

Chapter 18: Confrontation

The next morning both Will and Julia were up early. The sun had not yet appeared, but then Will reminded Julia the clouds obscured most all sunrises or sets. From their minimal camp they had a very small breakfast meal of bread and nuts, nearly all they had left.

The hike down was a bit dreary. The overcast nature of Myrah seemed to feel like it wanted to rain, but something held it back.

Julia had started her adventure on Earth, the blue world. Seen the wilds of Geb and its myriad peoples and races, trekked the vast nothingness of Alth's Green Dragon world and its sandy dunes. Come face to face with fear and learned that soon her journey would come to its end.

Now on Myrah, she could see it end. If all those other worlds had their faults, the faults of Myrah surpassed her own upon Earth greatly.

Myrah felt like a plastic bubble. The clouds trapping everything inside, while also choking off the life of an entire world. Even though Julia had no magic of her own she could feel the oppressive gloom that the clouds created.

How rough it must be for these people, she thought. As if hope itself were being pressed out of them.

"Will, what will you do? How can you help change this?" Julia asked. She remembered how both the Monster King and the Green Dragon had said Will was one of change.

"I'm not sure, but there may be a way," Will said. "With all the enchantments that are in place around Myrah, there has to be some place where they are set up more permanently. I mean, there are protective barriers, deflection spells, and containments. That takes a lot of energy. For just a single magi, it is fairly exhausting. But for such a large scale there needs to be a place where it is focused and then projected over a wide area."

They kept up a constant downhill pace as Will explained. "I mean, Myrah is not a person, it's an entire world. There has to be a central focal point or axis to project this kind of barrier system."

The hills were nothing like the foothills of Geb they had hiked. It felt like such a long time ago. These hills were more drifting as they kept going down. Looking down on the city below, it was unlike any city Julia had ever seen.

The city had a grand checked exterior. Plots of land that looked almost like crop fields or rice paddies. They criss-crossed the land only to be cut by a very long rail system that ran into the city to the walls.

The outer walls looked imposing. As if they were holdovers from an older, more violent age. The walls stood at least forty feet tall in places. They completely blocked off the city center from the outside world—or protected it from the dangers outside.

Yet, above the walls somehow, far further in the distance were buildings higher than even the walls could reach.

The buildings reached up like great spires, tall and thin. All of them had some form of black glass that reflected or absorbed what little light might actually make it through the clouds and enchantments.

These buildings cut up into the sky like sharp nails that had been designed to cut through ground, rock, air. Sharp features of a land where there was little hope. These spire-towers were meant to impress upon outsiders: "We are the center, and we do not bend."

But somewhere in there, thought both Julia and Will, would be the answer.

"Spire-towers of the elites," Will said soberly.

"Yeah, they look about as scary as any dark castle I've ever read about," Julia said in agreement. "Guess it all ends here, doesn't it?"

"One way or another," Will sighed. As much as Will didn't like the thought of facing the magi-police on their home turf, he knew there weren't many options left. Fight today or fight tomorrow. Today I have the advantage; tomorrow I may not.

Will led them down several smaller paths that finally led to a junction for the railway at the foot of the hills.

It looked interesting to Julia, seeing all the trails splitting from one solid stream into two separate lines and rushing along their way to the further reaches of Myrah, away from the capital.

Despite being a literal artery of the capital city, it seemed poorly protected. The trains arrived, were diverted to their appropriate rail line, and left to go on their way.

That was until they got up closer. From the ground they could see several guard towers along all the rail lines, and numerous figures all making sure everything was in order.

"If we move fast enough, we can load onto an inbound car and be safe until we hit the inner walls. Then it's going to get crazy."

"Why?" Julia concurred, but felt a bit unnerved. "We will switch to the underground then. The trains won't put us where we want to be."

It seemed like Will had a plan, but she had a feeling the plan wasn't one she was going to like.

They dashed across an open stretch of field to reach cover near the trains.

The trains were different from what Julia would have called trains. They had long metal sections along the outside construction. They were mostly painted in dark colors, bearing no company logos or even numbers. They all bore stamps with one of three logos of the universal shipping companies of Myrah. All state-owned monopolies, all run by magi elites, and always—always—running along their constant task: bring food to the capital.

It was a good half an hour before Will motioned them to move. "I don't want even a tiny chance of being noticed. Once past that wall, it's going to be a whole lot more dangerous."

"Yeah, I got that part. I'm ready."

They shuffled quickly to the closest parked cargo car and crawled under the base and through the wheels. They had to roll through all the rocks and dirt and oil, but soon they were three cars into the heart of the inter-changer.

