

**Story begins-18**

“So, you’re one of the admins?” the bat asked and Marc stared at him before reminding himself and of the four of them, Taro didn’t know about AI.

Constantine leveled his petal gaze on the Taro. “I am *the* admin. Nothing you see here would happen without me.”

Taro starred at Marc. “You know the boss?”

Marc was tempted to tell Taro Constantine was the big boss, just the boss of Gaia, but the distinction would probably be lost on the bat. “I suppose I do.” He watched Omar and Tuck, the latter of which was walking around Constantine looking him up and down appreciatively. Omar was attentive, but no more than that, as far as Marc could tell.

“Why did you show yourself?” Omar asked. “Tuck, leave him alone before he banishes you.”

Constantine looked at Omar and gave him a quirked smile. “Now, why would I banish this horny little money, unless it’s to one of the adult-rated bedrooms?”

Marc had a moment of irrational anger at the idea Tucker Orr might replace him as Constantine’s occasional bed partner.

“I didn’t know your kind had sex,” Tuck said.

Marc squashed the anger. The Gaia AI wasn’t a sex beast like the Orrs, or even as sexual as a healthy adult, but he had enough of a sex drive Marc couldn’t be the only one in the know Constantine had sex with. Or, Marc realized, since Constantine could become anyone, even one of the sex NPCs, he could have sex with any player he wanted.

“The things you don’t know about ‘my kind’ are infinite, Tuck LongDong.”

The Realization helped assuage Marc’s fear, but a part remained; that Tucker would eclipse them all in performance and become the only one Constantine relied on. Stupid, he knew, but Tucker had such a reputation around those circles...

“Can we get back to what’s important?” the brass Brastok asked.

“That’s what me and mister boss man here are doing,” Tuck replied with a grin.

“I swear Tuck, I am going to rip that cock of yours the instant it shows up if you don’t start taking this seriously. One of my friend’s life is in danger.”

“Right.” The comment was like a switch and Tuck stepped away from Constantine, who looked amused. “I’ll add you to my appointment book and we can see how well your kind performs.” Constantine inclined his head to Tuck, then looked at Marc, but it was Omar who spoke.

“Why are you here?”

“To provide the assistance I’m able.”

“Can you take us to where Bobby disappeared?”

Constantine seemed confused, the relaxed. “Bobby Powers, Paul Longpine’s player. No, I can’t take you to where he vanished, because that whole area had vanished from my control.” He placed his hand before him and over it, a map appeared. At first, it was identical to the one Tuck had pulled out, down to the lines and the circle of the general area they thought Bobby was in. Then the map became a three-dimensional

representation of the area, with the circle shrinking. “What I can do is take you to the border of that area.”

Taro cursed under his breath, and Marc glanced at him. “I spent a lot of my work tokens getting the Manarium going and speeding it up, now it’s for nothing.”

“That’s easily resolved.” Constantine waved toward Taro, and the bat’s eyes went wide.

“That’s more than I had.”

The leafy man shrugged. “Consider it compensation for not arriving earlier.”

Omar studied the map, then looked up. “Do you know where on Sibera Bobby is?” He brought up the pictures. “These are the only clues we have.”

Constantine looked at them and shook his head. “I am Gaia. That is all that I know. If Paul is on Sibera, then you are in the wrong world to rescue him.”

“Except Sibera isn’t connected to anything right now,” Marc said. “It shouldn’t even be active.”

“Indeed.” Constantine closed his eyes. “There isn’t an... administrator there at the moment.”

“Could whoever arrange for the server to remain on the station cut the admin staff off?” Tuck asked.

Constantine glared at the branch and leaf monkey. “We do not get ‘cut off’. Once in place, we are the world. If I cannot contact who is to be assigned to Sibera, then there is no one assigned to it yet.”

Tuck raised his hands. “Calm down, just making sure we cover all possibilities. We’re going in to rescue one person, if we need to look out for others, it’s best we know ahead of time.”

Constantine nodded. “Agreed, but no, we can take for granted that there is no one other than your friend on Sibera. Unfortunately, I cannot take you there. As I said, Gaia is the only place I have influence, and the port to Sibera isn’t open. Won’t be until my contemporary is in place. I’m sorry.” He turned.

“Wait,” Marc called before Constantine vanished, then felt foolish. It wasn’t like him vanishing from here meant he wouldn’t hear the call. “Can you still take us to the border of this zone?” he indicated where the map had been, but it had vanished.

