

Chapter 457

The Past Can Wait

To all appearances, Marta Fries was an unremarkable resident of the city of Kurdansk. Like many of Kurdansk's celestines, she had dark skin and silver hair. Her small row house was no different to the others wedged together on the narrow street where she lived.

The plain but powerful aura suppression bracelet on her arm hid her silver-rank aura but also impeded her aura senses, so she didn't sense the approaching bronze-rankers until they were close to her door. There was something unsettling about the celestine; a hint of familiarity that put Marta ill at ease. She didn't dwell on it or hesitate, immediately moving to her bedroom and pulling up the rug to reveal a trap door from which she took her emergency bag.

Mara pushed aside the wardrobe to reveal the removable wall panel that she herself had installed. It had gone unused for the two decades since her friend Melody had used it in the course of faking her death. Marta now used it herself, swiftly disappearing into the night. She never sensed the gold-ranker who quietly watched her emerge into the alley.

Sophie knocked again, this time hammering on the door with her fist.

"I don't think breaking this woman's door is the first impression you want to make," Humphrey told her. "I don't think anyone is home."

"If she knows something about my mother, I have to find out for myself."

"I understand that," Humphrey said, "but you can't conjure her into being by wanting it enough. You need patience."

She turned a glare on him and he met her gaze, unflinching.

"You've always been a realist, Sophie," he told her. "In a city full of hidden enemies is not the place to lose that."

She grimaced but gave a reluctant nod.

"We'll try again later," Humphrey reassured her.

"You needn't bother," a male voice said as the door opened in front of them. The man behind it had an unexpectedly familiar face.

"Mr Morse?" Humphrey asked. "What are you doing here?"

"The resident is gone," Callum Morse said. "She's not coming back."

"How do you know that?" Sophie asked.

"Because I watched her leave for good," Cal said.

“Are you tracking her?” Sophie asked.

“I am.”

“Tell me where she is,” Sophie demanded.

“No.”

“Why not?” Humphrey asked.

“Because you lack the strength to walk that road and I will not let you borrow mine long enough to get yourselves killed.”

“You’re going to keep that from me?” Sophie asked.

“Yes, he is,” a female voice came from behind. Another familiar face was walking up the narrow street behind them. It was Constance, Emir’s hitherto-absent chief of staff.

“You only got this far because Emir asked something of you that he had no right.”

“We agreed to it,” Humphrey said. “It was our choice.”

Constance shook her head.

“Miss Wexler’s motivation is clear and understandable,” she said. “You should know better, Mr Geller. You were raised better. Why would you go along with this?”

“Because she needs it,” Humphrey said, with a glance at Sophie. Constance waited for further explanation but all she got from him was a flat stare. She let out a weary groan.

Emir was in the middle of a massage when his very relaxed body went very tense.

“Sir?” the masseur asked.

Emir whipped himself off the table, snatched up a robe and threw it around himself as he almost skipped out of the massage room. The moment he had been waiting for had arrived as he sensed Constance returning to the cloud ship. She had reached gold rank and come home.

Emir didn’t even bother with an elevating platform. Remoulding the ship to open a hole under his feet and through the decks below, he dropped multiple levels. His robe was one of the things flapping around in his rapid descent to the docking chamber of the cloud ship.

“This is what you’ve been up to?” Constance scolded as Emir landed in a crouch.

“What was the rule about wearing pants in front of the staff?”

Emir looked up with a grin, which turned to a frown. Constance’s normally neck-length brown hair was cropped short and her pale skin contrasted unflatteringly with the light green and brown armour she was wearing. What perturbed him was not her appearance but the fact that she and Callum were frog-marching Sophie and Humphrey in

through the docking port, along with the embarrassed-looking people Emir had sent to trail them.

“What exactly is happening?” Emir asked.

“Do you seriously think that you should be the one asking that?” Constance asked. Emir had been longing to hear her voice, although not in that particular tone. “Using bronze-rankers as bait?”

“We made our own choices,” Humphrey said.

“You’re bronze-rank,” Constance said without breaking her gaze from Emir. “You don’t get to choose danger like that.”

Sophie deftly twisted out of the grip Constance had on her arm, turning to poke Constance in the chest.

“We chose to put our lives on the line and one of us died saving a city full of people,” Sophie said. “You want to shove us around, you’re gold-rank and you can. But if you denigrate what we’ve done and what it cost us then I will find a way to kick the crap out of you, gold-ranker or not. How’s your poison resistance?”

Callum snorted a rare laugh at Constance’s nonplussed expression while Humphrey grinned proudly. Emir did his best to mask his expression, with mixed results. Callum put a calming hand on Constance’s arm.

“They’ve faced their own trials and made real sacrifices, Connie,” he said softly. “They might be in dire need of guidance but we still have to respect that.”

“Wait,” Emir said. “Connie?”

“That being said,” Callum continued, ignoring Emir, “respecting their experiences is not the same as letting them run off and get killed.”

“What were you thinking, Emir?” Constance asked, turning to Emir once more.

“How do you even know what’s going on?” Emir asked her. “You’ve been gone for a year.”