Will motioned to Julia. "This car." They threw open a door and loaded into a full cargo container of packaged and boxed foods. Sniffing the air, Julia recognized the aroma. "Cereal?"

"Ah, yeah, kind of like morning rations for most people. Chaff, grains, and pressed/baked wheat flakes."

They closed the door to the container car and it became nearly pitch black. Then a quick snapping, cracking sound caught Julia by surprise as Will lit a lighting orb. It gave off a slightly dimmer glow than before. The light had a pale orange, unlike on Geb and Alth.

Soon they were moving. The train cars bucked, then stopped a few times before they were on a constant pull forward. They could feel bumps along the line, but Will's lighting orb kept aloft in its own orbit.

Both had a lot on their minds. Julia wondered how this would all end. They'd made quite a number of stops all along different worlds—worlds of human life, no less! She was shocked by that revelation. Scientists had only ever guessed life existed on other worlds, but merely at simple celled organisms.

But human life! That at least was encouraging. That out there, deep in space, other worlds of other races of man existed. Would they ever know? Would they ever find them?

Part of her was ready for this to end, but another part was going to feel lost. Will had become more than just a friend; he was almost like that missing part of her. The her that longed to know and grow. That fearlessness that we all have inside, yet cultured society seems to lock away. Somewhere inside, she didn't want this to end. Just a small fragment, but a yearning to see the next sunrise over the mountains of Geb, the wind in her hair from the deserts of the Green Dragon world of Alth.

Will wasn't so torn inside. The day of his return had been his wake-up call. Heck, the Monster King had made it all but clear that this adventure was going to end on Myrah. The system he'd come to despise was now in his hands to undo.

His journey had given him all the courage to face this trial, and all the skills from four different worlds to make it happen.

He'd learned the true nature of magic now. It wasn't just a gift of the super-elites, or a select few. It was a force in all living things, great and small. Even non-living things contributed to its greatness and complexities.

And today, he was going to tear apart that cruel system that shackled the denizens of his world to a gilded few. Today, he knew what he had to do and how to do it. The big question was, could he survive to actually accomplish it?

Ever since breaching the orbital barriers, Will was almost certain the magi-police would be alerted to the disturbance. They would likely be shutting down or watching all entryways and exits into the capital city. But the city still needed its food. Always needed those daily shipments to keep the wheels running. No food, and the city—the very heart of Myrah—would shut down in three days tops. No, it was the single weak link in its entire defensive strategy.

They would need to get through the gates into the city proper first. Then they would need to make it to the closest underground system. Enclosed, yet it also made them harder to pinpoint or bring their full forces to bear. Finally, if they made it to the Core, then it would be all over.

Core. Will had never visited it, yet rumors swirled from countless maintenance-magi that it was the single most heavily guarded and maintained structure in Myrah. Even more than the Grand Minister's estate. He didn't know, but he could guess what it was.

The train was dark inside, but there were tiny cracks of light as they continued to ride along into the heart of Myrah's capital city. With all the cloud cover, it was hard to know the time of day. Afternoons looked very much like noons.

An hour had passed, and finally the train stopped.

Will and Julia slipped out the moment the train was completely halted. Their surroundings now completely different.

Before entering the city, it had appeared only as high walls, peaked only by occasional brick buildings. Now that they were inside the walls it looked very different.

Tall red brick buildings everywhere. All like old fire-department buildings. Red brick towers. Square shaped bases, and occasional windows. Clearly, these people need better urban planning, Julia thought.

Each building was stamped at its base with several sets of letters and numbers. Their postal codes for delivery and addresses.

Interspaces between the red-brick buildings were sand-brown brick structures. They were smaller, but there were apparently nearly as many sand-brick types as the red brick types. They were more diminutive, less important in appearance. They had several windows each, but they seemed worn.

Finally, among the sand and red colors were very tall black polished monoliths. They looked like glass, but they were much more shiny, if that were the correct word. They were few and far between, yet there was an aura they seemed to create. It felt like these obelisks were watching or controlling things within the city.

"Why is everything so drab?" Julia finally said to break the silence.

"Our ancestors thought it would be best to create a city designed for efficiency. No distractions, no extras, just a single devoted effort to running this world," Will said, still a bit in awe of the complex buildings around him.

"So, kind of like Wall Street?"

"Yeah, kind of." Will felt his time on Earth had not been wasted.

