

Hannah found Isra and Verity mildly annoying as a couple, but at least some of that was because her very good advice seemed to have been silently ignored. And it was going well *now*, at the start of things — or continuation, given that in practical terms they'd been dating for weeks without admitting it — but when the trouble came, they wouldn't have given themselves the tools as a couple to handle it. Neither was terribly good at communication, and in both cases it was a matter of how they were raised. Isra just didn't have anyone, and Verity had likely been punished or ignored whenever she attempted to say something emotionally honest.

The whole thing had encouraged Hannah to speak more openly with Marsh, not that she'd ever really held back with him. For the most part he'd seemed delighted by what she had to say, mostly because she'd caught a case of feelings for him. She'd badgered him when he was circumspect about his own feelings for her, as she didn't want to be the only one pouring her heart out, and he'd eventually said that yes, he'd fallen for her, which had made her feel so warm and gooey that it was almost sickening.

It was easy to get wrapped up in another person, but she did her best not to let it affect her life too much.

"We've got a potential buyer for most of the theater stuff," said Alfric in the morning. It had been about a week since they'd crawled out of that miserable dungeon. "Out in Plenarch. I actually have an aunt in the city who'd like to see me, and we could spend the night with her, though it might be cramped with the five of us."

"I can't," said Verity. She'd been getting up earlier in the morning, Hannah had noticed, perhaps because of how her sleep schedule had adjusted after the dungeon, or maybe because she was sleeping next to someone who woke early. "I have to be putting every waking hour toward practice. I'm not ready for the concert, but it's happening whether I want it to or not."

"Fair enough," said Alfric. "It doesn't need to be all of us. I was thinking that with the helmet, it's not more than four hours by flight, and it might be fun to see the city, or to get some necessary business done."

"Four hours?" asked Mizuki. "Blegh. I like flying, but that sounds horrible." She had pen marks up and down her arms, doodles, and it seemed to catch Hannah unaware every time. It was ridiculous.

"It's worlds better than any other method we have," said Alfric. "And if you're not the one to fly, then you'll be spending time in the stone." He turned to Isra. "I'd like you to come along and help with negotiations, plus it would be helpful to have you do some dragon talk with some of the bastlekeepers there."

The herb dragons were a point of contention in the group, though Hannah herself wasn't overly invested in them. There were emotional arguments about the dragons being their pets, and there were also economic arguments about whether or not they were worth keeping for long enough that they might breed. Alfric didn't strictly speaking want them gone, but he did see them as something of an obligation, and worried about feeding them in the winter, though that was far off.

"I'll come," said Isra with a glance at Verity.

"Who is the buyer anyway?" asked Mizuki.

"Koyama Nesk. She's a speculator," said Alfric. "Not someone who would use the stuff herself, just someone who thinks she can sell it on for a reasonable profit. I spoke with her by mail, and she didn't agree to buy the whole lot, but she did give a prospective offer on the basis of what I described to her." He was smiling slightly.

"Give us the number then," said Hannah. "And given how you're grinnin' like a schoolboy, I assume it's a good one."

"Four hundred thousand rings," said Alfric.

There was some stunned silence around the room. That was well in excess of what they'd been expecting, and even split five ways, that was as much as some people made in a year.

"It's not final," said Alfric, holding up a hand. "And she hasn't even seen what we have. But it *is* a pretty decent offer."

"Pretty decent?" asked Mizuki. "It's *amazing*."

"It's the first offer," said Alfric. "It's also from someone looking to resell, and in practical terms it's local. We could get more by cutting out the middle man, or going further afield. I sent a letter to the Ellusifé but haven't gotten word back from them yet, and might not get more than a brief reply stating that they're not interested." He turned to Verity. "It might be nice to have your help with that? Talk to your mother, so she can mention it to someone she's in contact with?"

"Mmm," said Verity. "I — I'll do that, yes."

"Good," said Alfric.

"Plenarch has a big magic school," said Mizuki. "I might go there, if we're going to be in the city for the day."

"Mizuki," Alfric began.

"I'm not *enrolling*, I just want to see if there's anyone who can tell me whether it'll be worth it," said Mizuki.

Alfric looked like he wanted to argue the point. "So long as it doesn't impact the schedule."

