

## Chapter 262

### Ducking Responsibility

Arabelle and Emir were talking as they made their way through the cloud palace.

“Are you sure about this?” Emir asked. “I like Sophie, but she’s a damaged girl, in more ways than one. I’m not sure that she’s in a state right now where I want to entrust my granddaughter to her.”

“This is a good match,” Arabelle said. “Sophie lived a life where she couldn’t trust anyone but Belinda. A complete stranger came along and transformed her life, only to be snatched away as she was coming to terms with that. What she needs now is a place to channel everything that isn’t self destructive. Being responsible for someone else, the way Jason took responsibility to her, is exactly what she needs.”

“That’s fine, but what about the things my granddaughter needs?”

“Ketis is at a tricky stage, right now,” Arabelle said. “She got her essences so young, so she’s been waiting longer than most to get out into the world. She’s full of rebellious ideas.”

“That much I know,” Emir said, a long-suffering expression on his face.

“Sophie isn’t like the authority figures your granddaughter knows. Ketis is used to pushing around people who won’t stand their ground for the simple reason that she’s your granddaughter. They know how soft you are with her and are afraid to be harder. Sophie is not. She’ll provide the boundaries and life experience that Ketis needs right now.”

They entered one of the lounges to find Sophie drinking Emir’s expensive alcohol straight from the bottle.

“She’s also the kind of person a rebellious young girl can look up to,” Arabelle said.

Sophie nodded a greeting without putting down the bottle from which she continued to quaff. She finally lowered the half empty bottle, replacing the stopper as she looked over the bar.

“Where did this one come from again?” she muttered to herself.

“You can go ahead and take it,” Emir said.

“Nice,” Sophie said, slipping it into the dimensional pouch on her hip. “So what did you want to see me for?”

“Well, as you know better than most,” Arabelle said, “the experiences we have at iron-rank are important in shaping the adventurers we become.”

“Is that why you turned out the way you are?” Sophie asked Emir. “You said something about a giant metal duck, right?”

"You told her that was at iron-rank?" Arabelle asked Emir.

"Probably," Emir said. "It was probably what she needed to hear at the time."

"You should never take what Emir tells you at face value," Arabelle warned Sophie.

"I know the type," Sophie answered with a sad smile. "So he wasn't iron-rank?"

"No," Arabelle said. "In fact, it was the very last job our team did together."

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Emir crawled out of the mud hole, Gabriel and Arabelle crawling out after him. They found Cal waiting for them, as neat and clean as they were filthy.

"How do you always do that?" Emir asked.

"That's nothing," Cal said. "I've been in the real mud."

"What does that even mean?" Emir complained.

"There's little point in explaining," Cal said. "You're giving up the adventuring life."

"There's brown sludge packed into my underwear like I ate a bunch of clay and then soiled myself," Emir complained. "I'm gold rank; I haven't used a toilet in thirty years. If this is the adventuring life, I'll be glad to see the back of it."

The team made its way back to the cloud house, where the three mud-caked adventurers spent an hour in the shower. They vociferously expressed their gratitude at finding an array of food waiting, courtesy of Cal.

"So, how's it going, collecting the materials to upgrade the cloud flask?" Gabriel asked.

"The last of them should be waiting for me when we get back to Vitesse," Emir said. "Once I can turn this place into a nice big ship, then my storied career as a professional treasure hunter will begin."

"I can't believe anyone would hire you to find anything," Cal said. "Unless it's hidden in a brothel."

"You didn't hear, Cal?" Arabelle said. "Our sweet boy, Emir, has mended his sexually adventurous ways."

"I don't believe it," Cal said.

"This is what you miss when you pick up extra contracts instead of taking a break with the rest of us," Gabriel said.

"You don't get to diamond rank by taking breaks," Cal said.

"That's true enough," Arabelle said. "He really does seem to have come around though. He's met someone."

"Man, woman or fish?" Cal asked.

"Merfolk are not fish," Emir said. "They happen to be very sensual people."

“Very sensual fish people,” Cal muttered.

“It’s a capable young bronze-rank girl,” Arabelle said. “I quite like her.”

“Bronze rank?” Cal muttered. “Cradle snatching.”

“In all seriousness, you be careful,” Gabriel told Emir. “Cal’s not wrong that she’s young. Between the rank difference and the fact that she’s going to be working for you, there’s a lot of ways you could take advantage. Don’t let me hear that you did.”

“What kind of sleaze to you take me for?” Emir asked, only to met by three flat expression. “Oh, nice.”

“If you like this girl, be patient,” Arabelle said. “She’s not a match for you, right now. If she’s working for you, she’s not going anywhere. Give her time to come into her own.”