The two of them hustled away from the station into the mesh work of buildings. Around them, the city was fairly quiet. The rush hour hadn't yet started. Most people wouldn't go far. Only the super elites really had the means to leave the city. The maintenance workers lived, ate, slept, and worked in the city most of their lives. They were fed by trains. Given apartments close-by, and would live in the city until they retired—usually after they were too old or weak to keep up with their quota.

If they'd saved enough money, maybe they'd return to the country or city they'd been born in. It was a very undesirable prospect, yet most people didn't have many choices in their life on Myrah.

The small clusters of people they did see were delivery clerks, cleaners, house-keepers, or the occasional person leaning casually against a wall. Will recognized these as likely 'neighborhood watchers'. Most people were too busy to notice that Julia and Will had fairly unusual clothes. Thankfully Will had stowed his short-sword in his travel pack before entering the city.

They had passed several blocks before they found an underground. It wasn't too different from ones used on Earth. Julia was at least familiar with check points, stairs, gates, and platforms. Really the only major difference was the lighting.

On Earth, electricity was the primary means for lighting. Not so on Myrah. The underground was lit by strange flickering chains of orange lights. There was some form of power running through them, but it wasn't very reliable, apparently.

Will explained that the lights were run by pulsing charges of magic energies through transparent glass tubes. "Kind of like light-bulbs?"

"Yeah. Light bulbs would be much easier to work with, but... Well, you've seen how backwards this city is."

They managed to clear the gate and reach the platform before trouble finally found them. In hindsight, it had been a little *too* easy, Julia thought.

The streets had had at least a handful of magi-police set at the stations to pick up any disturbances.

As they passed the station, the magi-police began to close their net. Will had been gone a while, but not so long they hadn't noticed a class-3 magi that had escaped the academy.

When they passed the underground gate, the final wire had tripped and the trap sprung.

Will had sensed something odd at the gate, too. Their detection systems would have been too subtle for the average 3rd class magi, but Will wasn't a simple 3rd class magi from the academy anymore.

He'd learned a lot about detection runes on Alth, and protective auras from Geb. He was ready.

The first thing that hit was a distortion bubble. The magi to his left leveled his shorter police-cane and tried to catch Will before he could leave the platform. The impact knocked Will off his feet but didn't do any real damage.

Julia's heart skipped a beat as Will flew to the floor. Will reacted off of instinct and projected a protective aura around them. The second blast met the sphere and deflected back at its caster. He hadn't expected the deflection to be so accurate and was sent into the stairs leading back to the top.

"Infiltrator!" A second officer yelled out from behind them with two police clearly on their tail. Julia and Will jumped off the platform and onto the rails. Will led them deep into the dimly lit tunnels.

"Hope you know where you're going!" Julia shouted.

“Me, too!” Will replied, now running full tilt into the underground system.

Another blast connected behind them as the magi-police were both on their feet and in pursuit. Will turned quickly and started chanting one of his older incantations. The ground started to tremble as the energies bowed to his will.

He lifted both hands and a great wall of rocks, soil, and steel emerged and began to grow, growing up to the roof of the tunnel.

Light began to fade as it cut off any approach from behind them. They both heard a second and third impact, this time completely absorbed by the earthen wall.

The light was almost gone when Will ignited his lighting orb. “Here,” Will handed Julia the orb and to her surprise it stayed put in her hands. “Whoa. What?” She slowed down to get a better hold of the orb. They both stopped for a moment as the light from the tunnel cut out completely.

They heard another blast at the wall, but it continued to hold.

“How did you know this would work?” Julia continued to hold the glowing orb as they walked deeper into the system of tunnels.

“A feeling,” Will said, regaining his breath. “This tunnel should go for about 2 kilometers until it hits a cross point or a maintenance tunnel.”

“A guess or you know?” Julia was a little skeptical about this, but she had faith.

“A little of both.”

They were almost to their turn-off when Will stopped dead in his tracks. He could feel it now—they’d cracked his wall and would be closing in fast.

Figuring this was the best time as any, he drew his sword from his pack.

“No more hiding, I guess...” Will held the blade and activated the shielding rune on the hilt as well as his vibration detection spell on the grounds.

He didn’t want to be caught unawares again.

“What’s going on? Are they close?”

Julia was sure she’d just felt the vibrational spell take. “They broke my wall so we need to get going. We need to make it to the next station fast. Underground it limits their numbers, but we can’t escape. Kind of works both ways,” Will said as he turned and sped forward.

Julia quickly at his side. “What can I do?”

“Hold that orb. We need at least a little light to see where we’re going.”

Both of them continued for a while. They could sense the movements around them with the vibrational spell. It kind of made them feel like spiders in a way. The light helped to see, but in the dark vibrations

were more useful.

