed look.

“Perhaps some discretion?” Humphrey suggested. “We have not escaped yet.”

“It’s fine,” Neil said. “Everyone’s yelling. They’re not going to find us.”

“They found us,” Sophie said and started pushing her way back out of the crowd. Humphrey and Neil didn’t bother to look as they moved to follow.

“Was that strictly necessary?” Neil asked as he and Humphrey poured bottles of crystal wash over themselves. The yellow oil was rapidly purged from their bodies, which

were stripped down to simple pants and no shoes. It left their muscular bodies glistening wet, rather than looking like marinated slabs of meat.

“Yes,” Sophie said, her clothes still pristine. “Completely necessary.”

They were standing in a ramshackle wooden shed in the entertainment quarter of Kurdansk. Originally a warehouse district close to the Kurdan River docks, the large plots of relatively inexpensive real estate made it the most viable place for building large theatre halls. It was a heady mix of pleasure, criminality and money that made it a dangerous but alluring place where wealth and poverty collided.

Sophie blended in easily, especially given that her dark-skinned, silver-haired celestine ethnicity was the most populous race in the city. She was the one who found a way to disguise the companions who stood out much more, by flaunting, rather than hiding them.

“You did impressively well,” Humphrey told Neil. “For an elf, you have a surprisingly low centre of gravity.”

The muscular elf shot Humphrey back a venomous glare.

“What?” Humphrey asked innocently. “You want me to pretend I don’t have the might essence?”

“Yes,” Neil said. “Yes, I do. We were putting on a show.”

Humphrey turned to look at Sophie.

“Did it have to be oil wrestling?” he asked. “I’m still not sure that being half-naked and covered in yellow grease was the best choice of disguise.”

“It worked didn’t it?” Sophie asked. “I’ll show you the recording crystal later; you both looked completely different.”

“You recorded it?” Neil asked.

“No,” Sophie said quickly. “What I did do was receive several lascivious invitations for you two.”

“Really?” Neil asked. “What kind of women?”

“It was mostly men,” Sophie said. “Women prefer more of a sleek, lean body, instead of...”

She waved her hands at the two men whose torsos resembled inverted triangles made of abs and pecs.

“...all this. I mean, it’s not bad but you’ll find a lot of women will pick lithe over bulky. You look like a kilo of walnuts in a pair of quarter kilo bags.”

Neil looked down at his body.

“Walnuts?” he asked, then over at Humphrey. “Humphrey, do you wax your chest?”

“No,” Humphrey said hastily, shifting his gaze. “The oil probably made the hair fall out. Do you wax yours?”

“I’m an elf,” Neil said. “We don’t have chest hair.”

“Excellent work,” Emir said. “You flushed them out.”

“What is our next move?” Humphrey asked.

Sophie, Humphrey and Neil were finally safe in Emir’s cloud ship, floating above the city. Out of the low-magic region of Greenstone, the full functionality of his cloud ship was restored. It was docked to a taller example of the many towers in Kurdansk’s busy skyport.

“Your next move is to get out of the city,” Emir said. “They made an open move and we have their tail now. Your part in this is over.”

“Good,” Neil said. “My church has sent word. Asked me to join up with Jory while they have him running around isolated towns, teaching them to make cheap potions.”

“I thought he was working more like a lecturer,” Humphrey said. “What do they need you for?”

“He’s taking a direct approach,” Neil said. “The monster surge precursors are hitting these outlying communities hard and they need to be as self-reliant as they can with resources stretched thin everywhere.”

“They want to give Jory more protection?” Humphrey asked. “Won’t your church protect him?”

“We will,” Neil said. “He’s an important asset to the church. The Healer expects Jory’s work to help a lot of people.”

“Jory wants protection he can trust,” Sophie said. “Guards are fine but they won’t fight for you the way a friend will.”

Humphrey nodded.

“We’ll be parting soon, then,” he said. “At least, for a while. Which brings us back to the question of what is next for Sophie and myself.”

Sophie turned to Emir.

“Did you find anything out about my family here?” she asked.

“No,” Emir said. His aura didn’t betray the lie but that wasn’t how Sophie had learned to spot them.

