

## Chapter 877

### Something That's Inside You Already

The famous towers of Vitesse looked like living skyscrapers. With flowering vines covering the walls and plants dangling from the balconies, they were the reason Vitesse was called the City of Flowers. Not only were they beautiful but the magical flowers filled the air with sweet aromas.

On a high balcony of a tower belonging to the Geller family, Sophie was leaning into Humphrey as they sat together on a couch.

"You're leaving?" he asked.

"It's not just like that, Humphrey. We've talked about this."

"You never set a date."

"And now I have," Sophie said.

"When exactly?"

"When this conversation ends."

He wrapped his arm around her a little tighter.

"You need a shock, Humphrey. You're human. Your natural advantage should have you advancing faster than everyone but Clive."

"I am advancing. My essence abilities are—"

"What about your dragon essence?"

He slumped.

"I'm not a dragon," he said quietly. "I'm a lot of things, but I'm not that."

"I'd ask if you even listen to your mother, but we both know the answer to that. It's not about you being a dragon. It's about the dragon essence bringing out something that's inside you already."

"And if I don't have anything it wants? Most people never get to gold rank."

"This is why I'm leaving. I like that you can be soft around me, but it's not what you need right now. You're never going to find the dragon inside when you insist on being the little spoon."

Humphrey cast a worried glance at the door.

"It makes me feel safe," he whispered.

"I know. But what you need isn't to feel safe. It's for everyone else to feel in danger. Power. Dominance. These are what make a dragon. You're kind and compassionate, and I love you for that. But you're also righteous. Maybe that is the path to finding the strength you need, I don't know. What I do know is that my presence isn't helping. And I have my

path to follow as well. You're not the only one who needs to indulge their essences if they want to reach gold. The wind needs freedom. I have to go where I will, unfettered by anything that might tie me down. At least for a time."

"Is that what I'm doing? Tying you down?"

Sophie shifted from her place next to Humphrey, sliding into his lap where she could grab his face in both hands and kiss him.

"Of course you're tying me down," she told him. "I want us to be bound to one another, which is why I agreed to marry you. But we will live very long lives, Humphrey Geller, and there will be times to be together and times to be apart. We just aren't used to it yet because we're young."

"You've been talking with my mother."

She flashed a mischievous grin.

"Does that scare you?"

"Extremely," he told her, and pulled her in for another kiss.

"Do you have to go right now?" he asked.

"Jason has started hitting gold rank with his abilities."

"How do you know that?"

"The light in his soul realm. It's turned gold a few times now."

"Your mother told you?"

"Yeah. Farrah and Travis set me up with one of their communication devices that you can carry around and still connect to the network. That way I can still talk to her while I'm on the move."

"And to me. We have a communication node here in the tower."

She stood up.

"No, Humphrey. Not until you've found your way with your dragon essence. I don't want to give the communication tablet back to Farrah, but if you reach out to me, I will."

He grimaced, but nodded.

"Alright," he conceded. "Go, then. But go knowing that I love you, and if you stay away too long, I am going to come find you."

She smiled and leaned down for a kiss.

"There's my dragon."

Then she was gone, a breeze stirring up the scent of flowers. Humphrey sat for a long time, looking out at the other flowering towers. It was a typically gorgeous day, with only a few fluffy white clouds marking the vibrant blue of the sky.

A weight plopped down on the couch beside him. It was Stash, unusually in his natural dragon form. It wasn't his natural size, which was close to that of a winged elephant. He was more graceful than those lumbering beasts; sinuous and lithe, with iridescent scales that made him shimmer like a rainbow. His full scale was not convenient for sitting on a couch, however, so he was currently the size of a medium dog.

"Everyone is like that," Stash said.

"Like what?"

"Everyone has their own stories about dragons. Some people think we're unseen guardians, endorsing their claim to the throne. To others, we're little more than intelligent monsters. Terrorising the countryside and sleeping on a hoard of treasure. Demanding the occasional princess."

"You're saying that's not what you do with your time?"

Stash poked out a forked tongue at Humphrey, who laughed.

"The point is," Stash said, "that dragons aren't what people tell them they are. Dragons are what they want to be. And yes, if what they want is princesses and piles of gold, then you damn well better send them a wagon full of cash and tied up royalty. Sitting here and letting Sophie tell you what to do isn't how a dragon would do things."