“You think you’re the only one tracking the Order of the Reaper?” Callum asked.

“I did, yes,” Emir said. “Everyone is looking at the Cult of the Builder, now. Adventure Society, governments, everyone. Are you saying you’re running your own game? Why on your own? Why not throw in with me?”

“Because you aren’t my only loyalty, Emir,” Callum said. “I’m part of the Cult of the Reaper.”

“Since when?” Emir asked.

“Since always.”

“You never told us that.”

"I told Gabriel and Arabelle."

"Everyone on our team but me?"

"You have a big mouth, Emir. Especially when you aren't wearing pants."

Callum glanced over Sophie and Humphrey.

"Your judgement isn't always sound," he continued, "and you need someone to keep you in check."

"Like Connie, here?" Emir asked.

"Yes," Callum said.

"Do you even want me back?" Constance asked Emir.

"How can you even ask that," Emir said. "I just jumped down five decks with no pants."

"We all saw," Humphrey said. "Perhaps some clothes and a little time will give us a chance to discuss things more calmly."

"You haven't lost all sense, then," Constance told Humphrey. "You realise I'm going to tell your mother about this."

At that moment, Neil appeared via elevating platform, his possessions packed into the dimensional bag slung over his shoulder. He looked around at Emir in his robe, Sophie and Humphrey, Constance and Callum, plus a handful of Emir's silver-rank operatives trying to avoid anyone's attention.

"Did I miss something? I missed something, didn't I? Nobody tells me anything."

"There are trails to follow, but they're dangerous for you, as you are now," Callum told Sophie. "You're too weak and your team is scattered to the wind. Reach silver-rank, gather them together and I will give you what you need to take the next step."

"You don't have the right to keep knowledge of my family from me," Sophie said.

"But I have the power," Callum said, "and there is nothing you can do about it but wait. Concentrate on growing stronger."

"Surprise," Emir said. "The guy obsessed with getting stronger suggests you go get stronger."

Sophie, Humphrey, Neil, Emir, Constance and Callum were sitting in one of the cloud ship's secondary bar lounges, Emir now wearing clothes.

"If it were your family, how would you take someone keeping it from you?" Sophie asked Callum. Emir winced, breaking his gaze from where it had been locked on Constance.

"Not the approach to take," Emir told Sophie. "You and Callum have much in common when it comes to family."

"I understand your frustration," Callum told her, seemingly unfazed. "But I also know the price of letting your emotions drive you places they should not. So, I'm stopping you, until you are ready. Hate me if you like."

"That woman knew my mother," Sophie said. "And you let her go."

"She needs to go," Callum said. "You have brought attention onto her that will get her killed. She needs to disappear from more than you if she's going to live long enough for you to get your answers."

"I could have had them today," Sophie said.

"No," Callum said. "If not for the presence of Constance and I, you and she would most likely be dead, along with Emir's people trailing you."

"Then what do you expect us to do now?" Sophie asked. "Because I am done playing fish on a hook and I don't care about the stabby pricks of the Reaper."

"I'm a little curious about them," Humphrey said. "If you're part of the Order of the Reaper, why are you letting us run in circles hunting for them?"

"I'm not a part of the Order of the Reaper," Callum said. "The Cult of the Reaper venerates the principles of the Reaper. The sanctity of death."

"Sound like the church of Death," Neil said.

"We have long worked alongside the church of Death. Our values and objectives are often aligned. The Order of the Reaper is an offshoot of the cult. They started as a faction that wanted to become more active. Specifically, to accrue political power."

"That doesn't seem to fit what I know of the Reaper," Humphrey said. "Admittedly, that isn't a lot, but that shows how obvious it is."

"Yes," Callum agreed. "The order split from the cult, mouthing affinity to the Reaper while abandoning the principles that come with it. They became self-serving assassins until they overreached and were forced to falsify their demise. The so-called last bastion of the order, that you explored beneath Sky-Scar Lake, was part of a faction that sought to retain ties with the cult. They counselled reconciliation and were sacrificed for it."

"How do we not know this?" Emir asked. "Jason's Asano's familiar should have had this information."

"The shadow of the Reaper that administered the trials was a familiar from a time before the cult and the Order segregated. It was set in place when the astral space was a trial grounds for our youngest recruits, from whom our larger secrets were kept. I suspect

the order was careful in what they allowed him to learn, given that he was a part of the re-emergence plan taking place even now.”

“I don’t care about any of this,” Sophie said, standing up.

“Do not go out into the city looking for answers,” Callum warned. “They left with the woman who disappeared and all that waits for you now is death.”

Humphrey stood up as well.

“I don’t like it either,” Humphrey said.

“But you think I should let it go?” Sophie asked him.

“I think neither Mr Morse nor this city will give you the answers you want. But there are sources of knowledge greater than either of them.”

Constance put a hand over her face and groaned.

“Must you, Mr Geller?”

“This is my team, not yours,” Humphrey told her. “You can disapprove all you like, but we get to make our own mistakes.”