"Any word from your guild about *why* we got the Ellusifé?" asked Hannah. "Or the League?"

"Nothing that bears repeating," said Alfric. "One of the reasons that I wrote to the Ellusifé was so we could get some comparison to the real place, but again, there's been no response, and there's been more than enough time for them to have gotten my letter and replied back."

“And the stuff that doesn’t bear repeatin’?” asked Hannah. “I’m writin’ a chapter for my would-be book about our time in that theater, and it would be nice to know why we got somethin’ special.”

“There have been a few scattered cases of near-clones,” said Alfric. “There’s no common denominator though, and they’re *only* near-clones, not *actual* clones. And even when they’re near-clones, they’re typically representations of things that exist within the hex, not distant things or things that are in the minds of the dungeoneers. Everyone seems to agree that it’s important, but they don’t agree on whether they expect it to be repeatable. I’m finding it frustrating and disappointing.”

“You felt like it would revolutionize dungeoneering,” said Hannah.

“I still do,” said Alfric. “But we’re going to need to run more dungeons to test it, and,” he looked at Verity. “I want to give you time, I know this is income that your family needs to weather a seizure. Do you think you can squeeze in a dungeon each week while the concerts are ongoing? Because if you can’t, we’re taking almost a month off.”

“Sorry,” said Verity. She tilted her head back and let out a sigh. “Yes, a dungeon a week, but they can’t last more than a day, and I really do need to keep the distractions to a minimum.” Hannah saw a downward quirk of Isra’s mouth, which passed by without comment.

“Then I’m getting ready to go to Plenarch,” said Alfric. “In theory, we’ll only be gone a day and a night. I do have to warn you that my aunt is a little eccentric, even by dungeoneering standards, but she means well.”

“Can we get some context on this eccentricity before we meet her?” asked Hannah. “I don’t want to make a fool of myself.”

“Unless it’s better as a surprise,” said Mizuki.

“We had that long talk about thinking monsters in the dungeon?” asked Alfric. “She — I was told that it was impolite to say that she collects them, but she runs a small institute. It’s in Dondrian, not Plenarch, but she might have a satellite office there, I’m not entirely sure and didn’t ask.”

“Wait,” said Mizuki. “What?”

“Sorry, she doesn’t go into dungeons looking for them,” said Alfric. “She actually doesn’t go into dungeons at all anymore, and, er, doesn’t think that people *should* go into dungeons. But if you go into a dungeon and you fight some kind of thing that seems like it might be a thinking creature, and then you find some kind of babies that aren’t affected by dungeon madness, you can bring them to her, and she — or her institute — will try to raise them and give them proper lives.”

Mizuki’s eyes had gone wide. “That’s crazy.”

“Okay, so maybe it was good that I brought this up before we went,” said Alfric. “Saying that it’s crazy is *probably* not what you want to go with.”

"I didn't mean *crazy* crazy," said Mizuki. "But it's — I mean, what happens to them when they're adults?"

"The goal is that they go live in society," said Alfric. "In practice, most of them are housed within the institute for the rest of their lives, because they're unfit for society in one way or another."

"And we'll get to meet some of them?" asked Mizuki.

"You don't want to," said Alfric. "There's a good chance my aunt won't mention it at all, but there's also a good chance that if you give her any kind of encouragement, she'll talk your ear off."

"Well I actually *do* want to meet some," said Mizuki, folding her arms.

"You want to meet 'people' who are missing core functions?" asked Alfric.

Mizuki unfolded her arms. "I mean, kind of, yeah?"

"Alright, don't tell my aunt *that* either," said Alfric. "You know, maybe it's a bad idea to stay with her, we have the money for a hotel."

"She doesn't like her institute being like a zoo," nodded Mizuki. "Okay, those are good ground rules, I think I'll do fine."

"She was *also* a long-time dungeoneer," said Alfric. "Though she's a bit down on the profession overall, and I think part of why she extended the invitation when she saw the guild messages was that she wants to try to talk to me about it, but I'm not sure."

"I have some things to pack then," said Hannah. "I assume we're not doin' any dungeons while we're out there?"

"I might scout," said Alfric. "Go to the local League office and read some reports, that kind of thing. But no, we shouldn't do a dungeon without a full complement, especially if it's Verity we're missing."

