

## Chapter 458

### Dragon Lady

Belinda followed the signal of her magical device into a dusty desert gulch, a few dozen kilometres south of Rakesh. She roamed around, looking for the source of the signal. She and Clive had only been able to get an approximate location from the Magic Society campus and it was taking days to narrow it down.

"Where is the stupid thing?" she muttered, part of an ongoing stream of disgruntled commentary. "Roaming the whole damn desert. Sand in places that sand is not supposed to be."

The heat was not harmful to her bronze-rank body, but harmless was not the same as pleasant. After much searching, she found an old mine tunnel, filled with rocks and overgrown with scrubby bushes to disguise it. She used one of her powers, counterfeit combatant, which enhanced her strength and allowed her to toss out the large rocks.

She tossed out a light stone that floated over her head and followed the tunnel into the yellow stone rock face. It led to a chamber that she doubted was ever part of the mine. It was too large and the floor was worked smoother than any non-magical tool could manage. In the middle of the room, a portal arch was set into the floor.

Taking out some chalk, she started drawing a ritual circle.

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The Magic Society campus in Rakesh had magic in place to prevent portals from operating outside of certain designated zones. It was when Clive discovered that he was barred from those zones that he discovered exactly how 'insistent' the Magic Society was about his remaining on campus and focused on the tasks they fed him.

It seemed mild at first, as if they simply wanted him to be working as hard as possible. His repeated requests to conduct fieldwork were denied and his escalating attempts to leave the campus revealed that he was a prisoner in all but name. It felt like a stark betrayal from an organisation to which he had given a third of his life, even if he was no longer an association official.

Clive had always assumed that the Magic Society in Greenstone was an outlier in its corruption, courtesy of the man at the top. Now it seemed that the stain appeared in many places and many flavours. In Rakesh, where society was divided into castes, they apparently saw little problem with holding someone they felt lowly enough against his will.

Since he was barred from any area his portal power would work, Clive was forced to make other arrangements. No one suspected that the portal network that the Builder cult

used operated on such different principles to an essence user's portal that it would not be subject to the campus defences. The defence magic impeded the cult portal network, but with the right boosting rituals at both ends of a portal, passage could be opened up. Clive recorded this in his personal notes but left it out of the ones he made for the Magic Society.

Clive's assistant, Belinda, was not subject to the same restrictions as Clive. On the contrary, she was responsible for taking care of anything Clive needed done off-campus. She was not watched as carefully as Clive, the caste system that justified holding Clive leading them to dismiss her as unimportant. They did try to check any materials she brought in or took out, but she had a personal storage space. Even the Magic Society couldn't peek into that without killing her first.

It took the better part of two months for Clive and Belinda to devise and execute their plan, from making certain he understood the portal functionality, to building a device that could track down another portal to use as a destination. The biggest risk factor was the time between when Belinda set out to find the destination portal arch and when they activated it. If anyone looked into why she hadn't returned to the campus for however long it took, the whole plan could have come crumbling down. In the end, Clive had been forced to make a move he did not want to make.

Lorelei Grantham was the Vice-Dean of the astral magic research department, as well as the person who had recruited Clive out of Greenstone. Clive was fairly certain that the misrepresentation of what he would be walking into was perpetrated on her as well as him. Believing the lies herself made her pitch more authentic. Seemingly remorseful, she had paid close attention to Clive in the subsequent months, frequently shielding him from the attentions of Lady Ajus and other officials very interested in the research they pushed on him.

Clive took a large risk by trusting Lorelei to cover for Belinda, especially since he told her very little of what he was up to. Belinda had repeatedly warned him against trusting anyone, suggesting that Lorelei had been expertly playing him from the start. He wasn't entirely sure that trusting her was the right move right up until he escaped through the portal, right in the face of Lady Ajus.

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Immediately after stepping out of the portal, Clive and Belinda started eliminating the ritual circle around it to prevent anyone from following him through.

"We should leave immediately," Clive said as they. "There's a chance that someone there could devise a means to reopen the portal from the other end."