“Of course, but I don’t see how that will help you rescue your friend.”

“Bobby sent us pictures leading there for a reason,” Marc said.

“And if there’s something there preventing you from exerting control,” Tuck said, “the least we can do while we’re here is see about removing it.”

Constantine looked the monkey over and gave him a leering grin. “If you manage that, I would be extremely grateful.”

Tuck smiled back, his tail coming up between his legs in an obvious erection.

“I swear,” Omar cursed, “sex is all you think about.” He glared at Constantine, “and you aren’t helping.”

“You don’t want my help?” the AI asked innocently.

“That’s not what I mean and you know it!” Steam erupted from the face joints.

“Just get us to each of the locations so we can get on with the rescue, or whatever—”

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Marc looked around. “Really? Did you send just me away, or did you cut off Omar in the middle of his rant?” Constantine didn’t answer. “No, of course, now you’re acting like you’re the inscrutable god of this world, and don’t try to claim it’s because I’m out of reach. You couldn’t drop me off on the other side of the line, so you hear me nice and fine.”

*Calm down, Horace*, he told himself as he pulled up the pictures to find the one he needed to use. *He isn’t going to exchange you for Tucker*. Of course, the fact Constantine had been playful with the monkey didn’t sit well. His and Constantine’s encounters were more business-like. Pleasurable, but not filled with playfulness.

He found the picture of the mountain and overlaid it, moving until it was a perfect replica of the view.

He hadn’t even known Constantine was capable of being playful.

He overlaid a line from there to extend in the direction he needed to go.

And could he blame the AI for that? It wasn’t like Horace had approached their meetings with anything more than business. Now he wished he knew other operators who interacted with Constantine so he could compare notes with them. He certainly wasn’t talking with Tucker about sex with Constantine after this.

“Enough if this Marc Bonesword. The quest had begun. You can deal with everything else afterward.”

### Quest

Save Paul Longpine, retake control of Gaia.

Your friend, Paul Longpine, has been taken by unknown agents, and at the same time, a section of Gaia has become cut from the rest of the world. Coincidence? I think not.

Go forth and rescue your friend, break those who have sought to take from Gaia.

Reward: experience and the eternal gratitude of the world. And who knows, maybe a personal favor from someone in charge, if you know what I mean.

Marc wanted to have eyes so he could roll them. “Very Funny, Constantine.” He hated how the AI knew him so well, he’d guessed as what bothered Marc. Yeah, he was going to look into buying himself some Brastok eyes just so he could pull Omar’s trick of the three-sixty eye-roll in situations like this.

He set forward, following the line. Still, maybe a playful encounter with the AI would be fun.

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*Anyone who can see me, start moving with caution. We aren’t alone*. Tuck’s message brought up the guild chat. Marc frowned as he slowed and pulled up the guild membership. Yes, Tuck had been added to it.

It made sense, but Marc wondered what it had taken to get Omar to agree to it. Or had the monkey asked Taro, sweet-talking him into it with promised of wild sex in and

out of the Lands? Marc chuckled. He'd find out once they were together, by if Omar was kicking Tuck's ass despite the situation or not.

Activating his stealth, he slid through the vegetation until he saw the monkey lying down at the top of a hill. Straining, he could just make out voices in conversation coming from further ahead. The Brastok tiger stepped out of the tree line, moving so silently even Marc didn't hear the steam, clank, and gear that were customary. Magical silence.

Marc made just enough sounds the monkey looked over his shoulder at him. Then came a series of incomprehensible hand gestures.

Marc stared and Tuck stared back.

*I have no idea what that means.* He thought into the guild chat.

*Military hand talk,* came Omar's reply. *That bunch is paranoid the opposition has cracked the encryptions so they won't talk over the net on missions.*

*That makes sense,* Taro said.

*It would make more sense if the rest of us knew how to understand it,* Omar replied. Marc looked around, finding Taro before he stepped out of the trees. His technological body didn't lend itself to blending in, and he either didn't have or hadn't bothered making a potion for it.

*Okay, I get the message,* Tuck said, *you're just a bunch of civilians and I need to lower myself to your level. Which, of course, is impossible since you're all higher level than I am.* He motioned for them to approach and peer over the hill. *What do you make of that?*

Marc looked.

Four Syleant stood talking about what sounded like a movie. A knight, an arcane fencer, what had to be a forger, by the inscriptions on his weapons, and a druid, ranger specialized if he had to guess at it. He focused and activated his Knowing Skill. Yep, he'd guessed right as information appeared next to them. Level thirty-eight, forty-two, thirty-three, and fifty-seven.