Hannah internally cringed at that: in a team, it was best to maintain the fiction that everyone was equally valuable and irreplaceable. No one else seemed to pick up on how he'd worded it though, and it passed without comment.

They broke and went their separate ways, with third bell being when they'd meet at the warp. Hannah hoped that Marsh would contact her so they could meet up before she left, and not for the first time she wished that the marble she kept safely tucked in her pocket went both ways instead of just being for when he wanted to talk with her. She had been hoping that they'd get some kind of minor entad that would let them talk a little faster, but the entads for the most recent dungeon had been somewhat disappointing on that front, and were expected to bring in little money when they were eventually sold.

There had been a minor incident with the soup pot, in fact. Its power, which couldn't be shut off, was to instantly homogenize anything that went past the rim, turning it into indistinct slurry. In

theory this made it a very good blender, but it was simply too difficult to use and too dangerous to keep around. If you tried to stir pumpkin soup, the spoon, whether wood or metal, would be liquified and then perfectly distributed among the pumpkin. This applied to *everything*, including fingers, which Alfric had learned when he'd reached into the soup pot to clean it out. He had thankfully yanked his hand back before there was too much damage, but it was an object lesson in how dangerous an unknown entad could be, and how careful testing should be, at least in an ideal world.

For quite a while, Alfric tried to figure out how to use it in combat, but its weight and shape made it impractical no matter what he tried.

All the other stuff was — not *worthless*, but worth selling. Many of their entads had been sitting in storage though, waiting for a trip to a larger city or some use with other entads. They didn't have any particular need of money at the moment, and Hannah suspected that one of the reasons they were holding onto so many useless things was that Mizuki and Alfric had such strong affections for them, though each in their own way. The pen they'd found could write on skin, with the ink staying there, indelible, for six full days. It had been fun to play with, certainly, and Hannah had surprised Marsh by having his name 'tattooed' below her belly button, but she had a feeling that the pack rats were going to win out, and it would be kept in a closet somewhere until the end of time.

She did like the dirk though, and with the consent of the party, had taken it for her own. Cuts made with it could be mended later just by holding the two halves together, which was useless in combat, but quite helpful for the healing arts, though more because she could cut off someone's clothes than because she routinely needed to cut into people and try to get at whatever was wrong inside them. Besides that, it felt good to have a weapon that could be carried around in the day-to-day, something which wasn't true about either her weapon or armor.

As she was changing into a different outfit — something that would be more proper for the city, and for sitting in the garden stone for a few hours — she saw the 'tattoo' she'd given herself. It had been a little joke, but the way Marsh's face had lit up was very gratifying. If anyone else had seen it, she'd have been properly mortified, which wasn't something that happened to her often, but she'd liked hiding it there for him, and liked even more the feeling of him finding it.

When she was all packed, she went downstairs to wait for the others. She had an urge to leave Marsh a letter, but that was patently ridiculous, given that the marble worked across continental distances and they would surely be keeping in touch, along with the fact that she'd only be gone for a day.

<I'm ready,> said Alfric. <Everyone else?>

<In a bit,> said Mizuki. <Am I flying, or are you?>

<You said you didn't like flying enough to fly for four hours straight,> said Alfric.

<We can take it in shifts?> asked Mizuki.

<I wouldn't mind a shift,> said Isra.

<Fine by me,> said Alfric. <I've plotted out a course on the map, we'll be going in a straight line, it should be easy enough. And it's not like I'm looking forward to four hours in the air. Make sure that you've packed something warm, the wind can be a bit much.>

It took another fifteen minutes for everyone to get ready, which was mostly because Mizuki needed to pull out winter clothes, then also wanted to pack some 'quick' food for them. Once all that was done, they stepped into the garden stone.

In the week since they'd stripped the theater, Alfric and Mizuki had worked to clean out the garden and make some modifications. There was now a more permanent structure for the latrine, one that had been built from purchased lumber and put together with clever joinery rather than the use of nails. This was a new skill for Alfric, and he'd apparently put the thing together four times in undone days before doing it 'for real'. He had said that he planned to build a better living space for them, with simple beds, a crude kitchen, and a few other creature comforts. A week ago she might have said that he was planning too much, but if they were ever to have to overnight in a dungeon again, let alone longer, there were far worse things to spend time and labor on.