"Then why did you send me out to a hole in the side of a desiccated nowhere?"

Belinda complained. "I have sand and dust in places where neither are welcome."

"We had to make sure the arch was both abandoned and intact, for one," Clive said.

"All I could tell from the other end was that it hadn't been activated in years. I could have been damaged or obstructed."

"You think they can follow us without the ritual circle on this end?"

"I postulated a couple of ways it could be done before settling on this way," Clive said. "I didn't include them in my public notes but I'm far from the only good astral magic researcher they have. I rejected those methods because there's a solid chance they would extend the transmission time of the portal."

"Meaning that after you went in, it would take longer before spitting you back out?"

"Possibly," Clive said. "Another possibility is that I would have emerged from the destination arch over the course of several minutes."

"Does that mean what I think it means?" Belinda asked.

"If you think it means my body slowly oozing out of the portal like slime being pushed through a cheese grater, then yes."

"I think avoiding that was a good choice," she concluded.

"Agreed," Clive said.

They finished up and Belinda led him out through the mining tunnel. Belinda tossed out a floating glow stone while the tall Clive was forced to periodically duck his head under wooden support beams.

"I hope Lorel— Miss Grantham doesn't get in too much trouble," Clive said.

"She's probably in charge of trying to catch you," Belinda said. "You and Humphrey are way too trusting of authority figures. You don't have to be as suspicious as Sophie, but maybe take after Jason a little."

"Actually, Miss Grantham helped me cover for your absence," Clive said and Belinda stopped moving down the tunnel.

"What?" Clive asked, also stopping.

"What did I tell you right before I left?" Belinda asked him.

"To make sure I go to the right portal and don't land in a cultist camp."

Belinda gave him a flat look.

"Not to trust Miss Grantham," Clive sullenly admitted.

"And what did you do?" Belinda continued the interrogation.

"You were gone for nine days. That wasn't going to go unnoticed."

“You sent me to a portal hidden in an abandoned mine, lost in the middle of nowhere.”

“We needed one the cult and the church of Purity wasn’t using,” Clive said. “Every other portal arch in range was in active use. The point is that Lorelei covered for us. She even stalled Lady Ajus while I was activating the portal, all without ever asking what I was up to.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

Belinda rubbed her chin thoughtfully as she stared at Clive.

“I guess she wasn’t faking it,” she mused.

“Faking what?”

“The way she...”

Belinda looked at Clive, seeing genuine confusion in his face.

“You didn’t notice?” she asked.

“Notice what?” Clive asked.

“The way she looked at you.”

“What about the way she looked at me?”

Belinda gave him an incredulous look.

“Oh, that poor girl.”

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The Pallimustus equivalent of the Mediterranean Sea was called the Gramid Passage. Due to the absence of an Arabian Peninsula, Israel and Palestine, it directly connected what Jason knew as the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. Danielle teleported Humphrey and Sophie across the Gramid Passage from Vitesse to Rakesh.

“We shouldn’t keep Carlivexistrix waiting,” Danielle said. “She’s showing us a great courtesy, coming to meet us like this.”

“Clive would go mad seeing her,” Sophie said.

“She’s not a festival attraction,” Danielle admonished. “Clive will have to live with the disappointment.”

Humphrey produced floating platforms for the trio. They were flat metal disks, only just large enough to stand on. It was a common sight to see essence users riding them about as Rakesh had a sufficient level of magic to support their operation. In low-magic Greenstone, only people like Clive and Belinda, who possessed the appropriate essence ability, could use similar devices.

Humphrey had been using them since he was a child, having travelled widely with his mother. Sophie had learned to use them during their holiday in the city of Pranay, after their first excursion in the astral space that would later claim Jason's life. Seeing her stare at the platform in her hands, Humphrey realised her thoughts and placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. She reached up to cover it with her own in a gesture of thanks, gifting him one of her rare smiles.

