

## Chapter 905

### Objectives

Located safely away from Yaresh was an outdoor testing facility for the Magical Research Association. The Yaresh branch was one of the first, when the association was still looking to establish itself, and Clive had selected the location carefully. At a time when Yaresh was still rebuilding and struggling to control the surrounding region, the guards protecting the testing centre were, by default, required to safeguard a wide area around it.

Clive had situated the facility between two major trading routes; the river and one of the few intact major roadways. Having outside forces secure them when the city was at its most strained for resources was a major boon. This, in turn, made the city look very poorly on any attempt by the Magic Society to undermine the association as it established itself.

The testing centre itself was a series of reinforced buildings, underground bunkers and open platforms, scattered across a wide area. The land took minimal clearing for construction, as it had once been farmland. The former landowners were long dead, and the nearest town was abandoned.

One of several open platforms at the facility was simple but very large, designed for the maintenance and modification of large-scale vehicles. Right now, five people stood in the middle of the platform, around a flask.

“Turned out not be as tricky as we feared,” Travis told Jason.

“I have been doing this for many years,” the Cloudweaver explained. “I have created cloud vehicles and structures for several churches, and they like to incorporate the power of their god into the design. I suspected that your case might be similar, and while there were additional complications, the principles were much the same.”

“What kind of complications?” Jason asked.

“The power of a god is simple. Clean. Focused. It doesn’t need to be sophisticated because the power is, for practical purposes, infinite. Examining your effect on the flask, it’s obvious that your powers are messy. Complicated. I am correct in deducing that you are at least partly divine, am I not?”

“Wait,” Hector de Varco said. “You’re part god?”

“That’s not exactly accurate,” Clive explained. “It’s more a case that his transcendent aspect has certain capabilities that functionally operate in the same manner as gods perform similar tasks, rather than Jason being a god himself. Of course, with the transcendent aspect of his being and his ability to undertake the aforementioned tasks, the practical difference is—”

“He means no, but kind of yes,” Jason said.

“Jason,” Clive said, “that’s very reductive.”

“Yes,” Jason agreed. “Clive, I don’t have time for the long version, and I’m immortal.”

“Part god,” Hector said. “It makes me feel a lot better about you winning our duel just by looking at me.”

House de Varco was one of the larger noble houses in the Storm Kingdom who did not have their family seat in Rimaros. As with any aristocratic family, they counted adventurers in their number. Their influence and reputation, however, came from the construction and trade of magical vehicles. During Jason’s long absence, Hector had risen to prominence in the family by championing a new enterprise: cloud construct modification.

While cloud flasks were rare, less extravagant cloud constructs were not. Small personal transports were relatively affordable, after which things went sharply up in price. They still weren’t cheap compared to things like floater discs, but they were convenient to store in small vessels, like the amulet mode of Jason’s cloud flask. They were also fashionable, with features like trailing sparks, shifting colours and other effects that led to very full coffers for House de Varco.

“Your power serves much the same function within the cloud flask as a god’s, but with some key differences,” the Cloudweaver continued. “Your power’s influence was not part of the original design, so mapping out how that affected the functionality of the flask was difficult. Rather than a well of divine power for the flask to tap into, your power affects the flask in almost every aspect. This is why my override no longer works, and that’s how your constructs can function as portable temples.”

“Temples to whom?” Hector asked, then looked at Jason. “To you? Because of the part god thing?”

“Yeah,” Jason confirmed. “Did they not tell you about this stuff?”

“They only just brought me in on this,” Hector said. “I’ve done some contract work with Travis on vehicle weapon systems, and he said he had a special project. Going back to the temple thing, is that something we could reproduce? I bet the number of churches looking for cloud vehicles will shoot right up, if that’s an option.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” the Cloudweaver said.

“Now that we understand *most* of your cloud flask’s underlying structure,” Clive explained, “we can look at incorporating some modifications that Travis has been working on for years.”

“It’s just a side project I’ve been tooling around with,” Travis said. “I’ve done weapons for your cloud flask before, but that was years ago. My magical knowledge was still very

Earth-based, and I only tapped into a fraction of the potential. Doing contract work with House de Varco got me thinking about it again. A lot of my work wound up in Emir Bahadir's flask, but obviously yours has some unconventional properties. And many of the ideas I had weren't viable, once we got a proper look under the hood. Of the ones that were, we picked out a few that were extra special and Hector had his people put a rush on manufacturing."

"Just what we've learned from working on this makes it worth it for us," Hector said. "You're going to have the most personalised weapon systems on any cloud flask that I've ever heard of. Anyone foolish enough to get in a fight with your cloud constructs will definitely know who they're up against."

"There are still a few aspects of your flask we weren't entirely able to decipher," the Cloudweaver admitted. "I'm still unsure exactly how it seems to have ranked up alongside you. No special materials, no upgrade ritual. The aspect we had the most trouble with was some kind of minor functionality which seems linked to external items. Without them, the function appears to be lost."

"Yeah," Jason confirmed. "It's part of a three-item set. I got this linking item back at silver rank when I killed this intelligent gold-rank dinosaur guy and looted his body."

"You killed an intelligent gold-rank monster at silver?" Clive asked.

"I told you about this," Jason said. "Most of the work was done when a proto-astral space closed with us inside. It spat us back out, with him most of the way dead. I just finished him off."

"How did you survive?" the Cloudweaver asked.

"Oh, I was all the way dead. But coming back from the dead is—"

"Kind of your thing," Clive said. "Yes, we know."

"I remember that," Travis said. "You're talking about Makassar, right? The footage was all over the news. Am I remembering you turning into a giant bird made of stars?"

"The star phoenix, yes."

"Can you still do that?" Travis asked.

"This avatar can, yes."

"That was sweet. Taika can turn into a big magic bird, too. Maybe I should build a jetpack with wings, like General Hawk."

"From *G.I. Joe*?" Jason asked.

"Are you people utterly incapable of staying on topic?" the Cloudweaver asked.

"Yeah, pretty much," Jason agreed as Clive and Travis nodded their agreement.

“Well, the point is, I would like to thank you for giving me access to your cloud flask. It took significantly longer than I had hoped, but that was ultimately more valuable, given the effects of your current condition on it. I am curious about that other functionality, however.”

“Oh, it just lets me pull out a little bit of cloud stuff and use it to make shields and such. It’s only strong enough to be effective against things lower than my rank, though, so I usually use it to make chairs. I was originally disappointed, if I’m being honest, but it’s turned into one of my favourite things.”

“I’ve been looking into cloud furniture,” Hector said. “I haven’t managed to make it cost effective yet.”

“We’re expecting the materials for the upgrades to arrive some time in the next hour or so,” Travis said. “We’ll get them in, do a little testing, and then we can finally get on our way. Everything else is ready to go right?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “We’ve just been waiting on a ride.”

The Cloudweaver shook Jason’s hand.

