

Chapter 459

What Could Possibly Go Wrong

“Well?” Lady Prani Ajus demanded as she stormed into the large research room in the astral magic research department. Lorelei Grantham was there, along with a half dozen researchers poring over the notes left behind by Clive.

“We found something that Cli... that Standish left behind,” Lorelei said. “He obviously wanted it to be found. It’s a means to track portal network activity. It only gives vague locations but we can use it to at least partially monitor Builder cult travel. This could be a critical asset against the Builder cult.”

“Does it cover the theory behind the operation of the portal network?” Prani asked.

“No,” Lorelei said. “It’s a practical guide to tracking. He left us a valuable assent for—”

“Irrelevant,” Prani said. “There are people all over the world looking for ways to fight the Builder cult. What matters is unravelling the secrets behind the advanced magic they use. While the other branches waste time fighting a war that will be won sooner or later, we’ll be pushing ourselves ahead for once the war is done.”

Lorelei looked at Prani with disdain.

“Do you have a problem, Vice-Dean Grantham?” Prani asked.

Lorelei choked back the bile-filled response struggling to escape.

“No, Ma’am.”

“Carli was much more approachable than I expected,” Sophie said. “That’s not what I expected from a dragon at all.”

“Everybody needs friends they can be relaxed with,” Danielle said. “My family have been companions to Carlivexistrix since we first came to Greenstone. Her last child is still running around with my diamond-rank ancestor somewhere, as far as I know.”

They were standing in the precisely cultivated gardens of the Magic Society campus, waiting for Clive and Belinda. Thus far, they had the distinct impression of being given the runaround. Instead of Sophie and Humphrey’s team members, what they got was a stern-looking Magic Society official. Humphrey and Sophie moved to meet her, while Danielle remained where she was, casually examining a water feature.

“You’re Standish’s team members?” the official asked. “I am Lady Prani Ajus.”

She spoke to Sophie and Humphrey, but her gaze lingered uneasily on Danielle.

“Also Belinda’s team members,” Sophie added.

“Why is it that no one will so much as tell us where they are, let alone lead us to them?” Humphrey asked.

“The situation is complicated,” Prani said, earning a derisive snort from Sophie.

“The situation is shady as shi—”

“Sophie!” Humphrey barked, cutting her off. “I apologise, Lady Ajus, but I hope you can take it as an expression of our frustration.”

“I’m afraid that Mr Standish is currently engaged in a delicate matter,” Prani said. “He won’t be available for contact for some time.”

“Porky pies!” puppy Stash yelled out. “Stick it up your bum, lady.”

“Stash!” Humphrey scolded. “Who taught you to talk like that?”

“Telling people to bugger off is kind of my thing,” Stash said proudly. Humphrey and Sophie went stiff at the reminder of their lost companion.

“Lady Ajus, I apologise,” Humphrey said after an awkward moment. “We will take our leave.”

Prani’s expression showed exactly what she thought of the group’s lack of decorum, but again her gaze glanced over Danielle and she said nothing, turning and walking away without another word.

“What do you two think you’re doing?” Humphrey hissed at Sophie and Stash as they walked back towards Danielle. “What did my mother tell you about decorum?”

“That woman just lied to our faces.”

“Yes,” Humphrey said. “And how effective do you think your approach was in helping us find Clive? We’ll probably need to leverage Mother’s influence, which will not be made easier when the people she contacts hear about our behaviour.”

“You mean my behaviour,” Sophie said.

“No, I mean our behaviour,” Humphrey told her. “We’re a team, Sophie. We stand and fall together.”

They reached Danielle, who gave them a casual look.

“You will need to learn to control your impulses better,” she told Sophie.

“No I don’t,” Sophie said. “I need to get powerful enough that when some woman tries to hide my friends from me I can hold her upside down and shake her until she talks without people getting all whiny about it.”

Humphrey very carefully didn’t smile. His blank expression didn’t fool his mother, who gave him a weary, disapproving head shake.

“Power,” Danielle said to Sophie, “is certainly an intrinsic part of being an adventurer. As you rise through the ranks, however, you will find that so is diplomacy. This is why you're still only a one-star adventurer.”

“What do we do now?” Humphrey asked. “Head for the local Geller family and have them apply some pressure?”

“I think we should hear out the priest first,” Danielle said.

“Priest?” Humphrey asked.

“Behind us,” Sophie said. Humphrey turned and spotted a cleric in church of Knowledge regalia walking towards them.

“Good day, sir priest,” Humphrey greeted. “I am—”

“He knows who we are, Humphrey,” Sophie cut him off. “Church of Knowledge, remember?”

