

Chapter 15: Vortex - Geb and the Monster King

This time the 'Jump' felt little more than a heavy summons or extended casting as they ascended up past Alth's atmosphere in a moment and back along a vaguely familiar set of stars. Julia knew as well as Will the final answers were on Geb. The Monster King, the lord of Geb itself, was who they needed to see. The most terrifying creature Will had ever been around.

The pull of the 'Jump' was becoming less strained or maybe it was Will's increased experience with the technique, but there was much less drain as they could actually see the world of Geb come into focus. It was mostly green, divided by several large seas running between the 3 main continents.

This time they landed amidst a large thicket of trees. The landing was smooth and not so harsh as their first trip. Will knew at least an inkling of where to seek the monster king. Their several weeks on Geb had given Will a decent understanding of its history and Arcana.

In the farthest southern ocean of Geb lay the 'Miasma'. The 'Navel' of Geb if such a place existed. The center of all its Arcanic gatherings, both good and bad. Such a point was incredibly dangerous, but at the same time probably the place to find such a powerful being as the Monster King. Will and Julia were still in possession of their Geb clothes and so switched into their old equipment. It was worn a bit as Julia looked over her outfit. She was able to appreciate a little more of just how far she and Will had come.

Maybe all of her tests were done now, maybe finals were long behind her, but she'd gained something more from this adventure than simply a letter grade on a paper. No, this was a lesson in life. Life wasn't about grades. Grades were for school, yet school wasn't life. If anything she felt it only vaguely imitated life in ways. The work and drama were all just a way to pass the time.

But for Will, this was life. He was from a world where failures were proof of uselessness. He didn't have grades or professors, it was only pass or fail, no second chances on Myraho. And when he returned... it would be worse.

"Will, I'm sorry about what I said on Alth. I was just thinking, well worrying about myself." Julia had been waiting for the chance to tell Will by herself. She was starting to understand that for Will, going back meant torture and prosecution. He could go to Earth, but something about home always made it home. "You're going back to Myraho aren't you?"

Julia knew she had to ask to be sure, even if the answer felt redundant.

"After I talk to the Monster King, I know what I need to do." Will was just as nervous about this whole idea as Julia was, though he didn't show it.

They hiked the mid-day through some rough shrubs and trees to find a clearing or something but didn't find anything until the sun had passed its dusk phase.

It was an odd sight. Out from the thick trees and strange shrubs they broke onto an open grassy plain, or so it seemed, but in the distance they could hear the distant crash of ocean waves on a cliff. They were near the great southern sea, closer than they expected.

And in the distance, nearer to the cliffs than most would ever wish to live was a bizarrely shaped building. It looked as if it had been picked up by a hurricane and re-deposited on the cliff. Its support beams were warped and bent away by constant sea breezes, yet its foundations appeared as strong as a bunker. The bottom half of the shack was almost like a cellar. It was this cellar that actually had several lamps lit for the various wayward souls who ventured to this place.

As they walked to the shack part of a building they could make out a sign pointing in numerous directions to different cities. What struck Julia as especially odd was the name of several cities; Moscow, Cleveland, and New Delhi all written in their native languages.

What was even more flummoxing was the distant song of "Saturday in the Park" being sung by a voice in the building with a rough Eastern European accent. "No way." Julia said in a shocked voice. Julia had never, ever expected to hear a familiar sound so far from Earth. Never on Geb, a world so far removed from her own.

They carefully knocked on the door only to be told it was 'open' by a lively voice. They could see it was clearly a mix between a fisherman's shack and a tavern of sorts.

"Ah, customers. Please, please come in." The voice belonged to a man clad in what appeared to be a battered pair of greaves, a worn tunic with a chest protector, and solid boots. He had a roughly shaven beard of dark brown and grey, yet his eyes twinkled with a sincere happiness. "Come in, sit down my comrades." He said and showed them to a few corner seats.

In the tavern they could see a few small groups of travellers, all very secretive seeming. "Been a long while since I've had humans drop by. Welcome to the Oblivion tea-house!" The name seemed a tad ominous, yet the owner appeared pleased as punch. "What'll it be?" His attention was all on them. The other travellers minded their own business and continued to converse in low tones and whispers.