“I must confess that I was trapped in traditional thinking for a long time,” they said. “Failing to innovate is one of the traps that come with longevity. Following the lead of House de Varco, the last decade has seen some remarkable leaps in — what was the term you used, Travis?”

“Aftermarket modification.”

“I still don’t like the phrase,” Hector said. “Yes, there are Adventure Society trade hall markets where you can buy cloud constructs, but that’s for the more affordable personal transports. Cloud vehicles and their modifications are a prestige product. The implication that you can buy them from a kiosk doesn’t engender the kind of image my family is looking for.”

“While we’re waiting,” Clive said, “perhaps you could answer another few questions I have about the system.”

Jason let out a groan.

“Fine.”

“Excellent,” Clive said and plucked a notebook from a pocket from somewhere inside his flowing wizard robe. “Now, last time we were discussing the degree to which you were conscious of the System as it operated in the vicinity of your prime avatar...”

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Jason’s first encounter with a cloud vessel was Emir’s. It sailed into Greenstone, the size of an ocean liner, not flying due the low magic levels. Now that Jason was gold rank,

he could finally produce a vehicle of similar size, and it flew away from Yaresh alongside Emir's.

Both vessels looked markedly different from that first look Jason got of Emir's. Cloud substance remained as the underlying structure, but significant external panelling lined the exteriors. For Emir, the panels looked something like blue solar panels, letting off a faint glow. They drew on ambient magic to fuel Emir's vessel more efficiently, saving on spirit coin expenditure.

Jason had the advantage of powering his cloud ship with his personal universe, skipping that requirement altogether. The dark red panels on his vessel were more defence-oriented, in case of monster attack. As their route would be taking them just north of the Pallimustus equivalent of Australia, this was considered a wise move. The island continent was known for high-ranking and dangerous monsters, and it was not uncommon for one to swim or fly northward.

Jason and Danielle were on the open deck above the bridge where Shade was piloting the vessel.

"You know that you could portal around the world, right?" Danielle asked. "We don't have to go the long way."

"Sometimes, the long way is the point. If nothing else, I need to visit places before I can portal there. Same for Clive, and Humphrey's teleports. I know they got the chance to travel a lot in my absence, but there is always more to see. And as for me, I didn't get that chance. I've missed a lot, and I'm going to make up for it. I want to see the world, not teleport past it."

"I recall my son telling me about this exact plan a long time ago. Roaming around the world on your eventual way to Estercost. You didn't make it past Yaresh."

Jason turned to look behind them as they sailed over the trees. He could just make out the light gleaming off the Yaresh towers.

"We have now. It took us longer than I expected, but here we go. I wasn't expecting the great astral beings to show up and tell me I had to play IT guy to the cosmos."

"IT guy?"

"Yeah, they broke their magic throne, so I had to go turn it off and on again."

"If I'm going to be your political advisor, I'm going to need you to start talking to people in ways they understand. Especially me."

"You understood. Context clues."

"Jason, you want me to instruct you on matters of diplomacy, yes?"

"Yes."

“Then I’ll try to explain things as we go, since telling you to do the opposite of every instinct you have might be considered hurtful.”

“So, you’re not going to tell me that?”

“No.”

“Somehow, it still feels hurtful.”

“Then you need to harden up. I remember when you arrived in Greenstone. I remember the furnace of fear and panic burning at the heart of your aura, hidden under the bravado and the strange behaviour. But those days are long behind you, Jason. Back then, you were a boy with potential. Now, you have to be a man who lives up to it.”

“My first day in this world, Rufus straight up told me that I had to choose if I was going to take responsibility of my own fate. Things escalated a bit more than either of us anticipated. I was never ready for dealing with all these entities who were so much more powerful than me. Now, I’m not ready to be the one with the power. It feels strange that I need to learn to be more diplomatic to avoid using it. If I just haul off on everyone that tries to treat me like they did last time I was on Earth, I’ll end up going to war with the whole planet.”

“The good thing is, having that power and not using it will be a valuable asset. Diplomacy is a war, and like any war, it involves influence, positioning, allies and, yes, power. Of many kinds. You gather intelligence and hope you know more about them than they know about you, without ever being truly certain. Everything is an advantage to be won and lost. If you’re going to annoy someone, it needs to be for a purpose. Deliberate. If that purpose is your personal amusement, you’re giving away advantage for nothing.”

“There’s a part of me that wants to march in and demonstrate that there’s no one on Earth that can stop me from doing whatever I want.”

“I imagine that would be very satisfying.”

“Yes. And it would start going wrong almost immediately. But I know it’s going to be hard restraining myself when I see something I can’t abide. I know that having the power to make changes isn’t the same as it being a good idea, not when my understanding of a situation is too shallow. That doesn’t make holding back easy.”

“I said that diplomacy is war, Jason, and wars have objectives. It seems that, right now, you’re not thinking beyond a desire to avoid causing problems.”

“I think that’s a pretty valid desire.”

“Yes, but it’s not a goal. Is it something you honestly believe you can hold yourself to? Can you stand by as some travesty takes place and just leave it to the people of Earth to handle?”

“Probably not, if I’m being honest. Here, on Pallimustus, things are simpler. No one is going to look at it as a challenge of sovereignty or a violation of local culture if you punch a monster until it explodes. Even when problems get political, the people here understand individual power. On Earth, they don’t understand the ramifications of people like us existing. They think of them as extraordinary threats, rather than the new way of the world. And when they realise that it will be a new way, the people who like things the old way will start getting nervous. Desperate.”

“Is that you’re objective, then? To help Earth smoothly transition to a new paradigm of power?”

“No. That will take time, and it needs to be the people of Earth that find their own way forward. I’m not one of them anymore, not really.”

“Then you need to find what your objectives are, even if only preliminary ones. It will focus your efforts, and let you go to Earth with more than anxiety that you’re about to break it.”

“Danielle, I can feel you pulling me by the nose towards something. Just spit it out.”

“You want to change things, yes?”

“Yes, but don’t tease me, Danielle. I’m not a quick learner, and it took me an embarrassingly long time to get the idea of unintended consequences through my skull. I’m not just going throw that out the window.”

“You really aren’t a quick learner, are you? Yes, if you bolt off with no real understanding of what you’re doing and try to fix problems, you’re going to make even more. But why am I here right now?”

“To help me with the things I...”

Exasperation at his own stupidity crossed his face.

“...to help me with something I don’t properly understand.”

“There is your goal, Jason. You want to use the power at your command to address problems that others can’t or won’t. You need to find the people that can help you do that without making things worse.”

“This sounds suspiciously like what Dominion suggested about taking over. Or a *Team America: World Police* situation.”

“Jason, what did I just say?”

