

Chapter 1031

The Wisdom Not To

The artificial structure around the sun was comprised of narrow strips that extended from hubs like the spokes of a wheel. Countless hubs and the arms extending from them formed a network that floated over the star like a flotilla city on a sea of fire. Team Biscuit took all this in as the cottage ship approached, the sheer distance making it take far longer than it had initially seemed.

By the time the sun was a wall occupying all the space in their sightline, they realised just how vast the artificial city was. The seemingly narrow arms that connected the hubs were not bridges or roadways, but sections of city that were dozens, if not hundreds of kilometres across.

“What do you call this?” Rufus asked. “A city? If what we’re seeing here wraps around the entire star, it has to be bigger than a planet.”

“Than planets habitable by most normal-rank species, yes,” Dawn confirmed. “There are more gold-rankers down there than there are people on Earth and Pallimustus combined.”

“And there are more stars like this?” Clive asked.

“Many more. The planets in the Imperium are the cradle, holding most of the low-ranking population. The sun cages are inhospitable to those below silver-rank, so most people move to the planets to raise families. Imperial labour laws are very generous in supporting this.”

“But there are some lower rankers here?” Neil asked.

“A handful. Mostly the children of those who are critical enough in their position that they are allowed exemptions. It’s dangerous, though. There are environmental controls, but there is only so much that can be done with a city located on a burning star. A system failure or a slip of protocol could kill bronze-rankers by the thousands in an instant. Even silver-rankers need to be careful. Health and safety laws require anyone below gold-rank to carry safety equipment in case of accident.”

Closing in on the city, the density of sky traffic increased. With most of the vessels looking technological, the cottage was an outlier, but not unique. A variety of other, more overtly magical transportation, would occasionally pass through their view. The city itself was a mix of enormous buildings, vast domes and enclosed tunnels. Glass and ceramic were the predominant building materials. The glass came in a rainbow of colours while the ceramic was mostly white, accented with bold reds.

Humphrey pointed out what looked to be a tower taller than most of the city's buildings. Shrouded in colourful light, it sprayed rainbows like water from a fountain.

"A wholly unnecessary extravagance," Dawn said. "An indulgence when the rest of the city exterior is so carefully regulated."

"The city design does seem very uniform for something so large," Rufus observed.

"Control of the city exterior is of maximal importance," Dawn said. "It has to be, given the environment. The domes are more eclectic on the inside, where most people live and work. Each dome cluster has its own look and feel. Different architecture, different climates. The local councils have a lot of control on the culture, and tend to specialise. The specificity promotes tourism."

"I'm guessing that outside of the domes, things are less safe," Rufus said.

"Outside of the domes are the industrial spaces, travel hubs and the like. Non-residential areas are marked with artificial auras, so people know which sections are safe for their rank. That way, you don't get silvers wandering into places that will kill anyone short of diamond-rank."

"You don't?" Belinda asked. "You can post signage all you like, you're still going to get people who are stupid, arrogant, drunk, or all three. You're telling me that no one goes where they shouldn't?"

"There are always fools," Dawn conceded. "There are safeguards and checkpoints to make sure children or the vulnerable don't wander where they shouldn't. As for the stupid and the arrogant, we live around a sphere of nuclear annihilation. It's a problem that solves itself."

"What is this city called?" Rufus asked.

"Fourth Ring," Dawn said. "In the early days of the Imperium, the first constructs around the stars were rings whose only purpose was to draw power. This was before the advent of the accumulator towers that could be plunged directly into the sun. This star was the fourth one to be used this way, and now it's the capital."

"Why not the first three?" Estella asked.

"The Imperium has a long history. There are sections of our past that need to be remembered, so that their sins are never repeated. Star-killer magitech has been outlawed for thousands of years."

"Star killer," Humphrey repeated. "As in, destroying the sun?"

"Yes."

"Why would anyone do that?"

“War,” Dawn said grimly. “Always war. In every society I’ve encountered across the cosmos, the ability to destroy develops faster than the wisdom not to. My home is no exception to this.”

“Speaking of which,” Sophie said, “this place makes our planet look like a shack in the woods. Couldn’t you throw a gold-rank army into some dimension ships and go smash all of Knowledge’s forces?”

“We could,” Dawn said. “And if I declared it so, we would, but that would open a dangerous door.”

“How so?” Sophie asked.