Vitesse, the city of flowers. Located in what Jason Asano would know as the French Riviera, its iconic skyline was marked by huge towers with flowering vines spilling down the exterior. Known as the garden towers, most had every third or fourth floor dedicated to gardens using water, light and plant magic to create lush refuges of peace towering over the city below. They were residences for the city’s wealthy elite, meaning aristocrats and adventurers, as well as headquarters for the city’s key organisations.

The Adventure Society and Magic Society both maintained entire buildings to themselves. The continental council for the Adventure Society sat in Vitesse, rather than the capital. The royal family maintained a tower as a palace, with most of the family residing there.

The Remore family had no aristocratic title, while the Gellers had only a title from the small provincial city of their origin, refusing all others. Neither family was begrudged their residences in some of the city’s premier towers, however. On a courtyard balcony thick with floral aromas, Danielle Geller was giving her son a disapproving look.

“I always intended for you to learn from Jason Asano,” she told him. “You may have learned some lessons I did not intend, however. I’m not sure I approve of this rebellious streak.”

“Yes you do,” Humphrey said.

Danielle laughed, not denying it.

“Where is Miss Wexler now,” she asked.

"The temple of Knowledge," Humphrey said.

"Good," Danielle said, nodding her approval.

"You aren't afraid she'll get information that will send us into danger?"

"Knowledge does not give you the answers you want," Danielle said. "She gives you the answers you need."

"Now is not the time to pursue this goal," Knowledge told Sophie. In the Vitesse temple of Knowledge's answer room, Sophie faced the manifestation of the goddess with the same boldness Jason once had. The goddess showed Sophie a different face to what she had shown Jason, now bearing the dark skin of the Vitesse locals.

"That's not the answer I came for," Sophie said.

"Yet, it is the answer you have received," Knowledge said. "The time will come when your companions are made whole. That will be the right time to seek out your past."

"My companions can't be made whole," Sophie said. "You know that."

"You would presume to tell me what I know? You are as insolent as Jason Asano, but not as adorable."

"Adorable?"

"It is time for you to go, Sophie Wexler. I will not set you on the path you want, but I do have one I think you will accept. The time has come for you to reunite with Clive Standish. He has found that the promises of those around him to be worth little and could use allies he can trust."

"Clive is in trouble?"

"He is making trouble. Whose influence is responsible for that I think we both know. Seek him out, Sophie Wexler, for the past can wait better than he."

The city of Greenstone was in the far south of the continent that, in Jason's world, was called Africa. Compared to the low magic, largely empty south regions, the north was much more populous. The city of Rakesh, on the north coast, was the home of the Adventure Society's continental council. It was just one part of a sprawling campus combining the largest Magic Society and Adventure Society strongholds on the continent.

Prani Ajus was a Magic Society official who had come to visit the astral magic research wing. One of the research wing's officials, Lorelei Grantham, spotted her and moved to intercept.

"Grantham," Prani said. "I have no need of you at this time. I am going to see Mr Standish."

"He's caught up in his latest round of research," Lorelei said. "You know what he's like. This might not be the best time."

"Grantham, are you covering for him?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Lady Ajus."

"If you are going to lie, Grantham, do me the courtesy of making it vaguely plausible. Mr Standish hasn't placed one of his insistent requests for fieldwork in more than a month."

"Perhaps he has come to accept that they will be rejected," Lorelei suggested.

"That's what worries me," Prani said. "I will not permit him to go off on some aimless, ill-conceived mission of vengeance over some unimportant dead man."

"We promised him he would have the chance to take the fight to the Builder."

"Which he will," Prani said. "Vicariously. That man has an extraordinary mind and I will not allow some cultist to put a hammer through it. Now, enough delays. Take me to Standish."

Lorelei reluctantly led Prani through the building to where Clive was supposed to be working. Opening up the door to his workshop, she was surprised to find that he was. Behind a glass wall was a ritual room where Clive was standing in the middle of an elaborate ritual circle. With him in the centre of the circle was a metal arch, engraved with runes.

The glass wall was designed to restrict any magic that might interfere with the rituals inside while allowing sound to pass through easily.

"Mr Standish," Prani said. "I would like a report on your current activity."

Clive turned from where he was examining the arch to look back through the glass.

"Oh, Lady Ajus. Hello, Lorelei."

"Mr Standish," Prani repeated. "What are you doing?"

"What I was told to do," Clive said. "I'm unlocking the secrets of the astral magic the Builder cult uses. This portal arch, for example, is part of a transportation network the cultists and their church of Purity allies use to move about without drawing attention from the may people hunting them down."

"Alleged allies," Prani corrected.

"Of course," Clive said with an insincere smile.

"And how are you progressing?" Prani asked.

"Well," Clive said, "why don't we find out?"

He pointed a hand at the arch and it lit up with rainbow energy. Prani yelled as Clive stepped through immediately and she slapped her hand against the glass, which

shattered. She dashed forward with silver-rank speed as the portal went dormant again in her face. She wheeled on Lorelei.

“Open it back up!” Prani demanded.

“I don’t know how,” Lorelei said. “I’m an administrator, not a researcher.”

“We’re in the astral magic research department,” Prani said. “Find someone who is.”