“Right, sorry. What you’re talking about is a sophisticated undertaking, though, with a lot of steps. We’re talking about establishing something between a think tank and an intelligence agency. And that isn’t me making strange references, by the way. I’ll explain the concepts to you later, because they’re going to be important. And even assuming we

can make that work, we'll have to deal with the consequences of doing so. Negotiate how and when we can intervene when things happen. And what happens when we go back to Pallimustus. We're going to be visitors on Earth, not residents. What happens if we build the Justice League and then run off back to Palli?"

"Jason..."

"Sorry. But politically and diplomatically complicated doesn't begin to describe what taking this approach would entail. And once we navigate them fearing us, they're going to try and exploit us."

"That sounds familiar. Perhaps politics aren't so different over there."

"What's our first step?"

"Aside from me teaching you to avoid spouting a constant stream of nonsense? Information. Always information first. If you can contact this person you want to recruit on Earth, you should do so with haste. Before anything else, we need to understand what we'll be walking into."



## Chapter 906

### The Protection of a Dictator

Having been established decades ago, the Holy Army of Knowledge had many elite units at silver and even gold rank. Other armies, both of nations and other gods, had lacked the forewarning of the goddess of knowledge. Without the lead time for recruiting and preparation, their ranks were mostly comprised of people who had ranked up using monster cores. They hadn't intended to be adventurers, having little combat experience outside of monster surges. But when the call to war from their monarchs and gods came, they had not shirked their duties.

After more than a decade of war, many of these forces were battle-hardened veterans. There were always new recruits, however, and even veteran troops fell short of adventurers with the same level of experience. Many forces were reliable and experienced, but less powerful due to fewer resources and less training. They often had an elite core leadership of current or former adventurers, but they were inevitably lacking compared to premier armies and Adventure Society task groups.

That was not to say that these lesser groups had no value. Experienced hands were always assets, and there were far too many places for the elite groups to be stationed. Low-priority areas where the messengers had shown no interest were often protected by locally raised armies, taking on not just messenger threats but monster hunting roles when so many adventurers were busy. In low-threat zones, these less powerful groups were usually enough.

War, however, was capricious and cruel. Circumstances could change suddenly and without warning, turning a quiet backwater into a contested battleground. Such was the case in Segurado, a small city state in what, on Earth, would be Uruguay.

The Segurado army was not an elite force. Even the adventurers leading them were those that could be spared from more critical areas. There had been no indication that the messengers had any interest in the area until, suddenly, they were everywhere. They had flown low, over and even through the jungle, so as to avoid detection from flying observer patrols. There was alarm magic in the jungle, but it had been avoided or disabled. That was always a threat, given the superior ritual magic of the messengers.

The messenger force had closed on the city walls before anyone realised, watchful defenders only sensing them as they made their final approach. Instead of moving straight to the attack, however, they abandoned their low altitude positions and soared high into the air. Their numbers were so great they darkened the sky, as if storm clouds were

passing over the city. What they had in store for the people below, however, was far worse than wind and rain.

More numerous than the messengers themselves were their bizarre summons; an expendable army of creatures ranging from the monstrous to the utterly unnatural. Disembodied eyes, encircled by concentric metal rings. Giant bone cubes with mouths on each side, prehensile tongues slithered from each sharp-toothed maw. Round cages filled with hundreds of arms that grasped through the bars at empty air.

There was a pause, as if the messengers were waiting for the residents to look to the sky and panic. That malevolent mercy proved short-lived, with the populace and the city's defenders still scrambling when the messenger army descended. The dome of the city's magical barrier snapped into place as monsters and messengers rained attacks upon it. The faint blue shield shook under the downpour, from projectiles, beams and explosions to the brute force of fists, claws and tentacles.

The defenders hurried to take positions, knowing the dome would not last long. As with Yareh, years earlier, the barrier protecting the city had been designed to repel monster surges, not organised invasion. The messenger force lacked the powerful artefacts that had collapsed the barrier in Yareh, but Segurado was smaller than Yareh, with a commensurately less powerful barrier. The invaders didn't need anything but brutality and time.

The Segurado army managed to assume defensive formations before the barrier began collapsing, but they knew it would do them little good. They were far from elite, and the freakish monster army had them massively outnumbered.

The leader of the Segurado army was General Millicent Marks, an elven adventurer in the classic spellcaster style of her people. She was stationed on the flat roof of the city's highest tower, alongside several other spellcasters. The city's defences didn't stop with the barrier, the tower serving to enhance the range and strength of spells.

"They may be more interested in us than we hoped," she said, looking up at the foes pounding the barrier. "At least we aren't too much of a priority. They've used summons for most of their army, and there aren't lot of gold rankers up there."

"Small mercies," said her second in command. Like most of the people on the southern half of the continent, he was an elf. "Milli, do you think we can hold? Honestly?"

"We have a chance," Millicent said. "But even if the city holds, it's going to burn."

The barrier was designed to hold off monsters while adventurers went out to meet them. No one was foolish enough to take that approach against the merciless and intelligent messengers, as that was asking for death. The most the dome could do for them

was buy time for the populace to reach monster surge bunkers and the Segurado army to take defensive positions. Some took formations on the ground, others in the air. A few took positions in defensive emplacements like the magic tower.

Millicent braced herself. She was gold rank and would almost certainly survive the coming battle. But she knew doing so would involve leaving her subordinates, the city and its people to a grim fate. She wondered if it might not be better to stand her ground and go down fighting.

Silver and gold rankers were hard to kill and good at staying alive, especially adventurers. When messengers won a battle, most of the Pallimustus elites escaped to fight another day. Quite often, those victories came because the messengers were more willing to trade lives than the adventurers. The messengers would fight battles of attrition, going life for life until the armies and the adventurers could no longer tolerate the losses.

Millicent wondered if winning the war required people with the grim resolve to make the same sacrifice. Perhaps what she needed was not to escape but to take as many of them with her as she could. Her emotions wanted her to fight to the bitter end, but she knew it was futile.

While the messengers were outnumbered on Pallimustus, there were more of them in the cosmos than stars in the sky. Battle-ready silver-rank messengers could be grown and trained in batches, for a fraction of the time and resources required to produce an equivalent essence user. If the messengers had a secure and established summoning station anywhere in the area, they could always replenish their numbers.

Millicent closed her eyes, forcing herself to take calming breaths as the barrier started to give way. She only allowed herself a moment of that before snapping her eyes back open. As the barrier collapsed, it didn't crack and shatter like glass. Ripples formed, like the surface of a pond, with holes at the centre of each ripple. Monsters poured through as the ripples kept expanding, running into one another until the barrier fell apart entirely, dissolving like mist.

The enemies that had yet to move plunged downward in a cascade of alien war beasts, with glorious winged warriors following behind. The monsters let out alien howls, spine-tingling shrieks and sounds that no living thing should be able to produce. The bone cubes let out noises like the grinding of teeth, amplified through a bullhorn. Other made sounds like metal shearing and warping.

