

When in Rome



The workout room in the basement of the Hotel Casa Monti Roma smelled of disinfectant and stale sweat. As Nelson kicked his chest, Sim grunted and dropped to the floor.

‘You’re pretending!’ Nelson protested, using the back of his hand to wipe the fringe of sweat from his forehead. ‘You could’ve blocked that kick. I don’t want you to go easy on me.’

‘I wasn’t.’ Sim got to his feet, giving his best friend a wry smile. ‘I’m trying to build up your confidence by letting you knock me down once in a while.’

‘You mean . . .’ Jeopardy said from behind Sim. ‘Like this?’

Sim was already jumping as Jeopardy threw a kick at the back of his knees. He snapped his legs out into the splits, for less than a second. The ball of his right foot connected with Nelson’s shoulder and the heel of his left foot met Jeopardy’s.

Nelson fell back onto the mat, letting out an ‘*Oomph!*’

Jeopardy stumbled backwards, windmilling her arms to regain her balance.

‘Sim?’ Callidora stepped onto the floor mats, giving him a

stern look. She was a martial arts master and Sim's mum. 'That was uncalled for.'

'They asked for it,' Sim mumbled.

'In fairness, Mrs L,' Nelson said, getting to his feet and rubbing his shoulder, 'we did ask for it a bit.'

'Sim didn't knock me over. He barely touched me,' Jeopardy said nonchalantly. 'It didn't hurt.'

'Fifteen minutes' sparring,' Callidora commanded. 'Sim, you will stand in the centre of the floor and defend yourself. You are not allowed to strike back – only dodge and block.'

Sim walked into the middle of the mat and bowed to his mum. '*Osu, Sensei.*'

'Nelson. Jeopardy.' Callidora pointed. 'Stand either side of Sim. Throw every punch and kick I've taught you at him.'



‘Alright! I mean, *Osu, Sensei.*’ Jeopardy smirked at Sim as she went to her spot and whispered, ‘Revenge is sweet, cousin.’

‘Thought I barely touched you,’ Sim replied, bowing to her, then Nelson.

‘Two against one doesn’t seem fair,’ Nelson said, reluctant to throw the first punch.

Jeopardy whirled straight into a clumsy roundhouse kick that Sim sidestepped easily. ‘Imagine Sim is a time key hunter,’ she said to Nelson, ‘come to Rome to capture us and bring us to the Council of Keys.’ She threw a barrage of punches at her cousin.

Sim met Jeopardy’s frenzied attack calmly with a downwards block. She lost her balance and stumbled to her knees. Nelson threw a tentative kick that Sim turned aside, but Nelson followed with a punch that almost met its target.

‘Well done! That was close,’ Sim said encouragingly, as he ducked and somersaulted away from a swing of Jeopardy’s fist.

‘I’m pretending you’re Penhooligan,’ Nelson replied, lifting his fists in front of his face, narrowing his eyes and puckering his mouth.

‘He’s a bigger target than me,’ Sim said, thinking of the giant key hunter’s muscular Viking physique. ‘But much harder to knock down.’

‘Hiii-yah!’ Jeopardy cried, spinning in a circle, karate chopping wildly in all directions, hitting nothing.

Sim laughed until her auburn ponytail whipped him in the face. Momentarily blinded by his cousin’s hair, he failed to see Nelson’s kick to his standing leg. As Sim lost his balance,

he grabbed at the air, finding the white sleeve of Jeopardy's karate-gi, yanking her down. Jeopardy grabbed onto Nelson. All three of them ended up in a pile on the floor, giggling.

'We did it!' Jeopardy sat triumphantly on Sim's chest. 'We defeated the time key hunter!'

'Victory is ours!' Nelson agreed, chuffed that he'd landed the kick that had brought Sim down.

Callidora shook her head at the three of them. 'Nelson, you're making good progress, but Jeopardy, you must learn to focus and move with intention.' She looked at her watch. 'OK. I think we're done for today. Let's go back to the hotel room, wash, and get changed for dinner.'

'Into our theatre outfits?' Nelson asked eagerly.

'Yes, but remember, we're going to the restaurant first.' Callidora turned to Sim. 'Try not to get food on your clothes.' A wistful look came across her face. 'We want to look our best for the opera.'

Sim was surprised by the keenness in his mum's voice. He hadn't realized she liked opera so much.