“For the same reason that diamond-rankers usually don’t intervene of Pallimustus,” Estella said.

“That is correct,” Dawn said. “The Imperium is not isolated in the cosmos, and for all our power, we are far from hegemonic. If the Imperium decides it’s going to intervene in some little conflict somewhere, then what is to stop anyone else? Colonialism happens, but the major powers must stay out of it or be ostracised. If they wish to extend their influence they must use proxies and supplemental forces. The cosmic pirates you defeated on Earth are quite typical. Inconsequential, expendable, deniable.”

“No galactic empire coming to the rescue, then,” Sophie said.

“Did you not watch any movies on Earth?” Belinda asked. “You *never* want the galactic empire to show up.”

“There are ways we can assist,” Dawn said. “We already are, as you will see soon enough, but we must be circumspect. It is the way things are done to avoid escalation. It also helps when dealing with a goddess who plucks every morsel of information from a person the moment they arrive on that goddess’ planet.”

The cottage ship approached one of the city hubs. As it drew closer, the team could see the design, which was an octagram with spokes branching off from the tips to connect with other sections of the hub network.

As the ship descended, it approached a building not contained under a dome. It was primarily white with red accents, typical of what they had seen elsewhere, but was exorbitantly vast. That one building could have contained most of the towns that the team had seen on their homeworld. On the roof of the flat building, a large symbol was set into it, in metal that blazed with reflected sunlight. It was an elaborately drawn octagram with a sunburst in the middle. As the ship approached, the roof split down the middle to slowly open, the sides rolling away into recesses at the building’s edges. Inside was a hangar

filled with vessels, from ornate and decorative to plain and aggressive, bristling with weapons.

"Look," Belinda said, pointing at one of the ships. "Doesn't that look exactly like the pirate ship that attacked Earth?"

Jason, Shade and Gordon stood on the moor, watching the freshly uncorrupted souls rouse to consciousness. Colin was once again out and in his blood clone form, looking like a red-eyed version of Jason. He was clearly unhappy, glared at their surroundings as if they somehow owed him money.

"Do souls in the afterlife normally sleep?" Jason asked.

"It varies by afterlife," Shade explained. "Some afterlives are unrecognisable to the sensibilities of the living. Others, like this one, are facsimiles of life. In such cases, the mimicking of biological processes is normal."

"Does that mean that all these people are going to wake up and be in dire need of the bathroom?" Jason asked.

"I do not know," Shade told him. "If that is the case, let us hope the facilities in that castle are robust."

The army of former undead were a wildly eclectic bunch, both in outfits and in species. There were giants in armour that looked, to Jason's eye, like they were from the Ottoman empire. There were creatures like centaurs, but instead of being half horse, their lower body was that of a grasshopper the size of a car. Most were roughly humanoid, give or take a few limbs. One group looked like headless humans with scorpion tails that had a face in place of a stinger. Another appeared much like Indigenous Australians in pre-colonial outfits, weapons included.

"That's a woomera," Jason said. "It's for chucking spears, it's pretty sweet."

Jason and his familiars watched as the groups milled about in confusion. There was no hostility, although their group did get a lot of curious looks. There looked to be a small amount of debate before a small delegation was sent in their direction. It consisted of four people, like Jason's group.

One looked mostly human, but with flexible scales instead of skin and standing around seven feet tall. She, if Jason guessed the gender correctly, had the gear of a high-technology knight. What looked like glowing circuits traced across her sword, shield and half-plate armour. Another seemed human, a young man Jason would have pegged as Filipino if he were on Earth. He wore a simple loose garb that, other than its natural hemp colour, was not too different from Jason's combat robe.

The third person looked like an orc. Green-skinned, he had the height and build of a professional wrestler, and one of the larger ones at that. Rather than ugly, his stubbled square jaw and sharp profile gave him the handsome profile of a conqueror. His armour was toughened leather with metal plates over vulnerable areas, clearly designed to not hamper mobility. He had a long-handled war hammer and an axe crossed across his back.

The final member of the group looked like a wind fairy, with pale grey skin and light blue hair, flecked with white. She was slender and slight, around Jason's height, with striking blue eyes. Her hair danced down her back, teased by a breeze that didn't exist.

They stopped before Jason, the two groups lined up like sports teams facing off. They took each other in with curious gazes until Jason broke the silence.