Their collective auras came down like a hammer. The emotions of the summons were clear, if largely incomprehensible. There was an alien malice, drowned in the madness of minds fundamentally different from ordinary people, or even most monsters. As for the

messengers, only the silver rankers were readable, and only to gold rankers like Millicent. They held no hatred, only superiority, purpose and obedience. She couldn't read their minds, but their emotions suggested they had few thoughts not given to them by their distant kings.

Millicent could also sense the emotions of her fellow defenders, and the populace they were defending. Both were filled with despair that reflected Millicent's own. Few had any hope, and the little to be found was dying fast.

Then something changed. Millicent wasn't sure what, at first, but the reaction from the enemy was evident, immediate and extreme. Their descent stopped instantly, like a snap-frozen waterfall. Their auras roiled, a mix of fear, fury and confusion striking the messengers.

Millicent hadn't known, until that moment, that fear was something they could even feel. She'd heard stories of captured messengers defying torture to the last scrap of life. As for the summons, she'd never sensed anything from their auras before than gibbering madness. They were suddenly coherent, focused on something high above, like a mouse watching a perched owl. The sudden change was unsettling, even with the relief that their attention was no longer on the city.

Millicent was immediately sure that something had appeared above the messengers. She couldn't get a good read on it through the storm of enemy auras, and there were too many to see past. Then an aura cut through everything, and she knew immediately that it was responsible for whatever had just happened to the messengers.

The aura was gold rank and far too powerful to come from a person. She'd sensed aura amplification like this before, built into the defences from major churches. It wasn't a god's aura, but not quite that of a mortal's either. In any case, there was no temple in the sky above the city, last time she checked. Then she realised she had sensed something like it. Just once, very briefly. Every essence user had, in that strange moment when the system first appeared. What that meant, she had no idea, but in a city starved of hope, she'd take it.

Whomever or whatever that aura belonged to, she could feel the messengers trying and failing to suppress it. It was oppressive, yet benevolent, like the protection of a dictator. While that was certainly worrying, at that moment it was good enough.

She was looking up, trying to see past the throng of enemies. The summons had always been a chaotic mess, but now they were a maelstrom of activity, dashing around and sometimes even fighting one another. They were fighting something else too, as were the messengers, but Millicent couldn't see what it was yet.

Millicent tapped the collar on her neck. Communication systems had advanced in leaps and bounds over that last decade, and she could use the collar to speak to all her troops at once.

“Whoever is up there,” she announced, “they’re battling the messengers. I don’t know if they’re fighting for us, but they’re fighting, and I won’t let them do it alone. All squads capable of air combat, go full assault. Right now.”

Wind gusted around Millicent, picking her up and carrying her into the sky. She didn’t allow herself to get carried away, letting the more defensive elements of her forces lead the way. Not only was she a ranged fighter but she needed to keep a broader view of the battle. This warred with her desire to launch forward and discover the nature of their mysterious reinforcements, but she was an experienced commander and knew what rashness would cost.

The Segurado army assaulted what was now the rear of the distracted messenger forces. It was still unclear who or what was above them, but Millicent delighted at the distracted enemy. As she unloaded her powerful wind magic, she got her first sense of their presumed allies as she felt other essence users manipulate the wind. One worked similarly to Millicent, creating storm-like destruction over a wide area. Another was much more personal, passing unharmed through the magical storms at speeds Millicent could only sense, not see directly.

She started spotting what had to be adventurers as they took the fight to the messengers. A man in rainbow armour ploughed through the messenger forces with seeming impunity, on the back of some shape-shifting creature. One moment it was an eagle ripping the wings from messengers with its talons. The next, it was a floating slime that absorbed and disintegrated the messenger summons. The man riding it swung a massive sword from which waves of force erupted out, striking the clustered summons like a hurricane hitting mosquitos.

More presumed allies appeared, all apparently gold rank. Several were flying around inside a tortoise shell whose upper and lower halves were connected at the corners but otherwise open-sided. Multiples spellcasters and healers appeared to be operating from within, protected by the strange vehicle. Millicent watched several attacks fired at the open sides blocked by shell that grew up to shield them before retracting again.

A massive set of spinning wheels appeared in the sky, lined up next to one another like giant slices of sausage. They had symbols on them and occasionally the wheels would stop and fire off various effects. Some buffed and healed their allies, both the new adventurers and Millicent’s forces, even those still on the ground. At other times, the

wheels launched a dazzling variety of magical attacks at the enemy, from waters jets and fireballs to crippling debuffs. The more wheels with matching symbols, the stronger the effect and the more people were affected.

One oddity she noticed was the presence of butterflies across the battlefield, glowing blue and orange. The messengers avoided the beautiful creatures as if they were death incarnate, launching attacks at the butterflies to keep them away. It didn't seem to help much, as the struck butterflies exploded into clouds of sparks. The clouds then sought out enemies, mostly finding the less wary summons.

Wherever the clouds landed, the victims immediately started to rot horrifically, even the ones that weren't flesh. Those touched by the butterflies had a similar, but much slower effect. They started to produce more butterflies, however, that grew out of their bodies and flew off in search of more victims.

As the messenger forces lost cohesion and their numbers fell, Millicent was able to identify more of what she hoped were allies. Each one seemed to be not just a gold ranker but a gold rank elite. The messengers evaporated in front of them like morning mist before the sun. Millicent was finally able to spot the source of the massive aura, floating in the sky. It looked like an eyeball the size of a castle estate, everything but the blue and orange iris encased in dark red armour. Floating around the iris were smaller but otherwise identical orbs, each one the size of a house. These smaller orbs were the source of the butterflies, which poured out of them like water spilling off a cliff.

The messengers were not fighting tactically, for which Millicent was glad. They seemed obsessed with one of the combatants, either fleeing from him or chasing after him with wild-eyed fury. The man had a dark cloak with shadow arms sprouting from it, like the branches of a macabre tree. She heard more than one of the frenzied attackers screaming 'heretic king,' whatever that meant. Explanations could wait until after the fighting was done.

Still throwing out spells, Millicent watched what was quickly turning into a massacre. The messengers were caught between her forces and these newcomers, small in number but great in power. With the messengers barely paying attention to them, the Segurado army made them pay, while safely evacuating their injured to the healers.

By the time the battle was over, dead messengers scattered across the city below. The visiting adventurers had made them lootable and left them for her people to collect, rainbow smoke raising as messengers turned into magical weapons and supplies that would undoubtedly be put to good use.

Millicent hadn't suffered a single death amongst her forces. There had been a couple of close calls, but more than once a shield had snapped into place right before one of her people had suffered a killing blow. Only a short time ago, she had been contemplating whether to die fighting in defence of her home. Now, the invaders were dead, and her people were safe.

She had some profound thanks to give.

## Chapter 907

### You Want Your Adventurers Happy

In the aftermath of the battle, Millicent stood atop the magic tower. As the highest point in the city, it allowed her to survey the goings on below, without the need to start flying around. There were going to be a lot of anxious aristocrats and city officials so, for the moment, she wanted to be stationary where people could find her.