"Do you have any warm drinks?" Julia spoke up.

"Ah, several; Rua, or grey tea, Moz, green-tea, hot milk, or an espresso." He smiled at the last one.

"Two espressos with hot milk, please." Julia felt very glad to finally have a caffeine based drink for the first time in a while. Tea was nice, but it lacked the sweetly bitter after-taste she so enjoyed.

The man quickly glided back to his cooking station and began work. Despite the initial appearance of a worn-down shack, the building was fairly cozy if a touch disorganized. It had the sense of being well-worn like a good pair of shoes.

Some odd clinks, clangs, and whirling sounds and a few minutes later their drinks were ready. "If you would have a moment to chat, would you mind if I sit-in?"

"No, not at all..." Will couldn't recall a name.

"Ivan, Ivan Salk."

"Will, and this is Julia" both shook hands as Ivan took a seat next to Will.

"Do you know how many customers have ever ordered an espresso with milk? I could count the number on one hand." As Ivan held up 3 fingers. "You're not from Geb are you?" Ivan asked straight, the slight

grin on his face unchanged.

"No, I'm from Earth." Julia said now a bit cautious.

"Figured. You don't seem like the other types that come through here. This particular region of Geb doesn't exactly attract the nicest people." Ivan settled down a bit.

"Are you from Earth, too?" Julia ventured. "It sounds like you come from Earth."

"Was it my accent? I haven't been able to completely shake it. 24 years here and I still sound funny." Ivan lamented.

"24 years? How?" Will asked.

Ivan let out a bit of a sigh. "Well it is hard to explain. I was working at a university lab, after hours. I guess there was a gas leak or something. The lab started to catch fire and it wouldn't be long before I was cooked so... there was a strange device running in our lab with dark matter, micro-black holes, and magnitoidal dimension physics. One wrong switch and 'poof' I was out of the lab being sent Lord knows where."

"So that's how you ended up here?"

"More or less. Unless I'm dead and this is purgatory. I mean, I still get hungry and tired."

"No, you're alive," Julia said.

"That's what everyone else says," Ivan remarked. "I've been just getting by the last few decades. Can't complain, life goes on." He seemed sad, yet a bit content at the same time.

"Do you ever miss it? Home?" Will wondered.

"Not really. Back home, I was not very talented, yet here they appreciate me. Even the scary bunches that come by. There is a pride perhaps in that... Sometimes life has a way of moving us along our ways," Ivan said.

The dinner rush came; three more people came in for quiet meals. It was almost crowded that night. Ivan kept up with the meals ordered by his patrons. They all spoke very little to him, yet gave a bow to each meal received and taken care of.

Finally everything died down to closing. Only Julia and Will were left as Ivan closed shop. Thankfully Julia had been careful to hold on to the money they had been given by Kadde before their first departure from Geb.

"Oh ho, Avian coins! These are always good. Always a good trade in Avian space." Ivan seemed very pleased with the coins and showed them to their accommodations. There was a spare room on the 1st floor with a bed and a couch. It all looked a little dusty, but safe. Rest was something they had learned not to take for granted.

Julia took the bed, but only after Will wouldn't stop offering it to her. She personally didn't mind about either one, but found it hard not to accept after a while. Will felt better on the couch; it was just long

enough for his feet to reach the end.

The night was especially dark; there was only one window and it was mostly covered by an old dresser.

“Julia?”

“Yeah.”

“I think we're coming to the end of this journey,” Will said. He was starting to accept that he would need to return to Myrah. The Green Dragon had made some things very clear to him. “Earth, Geb, and Alth all have some type of balance with magic. They are all different, yet at a balance.”

“Wait, how is Earth at balance? No one uses magic there,” Julia said quickly.

“It's not that. Technology creates the balance in its absence. People are equal because of that,” Will pointed out. “You've seen just what magic can do. It is a power, but it creates so much discord.”

“Yeah. I guess.” Julia sighed a little inside.