“How much time? I don’t want to be going around a decade from now, still mooning over her.”

“She’ll definitely have someone else by then,” Cal goaded.

“That’s fine,” Emir said. “Highly suspicious accidents happen every day.”

“No,” Arabelle scolded. “Bad Emir.”

“I’m not a naughty puppy,” Emir said.

“You kind of are, though,” Gabriel said, the other two nodding their agreement.

“See, this is why I’m retiring,” Emir said. “If all the people I’m working with are getting paid by me, they have to show me some respect.”

He looked to Gabriel and Arabelle.

“I know Cal won’t stop taking contracts, but what about you two? Will you callously replace me and get right back to adventuring?”

“Rufus is old enough to start training properly, now,” Arabelle said. “We’re going to step away from contracts for a while and be home for the next monster surge. We’ll be taking a more hand-on approach instead of just leaving everything to the academy.”

“I wouldn’t go expecting him to get his essences too soon,” Gabriel warned. “All the boys in my family are later bloomers.”

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The team returned to the village the mud monster had been threatening, only to find it disturbingly devoid of people. In their place, they found piles of mud throughout the village, which had the clothes of the villagers inside them.

“What in the world happened?” Gabriel asked, crouched next to a pile of mud in the mayor’s house. He fished out a necklace he remembered seeing around the mayor’s neck. “Did they all turn into mud?”

Cal turned, looking through the wall.

“There’s someone here. He’s skilled; I can barely sense his aura.”

The team went out onto the street. The man there was wearing sandy coloured leathers with numerous tribal markings sewed in. They were designed to blend in with the tattoos on his skin. He was an elf with stark white hair, reddish skin and golden eyes.

“Greetings,” the elf said. “Did you kill the mud lord that was inhabiting this region?”

“If you mean the awful mud monster in a hole in the woods, then yes,” Emir said.

“I have been pursuing its progenitor,” the man said. “An emperor ooze.”

“Are you from the Walsh tribe?” Cal asked.

“You recognise our markings,” the elf said. “I am Brian, son of Kevin.”

“As in, Kevin, son of Jeremy, son of Dennis?” Cal asked.

“That is my father, yes,” Brian said.

“You come from a strong line,” Cal praised.

“I am proud to trace my lineage all the way back to Jeff, Lord of the Hunt,” Brian said.

The team introduced themselves.

“I have heard the Remore name,” Brian said. “It is said that you raise fine warriors.”

“Do you know what happened to the villagers here?” Arabelle asked.

“There were never villagers here,” the man said. “They were homunculi of the mud lord.”

“Then why would they send for the Adventure Society to come kill it?” Gabriel asked.

“Only the truly capable can defeat a mud lord in their lair,” Brian said. “They like to call the strong to fight them, then consume them to grow stronger. It seems that you were more than it could handle, however. You have my respect.”

“I’d rather have your soap,” Emir said. “You don’t have any crystal wash, do you?”

“Again with this?” Gabriel asked.

“It was your job to stock up the potions,” Emir said. “I very specifically reminded you that we were low on crystal wash.”

“You have a magical cloud house with crystal wash in the shower water!”

“Diluted crystal wash. It isn’t the same.”

Arabelle gave Brian an apologetic smile while Cal ran a frustrated hand over his face.

“So this isn’t a real village?” Arabelle asked.

“I told you it was weird that all the buildings were new,” Cal said.

“I intended to recruit aid before challenging the emperor ooze that produced the mud lord you fought. You have proven yourself capable and I would be honoured if you would join me in my quest.”

“Actually, we were just about to head back to... ow!”

Emir was cut off by Cal stamping on his foot.

“Are there magic spikes on the bottom of your boots?” Emir asked.

“The honour would be ours,” Cal said to Brian, ignoring Emir. “To fight alongside a warrior of the Walsh tribe is a privilege.”

“We’d be happy to help,” Arabelle agreed.

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As Gabriel’s attacks threatened the ooze emperor’s core, the ooze minions melted back into puddle shapes and rapidly flowed in the core’s direction. They formed a thin, gelatinous barrier around it that reformed with every attack.

“Get ready,” Brian called out. “I’ll expose the core to let you finish it off!”

No longer attacked after the sudden retreat of the oozings, Brian took the opportunity to pour powdered iron onto the ground in a circle. He quickly finished the summoning and an enormous iron duck rose from the circle, earning a sceptical eyebrow raise from Emir.

“That thing looks ridiculo...”