"But letting her go is what I want."

"You don't sound convincing."

"I don't like it. But what I want is for her to be happy. I will do everything in my power to see she gets everything she wants and needs. And if letting her go is what she needs right now, then I can do that. She's been talking about going off and following the wind for a while now. We all have to find our own ways to gold rank. I just wasn't expecting it to be so sudden when she did. I don't know why she did that."

"It's because you're a slow burn," Stash told him. "You don't make emotionally manipulative arguments like Jason does. You wear people down by being decent at them. If she gave you time, you'd probably convince her to stay."

"When did you become so insightful?"

"I've been watching you people for most of my life. Did you think I wasn't paying attention?"

"Well... yes."

"That's hurtful."

"Sorry."

"You being shamelessly callous doesn't matter."

"Shamelessly callous?"

“Shut up and listen. What’s important now is what you do next, and you have to do it like a dragon. You have to decide what you want to be, and what you want to do. Then you do it, and don’t let anyone stop you. Look at Jason. Gods don’t stop him. Death doesn’t stop him. If he thinks something needs doing, then it gets done.”

“Then he should have had the dragon essence.”

“He’s not the one who needs it! You think your mother picked your essence combination on a whim? Everything she does for you and your sister is to give you what you need. And what *you* need is some dragon. Stop being what you think you should be, or what other people want you to be. Don’t even be what you think you *need* to be. Dragons don’t do what they need; they do what they want.”

“What if they don’t know what they want?”

“They do. They always do. Maybe they aren’t ready to admit it to themselves. Maybe they can’t explain what it is, exactly. But they know. They feel it.”

“What if I don’t feel it?”

“Don’t give me that crap. Even I know what you want.”

“You do?”

“Think about when you’re standing at the front of the team. When you’re the last barrier between some god-awful monstrosity and a village full of people who’ll die without you. Tell me you don’t feel like you’re exactly where you’re meant to be in those moments.”

“That’s just being an adventurer.”

“Yeah,” Stash said in the tone of someone explaining something obvious to an idiot.

“Yeah, it is.”

“That’s it? You’re saying it’s that simple?”

“Yes, it’s that simple. Because I hate to break it to you, but you’re kind of simple. Not stupid, but simple. You’re not like Jason, always conflicted over whatever nonsense he’s got in his head that day. You want to know what’s right and to do what’s right. That’s all you’ve ever wanted.”

“Okay,” Humphrey said thoughtfully. “Let’s just say, for the sake of argument, that what you’re saying was resonating with me. What do I do with that?”

“You live your life. You do what you want, and gods help anyone who gets in your way.”

“That sounds like dangerous thinking.”

“Dragons *are* dangerous!”

“I don’t want to be dangerous.”

“Yes you do! You just want to be dangerous to the right things. Monsters. Villains. People who make unsweetened shortbread.”

“What?”

“I know, right? You wouldn’t even think that was something people did. I mean, you have to mess with the recipe until it isn’t even really shortbread anymore.”

“I think you may have wandered off topic.”

“Huh? Oh, sorry. But you see where I’m going, right? When you’re with Sophie, you want to be soft, like a jelly cake. But with your enemies, you want to be hard. Like a tray of biscuits some damn fool left in the oven too long, even when you specifically told them to—”

“Stash.”

“Sorry. The point is, you don’t need to overthink this. You’re not that complicated. We both know that what you want is to do the right thing in any given situation. When you know what that is, don’t let anyone stop you. Anyone. Don’t let Jason make you doubt yourself, or your mother convince you she knows better. You’ve seen her make mistakes.”

“And if I make mistakes?”

“Of course you’re going to make mistakes. When you do, you do your best to fix them. This is not hard to figure out.”

Humphrey ran a hand through his hair.

“I need to think about this.”

Stash let out a groan.

“Why do people who aren’t dragons always overcomplicate things? If you aren’t talking yourselves into what you were going to do anyway, you’re talking yourselves out of what you were never going to do anyway. You should just decide what you want to do and do it. Like me.”

“If all dragons did that, you’d have a cave somewhere with a massive hoard of biscuits.”