She shook off the malaise and they got moving. The buildings of Rakesh were desert stone, plastered and painted in colourful murals. It reminded her of the Cavendish district in Greenstone that was similarly styled, especially the neighbourhood people called the Rainbow Road. Unlike the mishmash of colours in Cavendish, the murals of Rakesh were both far more expansive and far more coordinated. Travelling through the streets was a soothing passage as each district's dominant colours graduated into the next.

Activity on the streets was busy but quiet, the local culture valuing calm decorum. It was a stark contrast to the raucousness of Greenstone's Old City where Sophie grew up. Most people were on foot or using animal-drawn carriages, their normal auras marking them as the teeming citizenry of the populous city. Essence users used floating platforms, either standing ones like the trio rode on or more elaborate models. Some were simple seats on a slightly larger platform, while others were ostentatious floating palanquins.

"Sophie, be sure to manage your behaviour in this city," Danielle warned as they glided along the streets on their float platforms. "Civic order is given much more precedence here than in most places. The culture is based around strict social hierarchies and respect for authority. Divergence from that is strictly punished, both socially and legally. There are allowances made for visitors, but visitors find themselves swiftly positioned in the hierarchy by their background and behaviour."

"We're only bronze-rank adventurers," Humphrey warned her. "That means a lot less here than in Greenstone. Mother is gold-rank and has already accrued some prestige here, so defer to her."

"The Geller name is also worth something here," Danielle said. "It will help us, but we must also be careful not to tarnish it."

Danielle led them to a large area surrounded by a park of pleasant gardens and long, winding pools. Many people walked along or floated over the pathways, the park serving as a major junction for city travel. Dominating the park at the centre was a vast building with multiple wings. It was not painted but made of a rich white stone, topped by golden domes.

Sophie and Humphrey followed Danielle as she made for one of the wings, approaching a pair of huge double doors, already wide open. Inside was a large atrium filled with plants that sat in pots, grew from wall alcoves and even hung from the high ceiling, either growing out directly or sitting in hanging pots. Doors led off in multiple directions and a pair of sweeping staircases curves up to the left and right.

"What is this place?" Sophie asked, looking around. There were no people at all inside.

"I told you that this city is fixated on hierarchy," Danielle said. "This is a place for those who trying to place in a hierarchy would be an insult. Diamond rankers, mostly, but not exclusively."

A door opened and a woman came walking out, a toddler waddling alongside, holding her hand. She had the ageless beauty of the magically preserved, with milk chocolate skin typical for the local human population. The toddler let out a yelp, pulled his hand free and started running across the floor, wrapping his arms around Humphrey's leg in a hug.

"Biscuit!" the toddler yelled.

"I haven't seen you in months and that's all you have to say?"

"Biscuit please!"

Humphrey shook his head.

"Did you enjoy spending time with your mother?" Humphrey asked.

The toddler transformed into a small bird and flapped up onto Humphrey's head, where he started chirping.

"You can't say this about your mother!" Humphrey scolded, throwing an apologetic look at Stash's mother, who was now standing next to Danielle and looking on in amusement. There was more chirping from Stash.

"My mother doesn't make biscuits either," Humphrey said, "but you don't see me calling her that."

"Can you understand his chirping?" Sophie asked.

"Unfortunately," Humphrey said. "The advantages of his being a bonded familiar instead of summoned."

Stash started chirping loudly.

"I don't have any biscuits," Humphrey said.

After some more angry chirping, the bird flew off Humphrey's head, transformed into a little grey puppy in midair and landed in Sophie's arms. She took a biscuit from her jacket pocket and slipped it to him, which he happily munched on.

"You're going to spoil him," Humphrey told her.

“Sophie is the best!” the puppy said and Humphrey narrowed his eyes at it.

“Since when can you use people talk in animal form?” Humphrey asked.

“I can’t!” Stash insisted, spilling crumbs. “Er... woof?”

Humphrey ran a hand over his face and turned to Stash’s mother.

“Carlivexistrix, I apologise,” he said. “I’m not doing the best job of helping your little boy grow up.”

“Oh, that’s just how they are at that age,” Stash’s mother said. “You should have seen Danielle, here. Your mother was an absolute terror. Also, please call me Carli.”