The iron duck let out a sound that was a quack by way of an earthquake, the air shimmering as noise blasted out in a tsunami of force. The continuous barrage of sound struck like a fire hose streaming full bore into a jelly dessert, splattering ooze everywhere. As the cacophonous blast finally subsided, a V-formation of iron mallards swooped into the hole that had been burrowed in the ooze emperor’s protective sheath. They each let out smaller sonic attacks of their own before exploding into metal fragments, the accumulated damage once more revealing the ooze emperor’s core.

Gabriel and Emir didn’t waste any time, dashing forward into the hole in the monster that was already starting to close. They destroyed the core and the ooze lost all cohesion, rapidly liquefying. Inundated in the dissolution of the ooze, Gabriel and Emir were washed up at the feet of their companions like bedraggled sailors from a shipwreck. Emir got to his feet, looking at himself with disgust as he shook his arms to fling off goo.

“Tell me again about how it doesn’t matter than you forgot to get more crystal wash?” he asked loudly, ears still ringing from the thunderous quack.

Gabriel tried to get to his feet, slipped on ooze and fell over again.

“I think I may have to acknowledge the point,” he conceded laying in the stinking residue.

Brian ignored the mess to wade in and help Gabriel to his feet.

“You are a credit to your name,” Brian said. “You fight well.”

“Thanks,” Gabriel said. “You too.”

“Okay, this time I’m *really* done with having adventures,” Emir said.

“You are giving up the path of the warrior?” Brian asked.

“Damn right,” Emir said. “I’m going to be a treasure hunter. Professionally. For money. Plus treasure.”

“Uncovering hidden secrets, unravelling ancient mysteries and exploring unseen horizons,” Brian said. “An admirable way to spend a life.”

“Nice,” Emir said, pleasantly surprised. “This lot think I’m a quitter.”

“Warriors claim the glory,” Brian said, “but who builds the homes they live in? Sing the songs of their deeds? Each of us must find their own path and contribute in our own way.”

“You know, I like you, Brian,” Emir said. “Have you ever considered treasure hunting in a subordinate capacity?”

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Rufus led Ketis into the lounge as Emir was wrapping up his story.

“Emir was just telling Sophie about how she met Brian,” Arabelle told her son. Whose face took on a grimacing smile. “He told her they met while he was iron-rank, but you were iron-rank when you met Brian’s son, right?”

“Yes,” Rufus said flatly. “Yes, I was.”

“Why don’t you tell us about it?” Arabelle asked sweetly.

“Mother...”

“Son...”

Rufus sighed.

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Although Roland Remore was rarely spotted on the Remore Academy campus, the presence of the diamond-rank arch-chancellor was always felt. When he did make an appearance, it drew all eyes. Whenever he acted personally, the ramifications were much discussed.

Most recently, he was rumoured to have personally brought in some boy from the remote countryside to join the academy. Roland Remore looked like a well-preserved forty, a tenth of the reality. He was tall, strong and handsome, with a round bush of dark, curly hair and a neatly trimmed goatee. Walking behind him was a boy of fifteen, wearing plain leather hide and sandals.

Rufus Remore was the prince of Remore Academy, the talented heir apparent to the power and prestige of his family legacy. He was lounging in the duelling courtyard with his friends, watching the friendly matches. He didn’t bother to participate as there was no one there who posed a challenge. He wasn’t going to go punching down.

Everything stopped the moment the arch-chancellor appeared, no one paying attention to the boy moving in his wake. Rufus immediately leap to his feet, rushing to respectfully greet his grandfather, although he would not address him as such on campus.

“Arch-chancellor,” Rufus greeted, bowing his head.

“Just who I was looking for,” Roland said. “Rufus, I’ve brought in young man to join the academy.”

Rufus looked at the boy for the first time. He was a white-haired elf, packing more muscle than most of his race. He could sense the boy’s aura, in the early stages of iron-rank but well controlled. Rufus felt a familiar pang of jealousy at the boy’s youth, having had to wait until he was nineteen before his body was ready to accept essences.

“I thought,” Roland continued, “that there would be no better way to introduce him than a friendly spar with our finest student.”

A susurrus went through the crowd of students looking on. The arch-chancellor personally bringing a stranger to fight Rufus Remore was the kind of event everyone not present would be sore over missing.

Soon, illusionary doubles of Rufus and the boy were in one of the courtyard’s arenas, their bodies inert on nearby on projecting platforms.

“I exhort you all to watch closely,” Roland announced to the gathered students, as if there was even a single one whose eyes were not glued to the spectacle. “I believe that this will be an important lesson for all.

“I am Rufus Remore,” Rufus said formally as he conjured a golden sword.

“I am Kenneth, son of Brian,” the boy said, calling out his summoned familiar. It was a duck.