Chapter 155

Rincewind was getting too old for this crap.  He had retired to Earth a few thousand years ago.  It was a nice out-of-the-way planet on the twenty-third layer.  It was meaningless in the larger scheme of things.  Just a grain of sand at the bottom of an ocean.  He had lived a thousand lifetimes and just wanted to mentor some children and watch them and their descendants grow.

Now, in the past month, he had been forced to fight an aboleth, negotiate with an ancient dragon to train a seer, and now was trying to unravel if the angelics were plotting to cut the planet he called home off from the Source.  He was not sure if he could take so much excitement.  Who was he kidding?  He loved it.

Although Rincewind was immortal, he was not an all-powerful mage by any stretch of the twenty-three layers.  He had a strong lower-tier three core and had forgotten how to cast more spells than most mages would learn in their lifetime. But still, he was limited in casting truly powerful spells with intensive ritual magic.  The aether was so thin on planet Earth that he had to travel to the twenty-first layer to recharge himself regularly.  Who names the planet Earth anyway?

Rincewind paused in the hallway, trying to remember which way he was going.  Was Raeila even still alive?  He had not talked to her in almost a millennia.  A guard in the hallway paused to look in his direction but didn’t see through his illusion.  The guard continued on his way, and Rincewind continued his search.  After being in a few thousand palaces in his long life, they all started to look the same.

All his current problems were due to a babe demon.  Not even a real demon, just a converted human. He was much stronger than he should be, which meant whoever transformed him was immensely powerful.

Andromeda was the succubus’ name, but Rincewind could not recall dealing with her before. She operated on the higher layers. When Yasmin Rowan, one of his promising students, got involved with the babe demon, he investigated to protect her as much as he could. Andromeda worked alone and did not appear to be involved in any of the major conflicts currently occurring on the higher layers. But that was just on the surface. She could have plans for the babe demon, not revealed yet or centuries yet in coming to fruition.

The boy still thought of himself as human.  Over time, his new demonic nature would erode his human nature; Rincewind had seen it before.  When that happened, he was prepared to rescue Yasmin. Until then, he would work with the babe demon and perhaps prolong his grasp on his humanity.

He turned left and then backtracked, passing servants unaware of his presence.  A large golden-skinned giant of a man stood in his way. The shiny man was looking past Rincewind but then looked down.  A shrill voice that did not match his size, he spoke, “Raelia said to stop skulking around and come meet her in the library.  Follow me, Immortal Mage.”

That was what Raelia called him.  The Immortal Mage.  Rincewind dropped the three layers of spells hiding him and appeared.  The golden-skinned man remained impassive, “Are you a golem?”  Rincewind asked, fascinated.

The man bowed, “I am, Ulrich, at your service.”  The golem was an excellent construction and appeared to have a mixture of technology and aether, but his mage sight couldn’t penetrate its outer skin for a closer examination.  It would be fascinating to examine him further when he had time.  Rincewind had not dabbled in golem creation in hundreds of years.

He followed the golem to a palace library that seemed out of place.  It was a hollowed-out round tower going high into the sky, maybe thirty floors.  Each floor had a wrap-around balcony and bookshelves lining the outer wall.  There were no stairs, so Rincewind would have to fly.  Raelia was on the fourth floor reading a book in a chair. She was clearly visible and waiting on him.  Rincewind leaped into the air and landed next to her.  The silvery-haired elf-looking woman ignored him, so he grabbed a chair and sat across from her.

Raelia did not look up when she finally did speak, “I don’t hear from you for nine hundred and ten years, and I discover you sneaking around my palace.  What do you want, Immortal Mage?”  Her tone was not pleasant, and Rincewind was sure she was angry.

“I came for your expertise on the angelics,” he said patiently and with a friendly tone.

Raelia closed the book, which Rincewind noted was in ancient Elvish and was a romance novel. She had probably read it before, but after thousands of years, he found you started to repeat things.  “Just because I am an angelic doesn’t make me an expert,” she said harshly. “You left me in the bed alone, Mage.  Why would I help you now?”

Rincewind had memories flash back.  He had thought they had left on amicable terms.  They had a few passion-filled nights, and then…I suppose he did just kind of disappeared without leaving a note.  “I must apologize then.  There was always an open invitation for you to visit me.  I thought it was implied.”  He looked up at the center of the tower far above.  A massive pulsing light was illuminating all the floors.  “I love your library. I always knew you loved books.  This is kind of like a temple to them, no?”