Ribbons of rainbow smoke rose up as her people looted the dead messengers where they had fallen into the city. There would be damage from an army of dead angels landing on things but hopefully minimal casualties. The populace had evacuated to bunkers while the defensive barrier still held, but there were always those who were too stubborn, too old, or too sick to move.

A woman was suddenly next to Millicent, arriving almost too fast for even a gold ranker to sense her approach. She'd realised, belatedly, who these people were. If not distracted by the existential threat to her home, she might have recognised some of their more distinctive members. The man in rainbow armour riding a shape-changing dragon definitely should have been a giveaway. They were Team Biscuit, who had recently returned to Yareh along with other famous adventurers for reasons unknown.

This woman had dark hair and a swarthy complexion, so she wasn't the team's famously beautiful speedster. But the team leader's mother was even more famous than the team itself, and this woman did fit the description.

"You're the Time Witch of Vitesse," Millicent said.

"I'm actually from a place called Greenstone. And I prefer to be called Danielle, to be honest."

Danielle offered her hand and Millicent shook it.

"You're in command of the local forces?" Danielle asked.

"General Millicent Marks, Segurado Defence Force."

"Danielle Geller."

"Thank you for the help. Our forces are battle hardened, and determined to protect their homes and families, but determination isn't always enough."

"No," Danielle agreed sadly. "It's not."

Millicent looked up at where the strange, humungous eye had transformed into a mass of cloud. It was now slowly taking the form of a sky liner, the largest class of airship.

"Is that what you travel around in?"



“For the moment,” Danielle said. “The man that owns the vessel has a penchant for the dramatic.”

“Is this what it’s like?”

“It?” Danielle asked.

“Being a famous adventurer. I was born and raised here in Segurado. Trained here, not in some big city like Vitesse. I had this dream, back when I was iron rank, about hitting gold rank and swanning into one of the famous adventurer cities like a queen. In the end, I never roamed far. There was always too much to do, and it was always going to be a dream. By gold rank standards, I’m a little fish.”

“There are no little fish at gold rank.”

“Of course you’d think that. Your life is all world travel and transforming sky ships. Swooping in to rescue little no-name places you won’t remember in a week. I’m not trying to sound ungrateful — I’m profoundly thankful for the swooping in, believe me. It just makes me realise that, even if I hadn’t been stuck guarding this place for all these years, I wouldn’t be anything special in a place like Rimaros or Kacha Kille.”

“Believe me, Miss Marks, you are special. I have known many adventurers from outside of the famous cities, and few choose to stay and protect their homes after reaching high rank. Of those that do, it is less often out of duty than a desire to be a big fish.”

“You said there were no little fish.”

“And I meant it. Even those who reached gold-rank with cores are notable people, but those who did not still have the potential to go further. Many famous gold rankers never reach diamond, while some that no one in Rimaros or Vitesse has ever heard of reach diamond. The path is long and strange, and many lose sight of duty as they walk it. If you told the Adventure Society that you were leaving this place behind, who would stop you? The society, and the leaders of this city would ask you to remain, but they would do no more than ask. Because you’re a gold ranker, and that makes you special, wherever you are from.”

“Did the Adventure Society send you here?”

“Yes. They’ve been using the sky link communication network to report messenger movement. They’ve also been asking us to move through more remote areas on our travels, where the society can’t afford to station major forces. We happened to be in the area just as a messenger army decamped and headed your way, so they asked us to intervene. We were lucky to be in the area.”

“Not as lucky as we were.”

Danielle nodded.

“It’s unfortunate that so many lives are reliant on luck, but that is the situation in which we...”

She trailed off as two arguing voices reached them from above. Two men were floating down on a small cloud, approaching the tower.

“...every city, just most of them,” Neil said.

“I have never destroyed a city,” Jason shot back. “I’ve been to lots of cities, and hardly any of them were destroyed. Look at this one. It’s fine.”

“How many is hardly any?”

“I don’t know. Three. Four, I guess, but one was more of a big town. And the brightheart city was basically destroyed before we even got there. Also, don’t act like you weren’t there for half of them.”

“Is four counting Rimaros?”

“Why would I count Rimaros?”

“That flying Builder city was dropped on it.”

“It was dropped *near* it, Neil. And there was hardly any damage. The priests of Ocean stopped the tsunami.”

“So, just the four, then.”

“Exactly.”

“You do realise that four is a lot when you’re talking about destroyed cities, right?”

Danielle let out a motherly sigh.

“I may,” she said to Millicent, “be forced to acknowledge your point about what my life is like.”

The pair landed and the cloud they were riding on streamed into an amulet hanging from one the men’s necks. The other moved forward to shake her hand.

“Neil Davone,” he introduced himself. “Team healer.”

“Were you the one putting shields on my people?”

“I might have tossed the odd barrier out, here and there. Nothing remarkable.”

“You saved lives that would otherwise have been lost. The lives of my people. You have my thanks.”

“You’re welcome. And this is—”

“John Miller,” the other man introduced himself as he moved forward to shake her hand. “Team cook.”

“Cook?”

He certainly wasn’t dressed for adventuring, in a floral shirt, shorts and sandals, topped with a straw hat. It was appropriate for the sunny day, but not for fighting monsters.

His aura was human and silver-rank, with the signature taint of monster cores. He looked every bit the auxiliary adventurer, yet he seemed a little off to Millicent. He had a translation power that sounded a little odd, and seemed to own the cloud transport they were riding on. Comfortably carrying two meant it was expensive, even if he was working for famous adventurers. How much did they pay their cook?

Mostly, it was the way he carried himself. He was a core using silver ranker, surrounded by gold-rank adventurers, some of whom were extremely famous. Even Millicent was uncharacteristically hesitant around the Time Witch of Vitesse. This man showed none of the wariness or deference she was used to from lower-ranked people. He acted entirely as if he belonged.

She took a slightly rude glance at the emotions in his aura. She saw little more than the same confidence displayed in his. He gave her an amused smile, as if he realised what she was doing. He certainly shouldn't have been able to, but could probably guess from the curiosity in her gaze. He took his leave, asking if he could use the elevating platform, leaving her with the adventurers.

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An impromptu street festival had sprung up seemingly from nowhere, long tables and food stands filling the market district. While the city of Segurado celebrated their reprieve, Millicent's concerns were with what came next. She wandered through the crowded streets as people feasted, sang and laughed.

She didn't join in, mentally exhausted after going from one meeting to the next for almost two days, often repeating the same things over and over. There was the Duke and his people, the city parliament, the local Adventure Society, then representatives from the Continental Council.

It had been two nights since the battle, during neither of which she had found a chance to sleep. She had finally slipped away, but instead of finding a bed, she found herself walking the streets in the late morning. People teemed around her, not recognising her with her aura carefully retracted.