Callidora took the stairs. Nelson, Jeopardy and Sim piled into the silver lift, which took them to the fifth floor. They filed into their family suite. Callidora had taken the double bedroom. Uncle Emmett was sleeping on the sofa-bed in the living room, where he now sat reading an Italian newspaper. He waved as the three of them bundled past him into their room.

Sim and Nelson had bagsied the bunk bed before they'd left London. Jeopardy had the camp bed.

They took it in turns to have quick showers in the en suite bathroom, then got ready for their night out.

‘I still can’t believe Auntie Calli agreed to our coming to Italy,’ Jeopardy said, opening the wardrobe. She moved aside the long white tunic and blue stola that she’d made herself from a design in a historical costume book, and took out the emerald-green dress she’d brought to wear to the opera.

‘It’s thanks to your dad being a next-level con man and telling Mum it’d be educational,’ Sim said as Jeopardy stepped into the bathroom to put her dress on. He remembered his uncle’s persuasive words with a smile: *‘While we’re in Rome, Calli, why not let the kids be time tourists for once? It never did us any harm. Remember how much fun we used to have? It’ll be good for their education.’*

Sim knew his mum wanted to talk to Matteo Blom, a time key and opera singer performing in Rome, about why Sim was able to open time doors with a tuning fork when every other time key needed a musical instrument. He hadn’t expected her to agree to him, Jeopardy and Nelson coming to Italy too, let alone being time tourists, but he was glad she had. The thought of going to Ancient Rome made Sim’s heart skip with excitement.

‘It *will* be educational,’ Nelson said, dropping onto the bottom bunk beside Sim. ‘What better way to understand Ancient Rome than by going there? We might actually see Romans building aqueducts or the straight roads they’re so famous for. I’ve been learning Latin for weeks so I can understand what people are saying. You time keys are so lucky

to be able to tune into foreign languages.'

'You've been learning Latin?' Sim was constantly surprised by his friend's cleverness.

'I've got a streak of sixty-two days on my language app.'

Nelson raised a hand and said in a bad Italian accent, '*Cave canem.*'

'What does that mean?' Jeopardy asked, coming out of the bathroom brushing her long red hair.

'Beware of the dog,' Nelson replied. 'You know, like, beware of Kane Wolfe, the evil chairman of the Council of Keys, except I haven't learned the Latin for wolf yet.'

Jeopardy laughed. 'Kane Dog. That's what we should call him.'

'We're going to have to wear togas,' Sim said, grimacing at the short oatmeal tunic hanging beside Jeopardy's in the open wardrobe.

'Togas are stylish,' Nelson told him happily.

Jeopardy looked in the wardrobe-mirror and clipped her hair into a centre parting. 'I'm just glad to be out of the Lasenby Rooms and walking around without a wig on.'

Jeopardy and her dad, Emmett, lived in the Lasenby Rooms – a secret underground residence beneath Liberty department store in central London. They were hiding from the Council of Keys. At their last encounter, in York, Jeopardy had threatened to use the Gjallarhorn – a Viking instrument that could herald a war to end all worlds. The powerful weapon had forced the Council of Keys to let them all go, but it had put Jeopardy on their radar as a serious threat. Luckily for Sim, the

Council had mistakenly thought Nelson was Callidora's son. For some mysterious reason Kane Wolfe had been fixated on finding Callidora, but when he'd discovered that she was no longer a time key, and Nelson – supposedly her son – wasn't a time key either, he'd lost interest. Sim wondered if Kane Wolfe's fixation had anything to do with the unique way Sim opened time doors. He hoped Matteo Blom might have some answers.

Jeopardy complained about having to wear disguises when she left the Lasenby Rooms, but Sim suspected she secretly enjoyed it. The wall of glass display cabinets in her bedroom exhibited a menagerie of wigs, hats, a crutch and even a rainbow umbrella. Once, Jeopardy had covered herself with fake tattoos, put on a short black wig, clipped on some piercings, and met Sim and Nelson at their school gates. Much to her delight, they'd walked right past her.