“Miss Wexler is correct,” the priest said, taking a small tube from within his robe and holding it out for Humphrey to take. “My goddess simply asked that I deliver this.”

“What is it?” Humphrey asked.

“The current location of Clive Standish and Belinda Callahan.”

The priest bowed and retreated without saying any more.

“What was that about?” Sophie asked as they watched the man turn and hurry away.

“If Knowledge seeks you out,” Danielle said, “it’s because she knows where you need to be.”

Humphrey opened the tube and pulled out a map.

“Somewhere south of here,” he said, looking it over.

“Well, good luck,” Danielle said. “I’m going to teleport back to Vitesse.”

“You’re not helping?” Humphrey asked.

“There’s only so much time I’ll willing to spend coddling my son. You can teleport yourself around just fine, so I’m going home. I have my own affairs to take care of.”

Humphrey looked down at the map in his hands.

“This is the middle of nowhere. I can’t teleport there.”

“Neither can I,” Danielle said. “You think I’ve been to every random patch of wilderness and can just teleport wherever?”

“Kind of, yeah,” Sophie said as Humphrey nodded his agreement. Danielle shook her head in exasperation.

“Ask Carlivexistrix to take you,” Danielle told them. “Her territory is to the south and she’ll be leaving today.”

Humphrey’s eyes went wide.

“Riding a dragon?”

Humphrey threw out his arms and let out a whooping noise.

“You’re going to fall off,” Sophie yelled so he could hear him over the rushing wind as the dragon underneath them rocketed through the air.

Carli’s true form was that of a vast and majestic dragon, whose scales were not just rainbow colours but shimmered and changed in a magnificent display of beauty. Humphrey and Sophie sat side by side on her broad back without any form of harness, just an oddly grippy blanket Carli had provided them.

“Are you really going to act like this isn’t amazing?” Humphrey yelled.

“It’s just flying, Humphrey.”

He looked at her with a disbelieving expression.

“No one is that jaded,” he told her. “You won’t break if you admit to having some fun, you know.”

He gestured around them at the vast desert panorama expanding in every direction below, with white sand, yellow stone and the winding line of blue and green that marked the river and the narrow strip of fertility it brought.

“It’s alright to admit to enjoying something,” he told her. “It won’t stop people from thinking you’re very tough.”

Underneath them, Carli jerked once then again, leaving Sophie pressed up against a mortified Humphrey.

“Sorry,” Carli’s rumbling dragon voice cut through the wind. “Air pocket.”

“I don’t see how you aren’t angrier,” Belinda said. “They were holding you prisoner.”

She and Clive were riding a skiff through a desert river canyon that towered over their heads. It was magically propelled but not especially fast. Clive had chosen it at the small village they bought it from because the low magic profile made it harder to track if they were being followed.

“From their cultural perspective,” Clive said, “they were acting within appropriate boundaries.”

“So you think it’s fine?”

“They lied to me, lured us into their territory and kidnapped me,” Clive said. “Of course that’s not acceptable, which is why I escaped. I won’t say I’m not disappointed in the Magic Society, but we can’t blame the whole organisation for the actions of a few.”

“That’s crap,” Belinda said. “The fact that you even think like that is how it keeps happening. After Greenstone and Rakesh, have you ever been to a Magic Society branch that wasn’t shady as shi... what is that?”

Belinda pointed at two figures moving through the air above the canyon. They were both mostly human-shaped, although one had huge wings. She and Clive extended their senses and then both broke out in grins.

“What are they doing here?” Clive asked. “How did they even find us?”

Sophie and Humphrey glided down through the canyon, Humphrey with his wings and Sophie riding the air. She alighted onto the skiff with no more impact than a falling leaf while Humphrey's landing almost tipped Clive over the side.

“What was that?” Sophie demanded after Belinda had righted the boat and Clive had recovered.

“It wasn’t my best landing,” Humphrey sheepishly admitted. “I’m more used to dropping down to attack things.”

“Like Clive,” Sophie said.

“I wasn’t attacking Clive.”

“It looked like you were attacking Clive.”

“I wasn’t attacking Clive!”

Clive and Belinda shared a glance as they watched the pair. With the skiff stabilised, Belinda stood up and snatched Sophie into a warmly returned hug. The last few months was the longest time the pair had been separated since they were children.

“We’ll lodge protests with the Adventure Society and Magic Society branches when we reach another city,” Clive said. “I’m not going back to Rakesh any time soon.”

“You should,” Sophie said. “We should burn down that Ajus woman’s house.”

“I’m in,” Belinda said. “It’s probably made of stone but there’s magic. We’ll figure it out.”

“No one is burning down anyone’s house,” Humphrey said.

They were in the courtyard of a tavern at a riverside town, deciding on their next move.