Her mind was still racing, preoccupied with the next threat. The populace was celebrating, but their leaders still didn't know what brought the messengers to their gates. Was it a part of their ongoing search for the rumoured artefact, or something more specific? Would they return, with a greater force? The Adventure Society had no more idea than she did, spending two days asking her questions to which she had no answers.

The smells coming from the stalls took her back to her days as a girl at market. Her family were never poor, or she'd never have gotten essences, but she hadn't lived in the

fancy part of town, either. Her parents were fruit merchants, and she'd grown up around markets and trade halls. She knew these streets. The yelling and laughing, the aromas of the food vendors. When an unfamiliar scent wafted her way, it arrested her attention.

Her gold-rank senses allowed her to track the scent like a hunting dog. What she found was a stall where a group of local stall vendors were crowded around an outsider, as if he were holding court.

"...season with some salt and then caramelize them in the oven with oil. Nice and simple. I like to add a splash of water to help them soften. Now, let me explain how we make fresh pasta back home. It's so fresh you can practically cook it by waving it over the steam from a kettle. Pass me that roller..."

Millicent found herself listening discreetly out of the way. There was definitely something unusual about the Team Biscuit cook. After around ten minutes, the group started breaking up. Then she heard him whisper, too low for anyone but an attentive gold ranker to make out.

"Can I offer you a meal, General? Pop around behind the booth."

She hadn't realised he'd noticed her, in the middle of teaching the locals a foreign recipe. But she shortly found herself in an area boxed in by stalls, shielding them from prying eyes. A folding table and chair set awaited her, draped with a tablecloth and festooned with dishes, plates and bowls. She could sense the magic of gold rank ingredients. Was this how Team Biscuit always ate?

"One of the secrets of Team Biscuit's success," John Miller said as he sat down. "Live off spirit coins when you have to, but eat proper food when you can. Well-fed adventurers are happy adventurers. And you want your adventurers happy, believe me."

She looked from the food to him as she sat down. As she did, he pulled out a privacy screen device and activated it, setting it on the table.

"I thought a woman of your stature would appreciate some discretion," he said. He ladled food from various dishes onto a plate that he set in front of her. He then made up a plate for himself, apparently unworried about what gold-rank food would do to a silver ranker.

"It would take a lot of strength, and a lot of finesse," she said, "to create an aura mask than would fool a gold ranker. Something that would hold up, even if the gold ranker gets pushy and starts probing for emotions."

"Messengers are good at that," Miller said. "I've even seen them mask people they were using as spies."

"It sounds like you've had a lot of strange experiences for a cook."

“A cook can see a lot in search of new recipes,” he said, and skewered a chunk of saucy vegetable with a fork. “And new ingredients.”

He plopped it into his mouth with a grin.

“Is that why you’re travelling with Team Biscuit?”

He didn’t answer until he was done with his mouthful.

“More of a happy accident,” he said. “An opportunity I take advantage of while attending to other tasks.”

“How did you end up with them?”

“I knew some of the team before they were famous. You might say I hitched a ride on their coattails.”

“You’ve been there since the beginning? I’ve never heard of you.”

“I’m the guy who makes the food. Who talks about the cook when there are people fighting monsters?”

“It sounds like you get to see a lot of cities destroyed.”

“I have been unfortunate enough to witness some tragic disasters, but that was just Neil teasing. Which I hope was obvious.”

“Even so, you strike me as someone who can’t help standing out.”

“But you don’t strike me as someone rude enough to sit down with a cook and not touch his food. Doesn’t smell to your taste?”

She took a slice of bread, dunked it into a thick soup and took a bite.

“It’s good,” she said.

“Thank you.”

They chatted intermittently as they ate.

“You know who else I haven’t heard of?” she said lightly. “That man in the battle with the dark cloak and the shadow arms. I’ve also never heard about Team Biscuit riding around in a giant eyeball that shoots butterflies of death.”

“Oh, you don’t want to meet him. He’s not very nice.”

“Is that so?”

“Remember when I said you want your adventurers happy? He’s how I figured that out.”

“Why does the team keep him secret? Or is he just travelling with you, like the Time Wi... like Danielle Geller?”

“No, he’s part of the team. Has been from the beginning.”

“Like you.”

“Yes. He’s just been away for a long time. I imagine he’ll be known soon enough.”

“What kept him away? Conflict in the team?”

“He has responsibilities that he’s finding increasingly tiresome. He’s looking to wrap them up and get back to adventuring.”

He looked her dead in the eyes.

“Without anyone making a fuss.”

“That might be hard if he keeps fighting messengers. They had a rather drastic reaction to him.”

“He has a lot in common with the messengers.”

“Like a talent for aura masking?”

“Try the casserole before you finish the soup. I think you’ll find it’s a nice accompaniment.”

They ate in silence for a while.

“People are going to have a lot of questions,” she said.

“He’s a known quantity. To those who need to know.”

“You’re saying that if I don’t know already, I shouldn’t go asking?”

“I would advise against it. The Adventure Society can be touchy when it comes to him.”

“Why is that?”

He raised his eyebrows and she sighed.

“Right, I shouldn’t ask.”

He plucked an envelope out of the air, accessing some dimensional storage power. He sat it on the table, next to her plate.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“You told Danielle Geller that you were born and raised right here in Segurado. And you’re still here protecting it, even with all the opportunities your power would afford you.”

“She told you that?”

“I overheard you on that tower.”

“You have good hearing.”

“Don’t we all?”

“What’s in the envelope?”

“Are you familiar with Lady Allayeth, of Yaresh?”

“She’s a diamond ranker that’s active in the general population. Of course I have.”

“Have you met?”

“Yaresh may be somewhat close, but she’s a diamond ranker. Even gold rankers don’t just call by for a cup of tea. Why bring her up?”

“I’m guessing that your choice to stay and protect your home during the messenger invasion is bound up in the path that got you to gold rank.”

“I don’t see how that’s your business.”

“Call it reciprocation for you poking around about Jason Asano.”

“I suppose that’s fair. Yes, that sensibility was integral to reaching gold rank.”

“Lady Allayeth is on a similar path. She may be able to help you on yours, so perhaps you should call in for that cup of tea.”

“I don’t know that she’d even see me?”

He reached out and tapped the envelope on the table.

“A letter of introduction to break the ice.”

“Cook for her too, do you?”

A smile teased the corners of his mouth.

“Once. Just recently, in fact.”

He pushed his chair back and stood up.

“I need to get back to the stall,” he said. “I’ll leave the rest to you.”

He walked off and was just about to disappear around the side of a stall when she called out.

“Wait.”

He stopped, half turning to look back.

“I already expressed my gratitude to the others. Thank you for saving my city, Mr Asano.”

“It’s what we do, General.”

## Chapter 908

### Making Things Worse

Being less central had left Segurado vulnerable, lower priority meaning fewer resources and weaker troops. The same thing affected the more isolated messenger groups, making them ripe for Jason and his companions to strike. The team had zigzagged down the Pallimustus equivalent of South America, hitting targets of opportunity fed to them by the Adventure Society.