“You can not brush aside leaving me in a cold bed, Mage.  I do not think I am inclined to lend you any favors,” Raelia said, her fingers intertwining and resting on her knees.  “Ask what you want, and I will tell you the price you must pay.”

Rincewind maintained a smile but remembered the old saying, hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.  Well, he had been to hell, or at least a version of it, and it was not that bad. “Raelia, some of the pure angelics are cutting off planets from the Source.”

Her response confused him as just her left eyebrow arched slightly.  His mind started to race.  “You know?” he spat out the words.  “Billions will be killed in the transit and the planet!”

“Calm yourself, Mage.  I heard whisperings at the gatherings but nothing credible,” Raelia barked at him.  He scolded himself.  He needed to stay calm as Raelia was his best source as to what the angleics were doing.  He had other, less reliable, contacts.  Many of whom he would prefer to avoid.

He focused on her, trying to pick out her reactions to his questions, “What have you heard?” Rincewind voice was calm now.

Raelia smirked, “We still have not decided on a price.  We can set fair compensation now that I know what you want.”  The old elf woman relaxed into her chair, pulled out a thick cigar, cut the end, and lit it.  She took two puffs, relaxing in the sickly sweet smell.  Rincewind waited on the elf.  She leaped from the balcony, sprouting her white feathery angelic wings, and zipped up the tower. Rincewind understood she wanted her to follow, so he did.

She flew up seven stories and landed, Rincewind a moment later next to her.  “I want you to teach my daughter lesser magic,” Raelia was looking around, probably expecting her daughter to be here.

“Your true daughter? Why would she want to learn the lesser magics if she has your angelic heritage?”  Rincewind asked, looking around as well for this mysterious daughter.  He added absently, “I thought you were not going to have any offspring?”

The silvery-haired elf opened a door between two shelves and then shut it, the room beyond being empty. “I wasn’t, but about nine hundred years ago, I invested in being able to carry my own child to term instead of converting others as I had been to the angelic bloodline.”

Rincewind walked behind her as she checked doorway after doorway around the circular balcony. He was distracted from reading the titles of the books. “I am happy for you then. Having and raising a child is a rewarding experience.” Rincewind had three children in life. Two had died, and the third was somewhere exploring another galaxy, looking for the ancesters. He touched a bead on his bracelet. It was still there, so he was still alive. If he died, the bead would vanish. He planned to never have another child. Keeping them out of trouble was too much work.

“Rewarding for the first century, maybe,” Raelia returned mockingly. “After that, they get their independence and don’t listen to a word you tell them. They think they know better than you and are very difficult to control.”

“I completely agree,” Rincewind said supportingly. “After the first century, they think they can conquer the universe. You just have to reel them in a bit in their expectations.” Rincewind winced internally, remembering his own failings in this regard for his two dead children.

She checked another door, found who she was looking for, and entered, Rincewind following. A woman with jet-black hair and prominent elf ears was in the middle of the room, going through a series of katas with a pure white katana blade. Hearing the door click open, she accelerated her speed to finish the series. Rincewind was impressed with her mastery but had trouble keeping focused.

The woman’s short back ponytail whipped as she spun and slashed. The reason why Rincewind had trouble was the woman was naked, but her lean body and firm chest barely jiggled through the exercise. Raelia waited while, who Rincewind presumed was her daughter, finished. She was attractive, that was certain. And he was not above admiring her form.

The black-haired woman faced the pair. Raelia introduced her, “This is my daughter Kristiel. My first and only daughter,” she emphasized.

Rincewnid bowed, “Pleasure to meet you. Your mother has negotiated your training in the finer aspects of aether manipulation under my tutelage.” He blinked his mage sight, and she had a lesser tier three core like him. “Although your body is exceptional, I prefer you to be clothed.” Raelia, to his right, twitched.

Kristiel inspected Rincewind with a discerning eye, still naked. Then she added a layering of white clothing to her body with a thought. She addressed her mother, “Can I leave the tower now?”

Raelia grunted, “Yes, you can. Under the Immortal Mage’s care.”

Kristiel’s eyes went wide in some shock, “The Immortal Mage you are always cursing about?”

“Yes, that one,” Raelia confirmed.

Rincewind was getting the feeling he had been set up. “You promised my information in exchange for my services of training your daughter. I still have not heard your side of the bargain.”

Raelia smiled, “At the last gathering, about eighty years ago, I talked with a Deva, who is working for a Solar. During some polite conversation, he let slip some angelic researchers theorizing that the release of certain transit threads could create a twenty-fourth layer. The research has been going on for tens of thousands of years.”