With all the walls, rocks, animals, and blank darkness, being able to feel more than just inches from your face was a welcome change.

They'd have made more progress, but the magi police were coming in at both ends of the tunnel.

Before they could reach the intersection they heard voices yelling at both ends.

"On your hands and knees now or he will offer no quarter!" A harsh voice said.

Three separate lights ignited at the other ends of the tunnel, now trapping them.

Will whispered, "Julia, let the orb go in, three, two..." She didn't even wait for the final "one" before dropping it and shifting to the wall of the tunnel.

She knew they'd open fire without hesitation the moment their light went out. The orbs flew past like bullets and the fight was on.

The first went low and hit just several feet from where Julia had been standing. The second cleared overhead by inches and the third deflected off Will's shielding charm and hit the ceiling above.

Rocks and chunks of concrete started to shower down on them.

The second volley of blasts launched around them. Along with the rubble from the ceiling and the damage their blasts made, it was hard to stay calm. Will knew if they could just break past the group in front of them, they'd have a clear path for a little while. Going back would only lead them into a wall of magi-police.

The third wave came. Will's shielding rune was doing well. The blasts, despite their speed, didn't pack as much punch as he'd expected. Or maybe runes were just more powerful than incanted spells?

As their blast orbs deflected and redirected off his shielding rune, Will concentrated and called his exploding orbs. He hadn't really used it since Geb, but this time he didn't need to make a pin-point hit.

Since that time Will had made some breakthroughs with his Myrah-based arcana. The larger orbs weren't all that useful when speed was needed, so he'd learned to simply compress a single orb with smaller individual explosion balls. Not horribly powerful, but enough for people-sized targets.

Will dropped his shield the moment the other magi stopped to reconcentrate their arcana and let loose his attack.

Unlike the pale blue magi-police impact orbs, Will's was an angry, sparkling orange explosives orb.

"Funny thing about staves..." Will thought. They really only allow for one spell at a time, don't they? Runes didn't need to be re-cast, but could only do one thing. Really more like a switch to be turned on or off at will. Very good utility. Since Will had learned both, he had a decided advantage now.

Will's orb struck the ground near the two guards to their front and exploded into several smaller versions of its larger self. Like a shot-gun the orb increased its area of explosion to nearly half the entry way.

Both magi were blasted back with such force they were slammed into the tunnel walls and dropped to the ground.

“Let’s go!” Will and Julia rushed to the open space just as two more impact orbs flew past. Will turned for an instant and cast another of his explosion orbs back at their pursuers. The single blast, followed by the crackle of multiple smaller bursts was heard behind them as they reached a set of stairs leading up.

They were up at least three flights before voices were heard catching up to them from below. More impact orbs flew up from below and started to make the set of stairs start to groan and shift.

Julia was in the lead and could see a heavy steel maintenance door just another flight up. “Will, one more to go!”

“I’m going to try and take out the stairs.”

Julia thought for a moment. Will was crazy, but she knew they were losing ground and time. What is Will’s grand plan?

She just flashed through for an instant. She reached the door.

Will took a heavy breath and concentrated all the energy he could and summoned his full sized concussion orb.

It was now the size of a large basketball. Looking down, Will could see at least five magi-police in their dark blue robes with silver trim.

Will wound up and pitched the orb down as fast as he could. His heart was racing. He knew in about 3 seconds the orb would impact and then splinter and explode again, hopefully destroying the set of stairs.

Julia burst through the door, surprising several onlookers on their way to the platform. She could hear Will rushing pell-mell up the stairs.

Will was just four steps to the door as his spell impacted the stairs. There was a hard “whump” shock as it tore apart the foundations of the steps.

Will leap through the doorway as the stairs shook violently and started to fall away as Julia pulled Will to safety. “A little close don’t you think?!” Julia said as Will caught his breath.

The crash of the stairs was so loud it could be heard all through the underground station.

The noise sent some older people hurrying to get clear of the station.

Looking around from their entrance, Will could see a large set of doors that were the exit out to the streets, another set of doors and stairs that led back to the underground (obviously to the loading platforms) and finally a smaller door that looked like it led to maintenance.

Yet those all seemed unfavorable.

Finally to their left were a large group of steps leading to the top of the station to an observation deck. The steps went up quite a ways (10, 20, 30 meters) overlooking the city below.

Will grabbed Julia's hand and led her up the steps. "It's a dead-end up there!" She shouted as the scuffle of feet below sped up. "Not for us."

Will was driven by adrenaline now. He had to get to an opening fast. He couldn't let Julia get hurt or stay in danger any longer. The time had come.

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