*Easy takedown,* he said

*I think he means what they seem to be guarding,* Taro replied after a few seconds.

Marc wouldn't call what they were doing guarding, but he looked for anything out of—

“What the fuck?”

A hand slammed his head in the ground and he could only see Taro lying down as if the ground could absorb him. Are you nuts? He mouthed.

*Sorry, I was surprised.* Marc said in the chat. *That isn't possible.* He replayed and paused on what he'd seen. The four were standing before a shimmering in the world. That by itself wasn't unusual, there were many places on any of the Lands where visuals were altered for one or another game-related reason. But in the middle of the shimmer was a crack in the world, and through it, he'd seen an icy landscape, which he suspected was Sibera.

*Okay, looks like we're clear,* Tuck said, *Their discussion of how accurate*

*Malcolm of the Sea* seems to be more important than being on the lookout for potential attackers.

*Marc, you want to take them?* Omar asked.

*Are you crazy?* Tuck replied, glaring at the tiger. *Those people have to be trained.*

Omar patted the monkey's head condescendingly. *It's okay, Tuck. When we're back in the real world, We can go find some bad guys and you can beat them up to regain your machismo. Since we're in the Lands, why don't you watch how an expert does it?*

Marc chuckled at the disbelieving look on Tuck's face, then walked around the hill.

He stealthed his way to the ranger, since he was the highest level. He took out his knife, Life's Bane, and added a poison buff to it, activated Life-Drain for the damage increase since he was already at full life and if he did this carefully, he wouldn't take any damage.

He waited for the conversation to die down, stepped behind the ranger, and activated Assassin's Cloak as he placed a hand over the ranger's mouth and stabbed him in the back repeatedly, pulling him away and leaving a copy of him standing there. The critical hits piled up and by the time he had the body behind a tree, the player was out of it and he ran to his next target.

The one real problem he had to deal with was the player getting over his surprise faster than Marc could take down the arcane fencer, the second-highest level player. He was confident he could take all three of them down in an open fight, but it wouldn't be as impressive as taking down a second one before anyone realized what was happening.

He was behind the arcane fencer in seconds, Life's Bane buffed again. He couldn't use Assassin's Cloak again since he could have one of it active at a time, but it was okay. The fencer asked the now dead ranger a question, and the other two looked at the motionless form for an answer. Providing Marc with the perfect opportunity.

He grabbed the fencer from the back under the chin and raised his head, slicing his throat open before adding three stabs in the spine. Not a complete kill, even with the criticals, but the three poison markers he was stuck with now would finish him quickly enough.

"Argyle!" the knight yelled, turning to face Marc and pulling a massive sword.

Marc dismissed Life's Bane and summoned his elite long sword from his inventory. Unlike Paul, Marc wasn't obsessed with doing everything as if the Lands were real. There were times when a quick summon was preferable. He blocked the attack, summoned his short sword in his other hand, and stacked the rest of his poisons on it before slashing at the knight's stomach. It was a common sword, but he'd gotten the edge upgraded to ignore some of his opponent's armor.

A slash at his back took a small bite out of his health. He put Life Drain on his long sword and turned, slashing at the forger. Most of the attack was rendered useless by the inscriptions on the armor, boosting both the resistance and the damage reduction, but enough went through Marc regained a portion of what he'd lost.

After a quick exchange of blocks and slashes, he'd lost a tenth of his health while the knight had lost half and the forger's inscriptions were almost all destroyed. Once that happened, that character was as good as dead even if he had most of his health still. A lightning bolt struck the forger as Marc parried the Knight's attack, going down to a knee under the force of the blow, but the angle gave him a perfect attack at the already weakened spot on the chest armor.

He struck hard and angled the short sword to score the critical as it pierced the heart. The knight shoved him away and into the edge of the lightning, which cost him more health than every attack the two of them had taken. Fuck, Omar's blasts were powerful. He glanced behind him as he stepped back to the staggering knight.

He wasn't surprised that all that was left of the forger was ash.

The knight, on the other hand, was tougher than Marc expected. He had to be up to a dozen poison debuffs; he should be dead. Anyone would be. Maybe he'd ask for Constantine to show him how this knight was built as his favor.

He charged the knight with a snort.

No, the sex was going to be better.

The knight died under the next flurry of blows.