Their navigation continued to prioritise sightseeing over efficiency as they left the continent behind. Although their path would take them to the southern tip of what, on Earth, was Africa, they chose to take a wide curve over the south pole rather than a more direct route.

The Pallimustus version of Antarctica was not the icy wasteland it was on Earth. Known as the Dragon Lands, it was the native land of the large, scaled humanoids known as draconians. Rather than the populace, however, the island continent was named for its signature geological features.

Where Greenstone had many apertures to an astral space that provided the desert with water, the Dragon Lands had subterranean apertures to a realm of fire. The result of this was a land filled with active volcanoes, steaming hot springs and the flame geysers known as 'dragon mouths,' for which the region was named.

The whole team came out to watch as the sky ship approached the coast, giving them their first look. Mountains of dark stone jutted from verdant, green lowlands, a mix of sprawling forest and vast agriculture. From altitude, they could make out the outline of fields as if the land below them was a giant map with borders drawn onto it. The plant life was very different from the tropical and subtropical climates they had been passing through, reminding Jason more of Scotland or Ireland.

"There are a lot of active volcanos, right?" Jason asked. "Do they have an ash cloud problem?"

"We're definitely going to see them," Zara said. "But the magic leaking out of the astral spaces has earth affinity, along with fire. It draws the ash from the sky, and absorbs it into the group, creating the famously rich farmlands. If you want gold-rank cooking ingredients, there's no place better than here. It's how they make a lot of their money."

"I thought the draconians were all isolationist," Jason said. "They do a lot of trade?"



“Exports,” Neil said. “Agricultural products from the Dragon Lands are the second-largest trade that passes through the Greenstone port, after low-rank spirit coins. They use proxies outside their own lands, though, and aren’t very welcoming to strangers.”

“Their goods are heavily tariffed by most nations due to political issues,” Zara explained. “That makes it even more expensive than high-rank produce normally is. The quality is what gets people buying it anyway, but obviously that falls under the luxury food market.”

“I did hear the food they produced was good,” Jason said.

“Jason,” Neil asked. “Why did we come here again?”

“It’s a tour,” Jason said. “We decided on this route when we left Rimaros.”

“Before fifteen years of war with the messengers made an already xenophobic people even more wary of outsiders. Is this about anything other than you getting a line on cheap ingredients? Can’t you just make as much money as you want and buy this stuff somewhere more hospitable?”

“There’s a value in farm fresh,” Jason said defensively. “It’s going to be fine.”

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Astral kings rarely mingled their forces, to avoid confusing the most critical element of messenger culture: hierarchy. When operating on a large scale, like a planetary invasion, cooperation was managed through regular meetings between Voices of the Will, the commanders of each astral king’s local forces.

Navise Den Rigal’s astral king was a minor figure, compared to the Council of Kings, and secretly one of the Unorthodoxy’s rare astral kings. Every Voice of the Will paid close attention when they met with others of their kind, but Navise was especially sensitive to any change that might signal a danger to her king’s true allegiance. Slipping Boris Ket Lundi into Vesta Carmis Zell’s service had already been more risk of exposure than she or her astral king liked.

When she arrived at a messenger stronghold, she went straight for the meeting room. It was a spherical chamber accessed through a hole in the ceiling, and the group met by floating in a circle. She noticed a number of missing attendees, all Voices belonging to members of the Council of Kings. Looking around, she saw that others had noticed the same thing, and shared her wariness. It did not take being a secret traitor to be cut down by other messengers.

As the discussion began, it quickly became evident that this wasn’t related to the Unorthodoxy, but to a much more localised threat. The Voices stood around a projection

showing a zigzag pattern across the lower half of one of the planet's continents. Navise listened to a pair of her fellows argue without interjection, as did the rest of the group.

"There is no reason for us to not put together a force and strike them down. They are being allowed to rampage through our territories unabated."

"They have left our territories. They are someone else's problem now."

"Yes. Our failure to quash a handful of insignificant locals will be a stain on our names forever."

"I would hardly call the Heretic King insignificant."

"That is a fool's title to keep the pawns from getting confused."

"It's not working. There is talk of a traitor astral king and of what that means. That is the kind of thinking that leads to the Unorthodoxy. My astral king will not be happy if I have to purge most of my forces again."

"Then let's kill the source. If we destroy his avatar, we won't have to deal with him again until we are done with this planet."

"Killing him has been tried before, when he was far weaker. More importantly, the Council of Kings had specifically instructed us not to provoke him."

"And none of our astral kings belong to the council. My king proposes that we collect our forces, set a trap and crush Asano."

The pair were unable to reach a consensus and would not let it go until each of the others said their piece. Most of the group advocated letting it go, moving any forces out of the Heretic King's path to minimise losses. When pushed, Navise took her usual path of following the group to avoid standing out.

"I say we simply allow the king to pass," she said. "In the end, the issue is one of being inconsequential."

The main advocate for killing Asano scoffed.

"If he is inconsequential, then what harm is there in killing him?"

"I speak not of him, but of us," Navise said. "He is not inconsequential to us, or we would not be having this meeting. We are inconsequential to him. He strikes at us incidentally, as opportunity presents. We should minimise his opportunities, reserving our forces, and simply let him pass. We can resume our operations once he is gone, having lost fewer people and revealed less information."

As Navise looked around the circle, all now staring at her, she realised she had made a mistake.

"We are inconsequential?" One of the others asked.

Anything resembling humility was not the thinking of an orthodox messenger. A wave of power flooded from Navise, slamming the others into the wall as she bolted for the hole in the ceiling.

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Anna took the coffee from the street vendor and started trudging back to her office. Once again, she was running on not enough sleep, but felt no concern for her safety as she took a shortcut through an alleyway. She might not have combat training, but she was silver rank. Anyone who could bring her trouble wouldn't need to use an alley.

"You aren't as safe as you think," a voice said, stepping out of the shadows, startling her.

"There are people watching me, you know, Mr Remore."

"No, there aren't."

"Oh. Will they live?"

"By silver-rank standards, they're practically unharmed. It's become hard to have a discreet conversation with you, Mrs Tilden."

"Everyone wants to know what's going on in your territory. We've seen your people reclaiming the area, but there's only so much that the many, many satellites pointing at your territory can show us. Then there's the vampires acting up, globally no less. Presumably in response to whatever happened to the vampire army formerly occupying your clan territory. An army that seems to have vanished entirely during some manner of surveillance blackout. Then there are the ongoing concerns about the System and Asano's potential return."

"Not potential. Six months to a year is the current timetable."

"How solid are those numbers?"

"Things can happen, especially with Jason. But he seems confident."

"He always does. You're in regular contact?"

"His power grows, and he can reach out to us with ease, now. When he returns, it won't be like last time he was here."