Keeping up the pretence that Nelson was Callidora's son took work. Every day, after school, he walked to the Sir John Soane Museum – where Sim and Callidora lived – and Sim would go and wait in a cafe in Soho called Bar Italia. Nelson would then sneak out of a side door of the museum in Sim's skater hoodie, taking a winding route to the same cafe. The boys would slip into the back room of Bar Italia, down through a trapdoor into a tunnel that wove under the streets, emerging in an underground car park close to Liberty department store. Staying in the shadows, they would approach the hidden entrance to the Lasenby Rooms cautiously, making sure they weren't being followed. They never let their guard down. Sim's

mum's words haunted him: '*We may not be a target for the Council right now, but Jeopardy is. We must keep her safe.*'

The five of them, Sim, his mum, his uncle Emmett, his cousin Jeopardy, and Nelson would discuss their newest findings in the ongoing investigation into the Council of Keys. There were rumours rippling through the network of renegade keys about increased policing of the time doors and unusual Council activity.

Emmett had a lock-up nearby where he kept an unlicensed black London taxi-cab. He would drop Nelson home and take Sim and Callidora back to the museum. They were always watchful. But in the three months since their run-in with the Council of Keys in York, there had been no sightings of the key hunters or their spies.

It was the pretence that Nelson was Callidora's son that had persuaded her he should come to Rome with them. '*But Mrs L, you can't go on holiday without me. What if someone spots you? If you're with Sim and I'm not there, the key hunters might put two and two together. No one would believe you'd leave your son behind.*'

And so, with Nelson's mum's blessing, the day after school broke up for the summer holidays, Sim, Callidora, Nelson, Uncle Emmett and Jeopardy had flown to Italy.

'I still can't believe that we're here, in actual Rome!' Nelson said, taking a midnight-blue velvet blazer and trousers from the wardrobe.

'What's that?' Sim asked.

'My suit for the opera,' Nelson replied.

‘It’s a bit posh, isn’t it?’ Sim stared at the sharp suit.

‘Opera is fancy,’ Jeopardy said, twirling so that the skirt of her green dress, and her hair, flew out. ‘Everyone dresses posh. It’s fun.’

‘I didn’t bring anything fancy!’ Sim felt a flutter of alarm and called out, ‘Mum!’

Callidora came to the door. ‘Yes?’

‘I didn’t bring a jacket for the opera.’

‘Don’t panic, Peanut. I’ve ironed one of your school shirts and your uncle says you can borrow his cape.’

‘His *cape!*’ Sim echoed in horror.

Callidora called out, ‘Emmett, where’s your opera cape?’

Nelson and Jeopardy exchanged a look, suppressing smiles.

‘I’m not wearing a cape,’ Sim hissed at them.

‘Capes are stylish,’ Nelson said, stepping into his suit trousers. ‘Jeopardy’s dad says the opera we’re going to see is called *Falstaff*.’

‘Never heard of it,’ Jeopardy admitted.

‘It’s a comedy about a poor, drunken, fat knight called Sir John Falstaff who tries to seduce rich married women to get his hands on their cash,’ Nelson explained.

‘Opera can be funny?’ Sim was surprised to hear this.

‘I’m ready,’ Jeopardy said, pulling a black banana-shaped shoulder bag over her head so that it hung diagonally across her body. It contained one half of the legendary Viking Gjallarhorn – the half that had once been owned by Eirik Windhat, son of Ragnar Lothbrok. She never went anywhere without it. She slept with it under her pillow. The other half of

the Gjallarhorn, its brother, was kept safe in a glass terrarium in her bedroom, back in the Lasenby Rooms.

Sim reviewed his reflection in the wardrobe mirror. He stabbed his fingers into his tangle of dark curls, trying to make it look like a textured fringe. He was wearing the white shirt and black trousers of his school uniform.

‘Opera cape delivery service!’ Uncle Emmett flounced into the room in a cappuccino-coloured linen suit and white shirt. He whirled the circle of black cloth over Sim’s shoulders, fastening it around his neck with a silver clasp. ‘Hmm, you’re missing something.’ He fished in his jacket pocket and pulled out a slippery strip of turquoise silk covered in silver stars. Slinging it around Sim’s neck, he nimbly tied it into a bow. ‘That’s better.’

‘We need to get a move on,’ Callidora called out from the other room.

‘Coming, Mrs L,’ Nelson replied, following Jeopardy out of the room.

‘I can’t go out like this,’ Sim muttered to his reflection, wafting the cape. ‘I look like a magician!’