“So, where do we go now? Tomorrow?” Julia could feel it had something to do with Will's dreams from before.

“I learned something from Kadde a while back, looking over the maps. There is a great void, a hole, or in arcane terms a miasma at the bottom of Geb. It is created by the imbalance and chaos of this world.”

“No, that sounds crazy. We'd be vaporized!” Julia had read enough about black holes and physics to know things like that were bad news.

“I don't know, but I want to go see. I think it may be the only way to find 'him',” Will said. Julia wasn't sure, but at the same time she felt a sense of trust for Will's actions. He'd been a good travel companion so far. Maybe she had to see this to the end too.

The next morning they bid farewell to Ivan. He wished them luck and loaned them an old boat that had washed in from the great sea. It wasn't a small row boat but a fairly decent sized sailboat. “If you can catch a fair wind it'll take you where you want to go.” Ivan even gave them a small loaf of fresh bread and a few water-skins. “Peace go with you” as they set off from the small beach below the cliffs.

Will had never really used a boat, but Julia used to visit the lake with her uncle during summer vacations. After an hour of re-adjusting the rigging they were moving farther and farther from the shore-line. The sea had a dark angry look about it as it shifted wave over wave.

The sun wasn't easy to see; Will suspected this was part of the storm. Magic does strange things to the weather; Myrah was the perfect example of that. The clouds were heavy and dark, getting darker as they sailed out into the sea.

Finally past noon they could see it, an enormous wall of waves drawing up shelves of water. It seemed to form a great crater within the sea itself. The sea seemed to be protecting others from this part of the ocean.

They both fought to angle the boat to climb over the waves and cut through the wall of salt water. It was

dicey business with the rough waves and uncertain directions. Will tried to double check with his compass spell but the vortex was throwing off too much interference.

They were pushed back several times and it started to look like night was coming on. Neither wanted to admit defeat just yet, but the gathering dark wasn't going to stop. Finally Will had an idea.

Julia pulled the boat back a ways. "We need to come at this at speed!" Will had to yell to be heard over the winds now. "When we get close enough I'll cast an angled barrier spell and the chrono-sphere. If it slows things down, it shall speed things up!"

"Aye, Aye!" Julia made sure the rigging was set from the stern as Will took a spot on the bow-sprit. The wind hit the sail just right and they were sailing through the rough waves gaining speed. Will called up the strongest, sharpest angle he could for the barrier. Two large panes of defensive energy appeared left, then right and merged into a solid wedge. The boat moved even faster.

Julia held as best as she could to the course; Will could feel the weight of the water slamming into his shields, the many hundreds of gallons of salt water.

The wind rushed in all directions, but their momentum was too great to dispel. The great wall of water was just yards away. Will incanted his chrono-sphere. He, Julia, and the entire boat shot into the great wall of impenetrable water in a burst of arcanic energy.

The impact was less than Will had expected. The barriers and chrono-sphere cut through the first several yards of water easily. The giant wave was large, larger than Will could have guessed, but finally it started to thin.

The water became less dark and both could see a large whorl of dark arcanic energy. Coiling, fuming, and thrashing in every which way, trying to expand, yet contained by some unseen force. They were going too fast to stop, as they came through the wave entirely free of its mass. Everything seemed to slow to a heartbeat. For the last hundred feet they could see that the water created a large protective wall around the vortex, keeping most out.

Somehow, Will had managed to breach it. Though, not without great cost. Will could hardly keep both spells up and would need to release one or both in the next moment. He'd never cast more than one spell at a time.

The chrono-sphere died first and they were pulled at present speed to within a meter of the vortex. The barrier was the only thing stopping them from entering completely. The front part of the ship began to be torn from its framing.

It was an odd feeling. Will could feel his barrier getting weaker, but there was something about the vortex that set him at ease. There was another force, keeping it in check, a sense of order fighting the chaos in a balance.

Finally the cracks in the barrier were too much to hold. The spell cut-out and the boat and both its passengers were enveloped by the vortex's energies.

Continue to [Chapter 16](#)...

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