Stash’s eyes darted left and right.

“I definitely don’t have one of those,” he said.

“I know. If you did, then you wouldn’t need to make money helping students with more money than sense skip their classes.”

“You, uh... you heard about that?”

“I did. And we are going to have a talk about you *not* doing whatever you want.”

“Look, you have a lot to think about, so I’m going to go.”

In a blink the little dragon was gone, vanishing over the edge of the balcony.

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“Your first ability hit gold?” Farrah asked as she looked up at the night sky.

“It did,” Clive said. “My perception ability, of course.”

“Congratulations. The others will follow soon enough.”

They were on the roof of the main administrative building of the Magical Research Association, Vitesse branch. It was a modest campus, especially compared to that of the older and more established Magic Society. There were still a few signs of vandalism, although that had mostly stopped. The courts had been quite punitive after the Magic Society were proven to be behind most of it.

“Travis’ idea of using satellites has solved the problem of monsters attacking the relay towers,” Farrah said. “I can see why they stuck with the water link system for so long. Monsters don’t block off rivers all that often. There are a few monsters that fly that far out from the planet, but space is big and we can afford to lose a few. Rather than monsters bringing them down, we’ve lost more to the Magic Society.”

“I have some more information on that. Estella confirmed they are making progress on replicating your satellites.”

“They want to set up their own network?”

“Yes. The Magic Society has had control of long distance communication for centuries with the water link. They don’t want to give it up.”

“I was discussing the idea of them making their own network with Travis. He said that even if they successfully replicate the technology components, which is far from a given, they have no understanding of orbital mechanics.”

“What are orbital mechanics?”

“It’s the theory related to non-magical aspects of how the satellites stay up. The non-magical stuff is his area, not mine. He’s been talking about getting me into something else, though. A new project, now the communication network is out of the research stage and into rollout.”

“What kind of project?”

“One that he said might help me get to gold rank. If I can get my head around the non-magical theory behind it. You know, that kid’s a lot like you, Clive, just with his science instead of magic. He has his area of expertise, but I suspect he’s also better than most in a lot of different areas.”

“Having the enhanced memory that comes with magic helps,” Clive said. “It would be a considerable advantage on Earth. If they got their essences early enough, were

dedicated to their studies and were fairly smart in the first place, I imagine they could be quite impressive.”

“He’s a little more than fairly smart. When it comes to research, anyway.”

“What else is there?” Clive asked and Farrah shook her head.

“That priestess has him wrapped around her finger,” she said.

“Gabrielle? Humphrey’s former lover?”

“Yeah. In fairness, her intentions seem honest enough. It’s not a surprise to see a priestess of Knowledge interested in someone merging the knowledge of two worlds. She’s just a little too religious for my liking.”

“She’s a priestess, Farrah. Being religious is the entire point.”

“I suppose. And the church was a big help on this project. They were very keen on a new way to disseminate knowledge.”

“What was that you were saying about helping you get to gold rank?”

“Right, yeah. It might surprise you to learn that spending all my time researching a magical communication device hasn’t done wonders for advancing my volcano essence.”

“I’m startled.”

“But now Travis is talking about something called geothermal energy,” she said with a sigh.

“You don’t sound excited.”

“Yeah, well, it sounds promising enough that I might have to actually learn more science theory. It’s like learning magic theory all over again. I thought I was done with learning.”

“We’re never done with learning,” Clive said. “Learning is the best thing there is.”

“I’m starting to see why your wife gets around so much.”

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Vitesse had many shopping districts. In one of the canal districts there was a patisserie called ‘The Pastry Stash.’ A bird flew in through an opening in the roof, turning into a person when he was inside. He went into the front where the manager, Janice, was working with the counter staff to handle a gaggle of customers. She saw him gesturing and headed into the back of the shop.

“What is it, boss?” she asked.

“We need to hide the tunnel better. Good enough that gold rankers can’t find it.”

“Boss, I’m going to ask why. Again. The illusions and warding magic we have on there now cost more than six months profit. And we’re doing really well; we make a lot of profit. I’ll remind you that Miss Farrah said that scaling up any more than what we have

already would be multiple times more expensive. Is it really worth it when there's nothing down there but baked goods and food stasis enchantments?"

"Yes!"