“Maybe we could go find Jory,” Sophie said. “Sounds like he could use some help. Neil’s probably with him already.”

“Jory?” Belinda asked, sitting up straight in her chair. “He told me he was going to be giving out lectures, not fighting. He should have let me know.”

“When was the last time you got a letter from him?” Clive asked. “It’s possible Lady Ajus was intercepting our mail.”

“I think we should revisit the burning her house down plan,” Belinda said. “We should take a vote.”

“We keep following the river to the border city of Oleyu,” Clive said. “Until we get there, we’re still in the Rakesh Magic Society branch’s area of influence.”

“There will be a temple of the Healer there,” Humphrey said. “We can find out more about Jory’s situation from them.”

The city of Oleyu was unremarkable. It wasn’t as big and important as Rakesh or Vitesse, or unusual like Greenstone. It was a pleasant, prosperous and moderately sized city built on river trade, with a mid-range level of magic.

Clive, flanked by Sophie and Humphrey, was in the Magic Society building lodging a protest over his treatment by the Rakesh branch. He wasn’t optimistic about results as the Rakesh branch was one of the most powerful on the continent. Any official with authority stationed there had power and connections, so any consequences they faced would come from the Adventure Society, rather than other Magic Society branches.

The Adventure Society didn’t take kindly to its members being exploited, but for a bronze-ranker like Clive, it would take time before his complaint was given attention. As the monster surge precursor signs grew worse and the Builder cult remained a threat, inter-organisational conflict was a low priority.

Belinda, meanwhile, was contacting Jory through a water link chamber. Communicating through watery clones was the most accessible form of long-distance communication and a major use for the magical stone that Greenstone exported. The green stone of the chamber Belinda was led into was a reminder of home.

She stood on a small platform in front of a water pool and waited. It took a few minutes before the water flowed up into the shape of a person. The water took on colour until a somewhat wobbly replica of Jory stood before her, the blank expression turning into a grin as the connection was formed.

“Lindy!”

She smiled at him, about to answer but he started babbling.

“I was so relieved when I heard you were alright. After you didn’t respond to my last letter I tried contacting you but the Magic Society said that you were on some job with Clive and couldn’t be contacted. I kept trying to get in touch but they stopped listening to me altogether. I was about to try contacting Emir Bahadir to see if he could help but –”

“You do realise this chamber lets both of us talk?” she interrupted. Jory let out a sheepish laugh.

After regrouping in the private dining room of a high-end tavern, Belinda explained Jory’s situation to the others.

“Jory isn’t doing anything dangerous,” she said. “He’ll just be in some isolated rural areas where his guards will need to handle monsters they come across. The areas are all low magic, so he should be fine. Mostly bronze and silver-rank monsters.”

“That might not be the case if these monster surge precursors keep getting worse,” Humphrey said. “Joining him might not be a bad idea.”

“I’m not against it,” Belinda said, “but I think it would be better off with only me joining Jory and Neil.”

“We just met up,” Sophie said. “You want to run off again straight away?”

“You’ll get bored senseless playing guard duty, Soph, and you know it’s good that you haven’t had many chances in life to get bored. You know what happens.”

“You’re blowing things out of proportion,” Sophie said.

“Am I? Remember Charles and the moss cat?”

“How was I meant to know it wouldn’t grow back?” Sophie asked.

“It was growing off of a cat, Soph. It very obviously wasn’t a real tomato.”

“It wasn’t a real cat!”

“I believe Belinda’s point,” Clive said, “is that she thinks you’ll do better working with me.”

“On what?” Humphrey asked.

“I’ve been working on something that might help us catch the Builder cult by the tail,” Clive said. “I’ve managed to tap into the portal network that the Builder cult has been using to move around.”

“That’s amazing,” Humphrey said. “That will be a huge weapon against the Builder.”

“If I can use the information the way I think I can,” Clive said. “Every request I made to do reconnaissance and field testing was denied. I eventually realised that the Rakesh Magic Society wasn’t interested in the fight against the Builder. All they want is access to the cult’s advanced astral magic, which is what they really recruited me for.”

“The Adventure Society will take a very different view,” Humphrey said.

“Yes,” Clive agreed, “but after Rakesh, I’m not willing to take that on faith. They might dismiss me as just some bronze-ranker from a provincial city. I want to walk into the Magic Society with everything on a plate, so they can’t push it aside.”

“Will we get to kick the crap out of some cultists?” Sophie asked.

“She means will we *have to* fight any cultists,” Humphrey corrected.

“If everything goes right, then no,” Clive said. Then an uncharacteristically malevolent grin crossed his face. “And what could possibly go wrong?”