“You owe me, Bahadir,” she said. “I talked my team into going along with this and you know why.”

“You need to be patient, Miss Wexler,” Emir said. “This is not an affair for bronze-rankers to dabble in.”

“Yet, you had no compunction about staking her to a tree and waiting for predators to sniff her out,” Neil said.

“Tell her what she wants to know, Mr Bahadir,” Humphrey said. “Unless you want my mother to come and ask.”

“I heard she reached gold rank,” Emir said. “Please pass on my congratulations.”

“I will,” Humphrey said. “Last time I spoke with her over water link she expressed an interest in coming to see how I was doing here. You know she never approved of this endeavour.”

“Are you seriously threatening me with a single, freshly ranked-up gold-ranker?”

Humphrey didn't say anything, simply giving Emir a wicked grin that startled Sophie. She had last seen it on the face of Jason Asano and it looked alien on the normally straightforward Humphrey. Even in her surprise, she didn't miss the subtle clenching of Emir's jaw.

“Fine,” Emir said. “Just don't do anything stupid.”

“What do you mean, gone?” Emir asked his acting chief of staff, Wilmont. Wilmont was an elf known for his unflagging composure.

“I did tell them that you would not like them disembarking,” Wilmont said. “I sent word to you immediately, of course, but Miss Wexler was not to be deterred, despite Young Master Geller's best efforts.”

“But he followed her anyway, of course,” Emir said, not asking.

“Indeed, sir. Young Master Neil remains aboard, preparing for departure. He will be transferring to the church of the healer's skyship quite soon.”

“At least tell me my granddaughter didn't try to follow them.”

“She did,” Wilmont said. “After the fact. As a member of the household, the staff felt more comfortable in more forcibly restraining Miss Ketis.”

Ketis was Emir's granddaughter, whom Sophie was training to use her martial arts, derived from a skill book, the way Rufus had once helped Jason. Emir hoped Sophie would be a more-or-less positive role model, which wasn't working entirely as intended.

“At least there's that,” Emir said. “You should have stopped the others too, Wilmont.”

“As Miss Wexler quite vociferously pointed out, Mr Bahadir, they are your guests, not your prisoners.”

“I meant stall them, not lock them up,” Emir said. “Constance would have done it.”

“Miss Constance is not here,” Mr Bahadir. “If I were as capable as her, then I would have already had her job instead of just filling in.”

Emir rubbed his hands over his face in frustration.

"I'm sorry," he said. "That was rude of me, Wilmont; I apologise. I just feel out of sorts without her by my side."

"Of course, Mr Bahadir. I am certain that Mr Morse will take pains with her wellbeing."

"Then you don't know Cal," Emir said. "He's a firm believer in strength through adversity. It's why she asked him to help her."

Emir's chief of staff, and the object of his affections, Constance, had taken a leave of absence from Emir's staff. She had left with Emir's old teammate, Callum Morse, with the intent of not returning until she reached gold rank.

After the trail of the energy vampire that possessed Thadwick Mercer went cold, Rufus Remore's parents continued the investigation while Callum returned to his usual activities. An avid monster-hunter, he was one of the few gold-rankers that obsessively worked to raise his strength with the unflagging enthusiasm of a low-ranker. He agreed to assist Constance who had renewed her ambitions for gold rank as the world grew more dangerous.

"He best bring her back to me safe and sound," Emir said, "or he and I will have words."

"You and he, sir?"

"Well," Emir amended. "Me, him and a bunch of gold-rankers I hire. I'm not an idiot."

"Would you like me to dispatch people in pursuit of Young Master Humphrey and Miss Wexler?" Wilmont asked.

"No," Emir said wearily. "I already had people waiting to follow them. They were obviously going to leave."

"Then, if I may ask, Mr Bahadir, why not have them stopped yourself?"

"I can't responsibly ask Sophie to let me put her in any more danger," Emir said. "If she insists on doing it herself, though, who am I to stop her?"

"Then why the exasperation, sir?"

"Wilmont, it would just be really nice, from time to time, to be surprised by someone making a sensible decision."

"If I may be so bold, Mr Bahadir; if what you are looking for is sensible, you may have chosen the wrong profession."