"I've been helping," said Mizuki. She had her hands on her hips and was looking around the area. "I think Alfric loves a project. A year from now, if we don't upgrade, this is going to be a mansion." She looked up in thought for a moment. <Alfric, do you want us talking over the party channel? I would hate to exclude you.>

<I'm fine,> said Alfric. <I'll let you know if I get bored.>

The trip went quickly, and during Isra's turn flying, Hannah even got in a brief nap on her bedroll. It didn't *feel* like they were flying through the air, it felt like they were killing time, and with the majority of the party in there, it was easy enough to find something to talk about. Conversation always seemed to go back in the direction of the dungeons, especially when Alfric was around, but that was alright, since Hannah spent a fair amount of time on dungeons herself.

They were nearly there when Marsh made a call via the marble, and Hannah held it with her sleeve rolled up, a now familiar habit.

"We're going to Plenarch today and won't be back until tomorrow," said Hannah. "Sorry."

Marsh's face fell. "I was hoping to see that tattoo again."

"You were hopin' to see me naked," said Hannah with a smile. "But I think you'll survive."

"Do you have time to talk?" asked Marsh. "Kell joined us today, we're gearing up for our first dungeon under the new management."

This was Marsh's preferred euphemism. The old management had been Lola, mostly by virtue of the fact that she'd brought in the money, but also, in part, because she'd replaced Alfric and naturally slipped into that role. Their new party leader was Grig, mostly because he was the one

putting the most effort into keeping the team together; Mardin was too aloof and Josen was too prickly.

"I can talk, but we're almost there, so I might have to cut you short," said Hannah.

"Josen is being an ass, more so than usual," said the image of Marsh on her forearm. "I've been trying to figure out why that is, and I've got a couple of theories that I want to run by you."

"I've never really met Josen," said Hannah. "So if you're askin' for my professional opinion as a cleric, it'll be woefully uninformed."

"Noted," smiled Marsh. "So my *first* theory is that he doesn't like Kell, which isn't that unusual, because Josen doesn't really like anyone, but maybe he hates Kell for being another wizard, or because they've already gotten into a few disagreements about the finer points of wizardry."

"Very possible," said Hannah. "But Kell knows how to disengage?" Kell lived in Pucklechurch, and had been around a few times, once to speak with Alfric about Vertex, the other times because Mizuki had invited him for meals.

"He does," said Marsh. "Which might be part of it?"

"Josen likes to butt heads," said Hannah. "He likes to have it out, even if he doesn't do that in particularly productive ways, so if someone doesn't have it out with him, he feels like he's being cheated, like they're not playin' the game."

"See," said Marsh. "I don't get how you do that, you say that you don't know Josen, but you *get* him so well."

"I'm just tellin' a story," said Hannah. "I *don't* know Josen, but I know people well enough and that's one way that a person could be: unfulfilled because they can't keep on with their patterns. Could be I'm completely wrong, and I wouldn't know, because I'm workin' off what you and Alfric have said about the man. Could be that losin' his arm was hard on him and he's snippy because he's worried it will happen again, could be that he's got some romantic trouble he's not sharin' with the group, could be that he feels put upon to be doin' the dungeon in the first place, could be lots of things."

"I should send a letter to the Church," said Marsh. "I should let them know how wrong they were about you."

"Yes, that would be swell," laughed Hannah. "They'd surely see the error of their ways and make me a bishop."

"I really do think you're marvelous," said Marsh.

<I think I see Plenarch,> said Mizuki.

<It should be pretty hard to miss,> said Alfric. <If your bearing is off, just go to the coast and look from there, it's in a large lagoon.>

“We’re done with the trip soon,” said Hannah. “But thank you. And I’m sure Josen will settle himself down. You said that he does well in a dungeon. With you up at the front givin’ him the protection he needs, you’ll do fine. You’re pretty marvelous yourself.”

He beamed at her, and for a moment she thought that he was about to say that he loved her, but instead, the image of him winked out.

<Landing now, everyone out,> said Mizuki.

They stepped out of the stone one by one and into the city of Plenarch.