"I think it's safe to say that we all have a lot of questions," he said. "I think we should start with the obvious one."

He looked to the looming orc.

"Those weapons tied to your back, they don't look easy to just yank out in an unexpected combat situation. Do you have a magic bandolier, or a little bloke behind you doing and undoing bits of string? Or do you just put up with the inconvenience?"

The four newcomers all shared a look.

"That is what you consider the obvious question?" the human asked.

"Yep. Not to you, I suppose. You all seem to know each other, so you've probably known the little string guy for years."

"I've met your kind before," the orc said in a voice built for sensual R&B music. "You're a fool."

"You *have* met my kind before," Jason said cheerfully.

"I think the actual questions," the lizard techno-knight said, "should be more like 'who are you,' 'what are you,' 'how did you get here' and 'what is going on?'"

"I see where you're coming from," Jason told her, "but if I'm being honest, those questions are a little pedestrian."

"By which he means useful and pertinent," Shade added. "I'm afraid that Mr Asano has trouble with appropriate manners."

He gave Jason a pointed look.

"Which he could begin to rectify with a polite introduction."

"Actually," the wind fairy said, looking at the orc, "I've always wondered about your weapon situation myself."

Glowing lights appeared in the space above the hanger, guiding the cottage ship into an empty place to land. There were people all around the hangar, maintaining the vessels it contained. Leaving the ship was as simple as stepping through the bubble at the edge of the garden. By the time they did, a platoon of knights in blue and gold armour came marching across the hanger in perfect twin-column formation.

“Sorry about this,” Dawn said as the knights approached. “We’re going to have to deal with a certain amount of ceremony.”

“This is why I don’t normally spend time with space princesses,” Belinda told her.

The knights reached them and those at the head of each column kneeled. The rest stood to rigid attention.

“Your Highness,” one of the Knights said. “We are here to escort you and your guests to Beacon Palace. Your parents are currently occupying the Cumulant Spire, in the private residence.”

“And our other guests?”

“The Baramean Palace.”

“Then I will meet my parents and you may guide my friends to the others.”

“Forgive me, your highness, but the Empress’ directions were quite explicit. You are all to attend her.”

“Very well. Lead on.”

The knights led Dawn, Helsveth and Team Biscuit through the palace, stopping in front of a set of relatively modest doors. These were only twice the height and five times the breadth of a human, making them downright modest by the standards they’d seen moving through the Beacon Palace thus far. They were somewhere high in a tower whose exterior was entirely crystalline, the faceted design shrouding it in rainbows whenever the sunlight hit it. Given that it was located on a sun, that was all the time. The resulting blaze of light explained the rainbow tower they had seen on approach, that Dawn had called an unnecessary extravagance.

The knights all kneeled in place as the doors opened of their own volition, sliding into recessed wall panels.

“Our escort will go no farther,” Dawn said. “Beyond these doors is the private residence of the royal family. The fact that you’re being let in is likely hitting the news portals already. A lot of people are going to be curious about you.”

Dawn strode through the doors like she was marching into battle. Helsveth gestured that they should follow and they all moved into a room the size of a sports arena. The

doors closed behind them. The floor and ceiling were white marble, streaked with red and gold. The walls were the crystal walls of the tower, the room taking up an entire floor. The cavernous chamber looked all the more vast for being almost empty.

At the far side of the room was a marble platform that hovered just above the floor. A man and a woman sat in comfortable but opulent reading chairs on the platform. Both looked up at the group's entry, sat their books down on side tables and stood.

The platform flew towards the visitors. Helsveth dropped to one knee and the others copied her, except for Dawn. The platform rushed across the room before suddenly decelerating to stop right in front of them. The pair standing on it seemed unaffected by the momentum. Both wore simple but exquisitely tailored clothes, with the octagram starburst symbol embroidered on the left breast. They were both celestines, his eyes and hair being the colour of brass. Hers were the same ruby as Dawn's, the family resemblance clear. Both celestines had the youthful appearance and potent aura of diamond-rankers.

"Oh, do get up," she scolded in the good-natured tone of a doting grandmother. "This is the only place in the whole Imperium that we don't have to bother with that nonsense. And Helly, you should know better. The First Daughter of the World Phoenix does not kneel."

"My apologies, Your Majesty," Helsveth said as she got to her feet.

"Now, let's get a look at the rest of you, this is so exciting. Dawnie never brings friends home."