Rincewind frowned. A Solar was one of the most powerful angelics in existence. They resided on the sixteenth layer and higher. “To what end would a Solar want to create a twenty-fourth layer? And at the expense of hundreds of billions of lives.”

“Trillions of lives, Mage. I can only postulate. A new Great Descent would thin the aether on the higher layers, weakening the beings there and allowing the Solars a chance to traverse higher.” Raelia said. She was a scholar in the truest sense of the world, and it would not surprise him if she had read most of the millions of books in her library. But her theory lacked grounding.

“It wouldn’t give him any advantage. It makes no sense.” Rincewind returned after digesting her words.

“It would if the Solars were banding together in a coordinated attack. My guess is they have a target deity in mind. Or, more likely, one of the archdemon lords.” Realia continued with her theory. “We are just fleas on a wooly mammoth. I doubt we could change the course of events. Now I have filled my half of the agreement. You can take Kristiel back to your crappy little planet on the twenty-third layer and train her for a few centuries. She has been on a kick recently to hunt demons, and I have had to rescue her a few times—so make sure she doesn’t get herself killed.”

“So you knew where I was the entire time and never came to visit?” Rincewind countered Raelia’s upsetness at his prolonged absence.

Kristiel interrupted, agitated, “The twenty-thrid layer? Mother, the aether is too thin there to manifest my power for long, and there are no worthy demonic foes!”

Rincewind calmly explained, “The thinner aether will help you learn to the fine control of the aether you do have. It just so happens I am—assisting—another powerful being in learning the finer points of controlling his aether.” He smiled, wondering how the babe demon and Raelia’s child would interact. He could imagine trying to separate them in a fight.

Raelia said, “So it is decided? You will take Kristiel for, say, two hundred years?”

“I will teach her until she learns the fine control of aether. But I am actually heading to another planet first. I can swing by and pick her up on the way back,” Rincewind offered the pair.

“Take her with you. You are competent enough to keep her safe,” Raelia pushed her daughter forward. A smile grew on her face. “Do we need a contract, or can I trust your word, Mage?”

Kristiel seemed a little put out being handed off like a piece of luggage. “Don’t I get any say in this? Are you going to remove this?” She held up her wrist. Rincewind recognized it as a device to prevent the opening into transits with her aether. He suddenly got the feeling Kristiel was a little bit more of a handful than he assumed.

“No,” Rincewind told the woman. “Fine, I will take her with me. Do you know which angelic controls the Mercanious thread?”

“The Solar Crystioff.” Her eyebrows went up, “And yes, he is the Solar the angelic I talked to was working for. He resides on the higher layers, Mage, but his subordinates are not to be trifled with. Is that where you are taking Kristial?”

“I am looking for two missing humans from my planet. But yes, that is where I am heading. Are you sure you want me to take Kristial at this time?” Rincewind had smirked as if he had just achieved victory. He could delay returning to Raelia’s palace for years to begin his tutelage of Kristial.

Raelia sensed the deception, “No, take her with you. She is probably safer than you are. The Angelic Deva in charge of Mercanious is Ramiel. Drop my name if you get into trouble. He should at least not kill you before contacting me.”

Rincewind nodded and had to wait while Kristial gathered her things. She had a mind space but was learning how to assimilate items and create objects. She only had a single construct currently as well—an inefficient one, according to Raelia.

Raelia stood next to Rincewind as they waited in the palace entryway. “She is yours, you know,” Raelia said smugly.

“I know. You dropped enough hints. Natural or assimilated?” Rincewind asked, unphased.

“Natural. Three nights before you left. I was always expecting you to come back and surprise me. Well, surprise.” Raelia said jokingly. There was quiet for a time as Rincewind didn’t speak. Raelia asked, “How did you know?”

Rincewind considered his answer, and held up his bracelet, on it were two beads. “When she got close enough to me, the artifact activated and added another bead.”

“A life tracker? Linked to your direct descendants?” Raelia asked, and Rincewind nodded.

Raelia held up her hand, and a blue-veined white ring was on her hand. Rincewind nodded. It was a similar device that would alert Raelia if Kristial was in grave danger or in the event of her death.

Kristial was walking toward them in a full outfit with two swords on her hip and a small backpack. “You know if anything happens to her, I will hold you responsible,” Raelia said, finally letting affection for her daughter seep into her voice.

“I know,” Rincewind stated. “I will keep her safe, even at the expense of my own life.” Raelia nodded, and her daughter.

Kristial had a grin at being able to leave the tower, “So, Mage are we going to have some opportunity to fight some demons?”

Rincewind laughed, “More than likely.”