Hannah somewhat wished that she could have seen the city from the air, but supposed that she would be able to take her turn with the helmet at some later time. The city jutted out into the lagoon, having been built on small islands that were linked together with stone bridges. It was protected from the waves of the Plenum Sea by the Hring Barrier, and the waters were calm, only the barest lapping of waves. The buildings were of two styles, with tall buildings of stone toward the center of the islands and shorter buildings with timber frames, often on stilts, out near the edges. There were a huge number of docks and boats, some of them smaller, but others that were massive affairs with huge sails or other means of conveyance, mostly used for fishing. The sails were dyed in reds and yellows, and a slight fishy smell pervaded the area.

It was a very familiar place for Hannah: this was where the seminary she’d gone to was located. She knew the streets better than she knew Pucklechurch, but it felt far less like home, and she had no particular plans to return to her old stomping grounds.

The chest sat on the dock Mizuki had landed on. It had easily kept pace as they’d flown toward Plenarch, zipping along through the trees and fields beneath them.

“This *is* Plenarch, right?” asked Mizuki. “It sure would be awkward to land in the wrong city.”

“It’s Plenarch,” said Hannah.

“We should warp,” said Alfric. “Then we want to go across Ibis Boulevard, then up Norbis Lane. That will take us to my aunt’s place, where we can settle in before we explore the city. I don’t think there’s a lot we need to do in order to get ready for the meeting with the buyer tomorrow, since we already have a written inventory.”

The warp was a busy place, though nothing like Dondrian, and after some movement and jostling they each briefly sat beneath a wide-brimmed hat which teleported them over to a different part of the city.

There were bridges everywhere, which Hannah quite enjoyed. There was something of Garos in a bridge, mostly because of the way the math worked out and the forces needed to be balanced for the purpose of physics. Most bridges were an arch, which was pleasing, since the parabola was a holy shape. Beyond that, bridging was also symbolic of Garos, the bringing of two sides together, the *calling attention* to two sides.



Most of the bridges in Plenarch weren't built with any explicit holy reference to them beyond the usual — no matching of stones, no patterns of symmetry, just what was dictated by the engineering. There was one exception to this, the largest bridge that connected the lagoon islands to the mainland, and Hannah glimpsed it every now and then as they made their way through the city. The center of it had a small temple above the roadway, accessible via stairways, and identical stained glass windows on every side. She had been there dozens of times, usually for small services, and she'd given her first sermon there, which she was sure she would find rambling and self-important if she heard it now.

The nostalgic part of her was thinking of food. The Plenum Sea allowed for plenty of fishing, and they ate fish more than any other meat. Wood-fed ovens were a common affectation in the sturdy stone houses, a sign of wealth and prominence, one often mimicked by those in wood houses, though much more carefully. Driftwood swept toward Plenarch from all over the Plenum, creating a nuisance on the seaward side of the Hring Barrier, and merchants sold it for cooking fires at a pittance. Hannah had learned to bake from her mother in Cairbre, using an ectad stove for incredibly consistent and even temperatures, but she'd cut her teeth on wood stoves at the seminary, where tending a fire was part of an *extremely* old religious ritual from the ancient ages. Keeping a fire symmetrical was no mean feat, but Hannah had been quite good at it.

The Ibis Boulevard was in a section of the city that Hannah hadn't visited too often. The street ran down the center of one of the lagoon islands that was large enough to have some proper soil and trees on it, ones which had been planted ages ago and likely supported by growthstones, as they towered above the surrounding buildings, spreading shade. The street they took off the boulevard was a quiet one, with hardly any foot traffic, and the houses were surrounded by sizable yards that were a rarity in Plenarch, a costly sign of wealth.

The house Alfric walked up to was, by his own admission, one he'd never seen before, and Hannah gave it a critical eye. It didn't fit in with the houses around it, the style not favoring heavy windows or brightly-colored clapboard shutters, and the roof didn't have the slant that kept snow off. The skin of the building was a dull tan, with none of the siding or brickwork that some of the others had. The *shape* of the house was odd, nearly a perfect cube if you imagined that it was partly buried in the ground, and when she looked at the windows, she realized that they were perfect squares as well. The faces of the cube were five by five, if it was a cube beneath the surface.

She wondered what it was like on the inside, and supposed that she would find out.