"If he's strong enough to settle old grudges—"

"That's not what he wants. He wants to come home without making things worse. For his return to be peaceful. He believes that you can help make that happen."

"And how does he expect me to manage that?"

"He is aware that his understanding of the political realities he's walking into is shallow. He wants to hire you to be his senior political advisor for Earth affairs."

"Does he have someone doing that for the other world's politics?"

“He does.”

“I don’t know what you expect from me. Nigel Thornton vanished into the Asano Clan and didn’t come out.”

“He wanted to. He considers himself to have an obligation to you, which I respect. But the moment he shows up in an airport, someone or other will try and take him into custody. They’d try to do the same to me, thus my discretion.”

“How badly did you hurt the people following me? I’m not sure ‘practically unharmed’ means the same thing to you as me.”

“What have I ever done that you would think me a savage?”

“I saw what your world did to Jason Asano.”

“And I saw what yours did. At least on mine, we stab people in the front. I did less to the people following you than I would have in my world. More than if they were here to protect you, instead of to watch for someone like me contacting them. But silver rankers heal well.”

Anna shook her head.

“I need to retire.”

“Perhaps just a change of employer.”

“That’s what you want? For me pack up my wife and move to the middle of vampire-infested Europe?”

“You did it before. You were the first UN liaison to the Asano Clan.”

“Yeah, and that position fell apart once the French realised the clan had no intention of giving back the chunk of their country they took. I don’t see the UN or anyone else being more accommodating once Asano is back.”

“Which is why Jason wants your help. France hasn’t existed for almost two decades. You can talk about governments in exile all you like, but the reality is that your world has undergone a fundamental change. The sooner the people who rule it understand that, the sooner they can stop fighting over the ashes of a world that no longer exists. It’s time to look to the future, and Jason wants to help this world understand that.”

“Is that his intention? To come back and fix the world according to his standards? It’s certainly in character.”

“You will find that Jason is not the blunt object he once was. That he wants your guidance should tell you that, but yes, he’s the same in many ways. He has power and wants to use it for good, and that hasn’t changed in all the time I’ve known him. What has changed is his realisation ‘good’ is a more nuanced concept than he understood when he was younger. He wants your help figuring out how to act responsibly, and that starts with

how he returns. The first job he would have you work on is figuring out how he comes back without the world deciding to go to war with him.”

“He could give them the things they want.”

“Tell that to him, Mrs Tilden. I’m just a messenger today.”

Anna sighed.

“My experience tells me that he wants me to smooth things over because he wants to keep his toys to himself. That he realises he can’t fight the whole world to keep them. But that’s not who he was, when I knew him. The man I knew *would* fight the whole world, if it came to that.”

Rufus chuckled.

“It seems that you do know him. Come to Europe, Mrs Tilden. You don’t have to make any decision now. Talk to Jason. Talk to Nigel.”

“Even if I was willing to consider it, you know I’ll need to clear this. I’m not going to sneak off with you in the night.”

“It’s ten-thirty in the morning, Mrs Tilden. And I suspect that your people will be more than happy to get some eyes on the inside.”

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The sky ship accelerated rapidly out of Dragon Lands airspace. Clive scurried down one of the airship’s hallways, casting anxious glances behind him.

“CLIVE!” Humphrey’s voice roared as he stormed around a corner and into the hall. “What in the goddess of pain’s needle pit were you thinking?”

Clive stopped and let out a nervous laugh.

“Did we get away?” he asked.

“Yes. And we’re not being chased, thanks to Stash being an actual dragon. Why did you go into that temple?”

“It wasn’t an actual temple. They venerate dragons rather than gods; there’s no divine power there. It’s more of an academic hall dedicated to draconic magic. I didn’t know they’d get so angry about me going in.”

“They had a sign out front that read ‘outsiders strictly forbidden!’ In adventuring circles, Clive, that is what is referred to AS A CLUE!”

“I actually went in at the side, not the front. And it wasn’t a big sign. More of a plaque, really.”

Humphrey conjured his sword and Clive bolted down the hall, Humphrey chasing after him. Jason, Sophie and Belinda watched them go, having been drawn by Humphrey’s yelling.

“I’m just glad it wasn’t my fault,” Jason said.

“I’m not,” Sophie said. “My money was on you getting us chased off on the morning of the second day. How did you last a whole week without causing trouble?”

“I’ve been working on my diplomacy. Belinda, did you make a betting pool again?”

“Yeah, and Clive made me a bundle by beating you out. And if he’d just asked me, I’d have gotten him in there without anyone being the wiser.”

“You know,” Jason said, “people always accused me of getting us into these things, but I’m starting to suspect that all of you are the real troublemakers. Except Zara. I’m not the biggest fan of royalty, but at least she was trained to have some decorum.”

Jason watched Belinda and Sophie share a look.

“What aren’t you telling me?” he asked.

“So,” Sophie began, “there was this draconian prince. Not much of a prince. One of those eighty-seventh in line for the throne types. He decided that Zara was going to be his fourth wife, and didn’t see much point in consulting Zara on that decision.”

“What happened to the prince?” Jason asked. “When things happen to princes, it tends to get around. I can’t tell if not having heard anything is good or bad. Is this what it’s like running around with me?”

Sophie and Belinda nodded in unison.

“Let’s just say that we were on the way to suggest we skip town when Clive got in trouble,” Sophie told him.

“Yeah, that imprisoning ritual is going to hold the prince for another day, tops,” Belinda said. “And that’s assuming no one finds him. I assume someone will be looking for him.”

“Not his first three wives, if his personality is anything to go by,” Sophie said. Belinda snorted a laugh.

“What’s this about an imprisoning ritual?” Jason asked.

“Well,” Belinda said, “I wanted to disappear the guy, but Stella thought killing him was a bad idea.”

“I’m very confident it was.”

“I don’t know. Leaving him alive might be worse, after Zara’s response to his proposal. I didn’t even know you could put storm magic inside someone’s—”

“No need to talk about that,” Zara said, sticking her head out of a cabin door. “Humphrey doesn’t need to hear anything about it.”

She retreated into the room, only for her head to immediately shoot back out.

“Neither does my father.”

Jason sighed.

“Her father is definitely going to hear about it, isn’t he?”

“Oh, yeah,” Belinda said. “She left stains in that room that I’m not sure crystal wash could get out. Why he had so much—”

“Let’s skip the details,” Jason said. “For now, at least, while I go talk to Danielle about this. I expect we’ll want all the grisly details later.”

## Chapter 909

### Sometimes We Need Scars

When she'd been young — well, younger — Jennifer Landry had loved having visiting adventurers stay at her boarding house. All those powerful and attractive young people, politely calling her 'Madam Landry.' As years went on, the desire for excitement slowly gave way to a desire for reliability. Rather than cater to out-of-towners who were often interesting but frequently volatile, she shifted to catering to locals.

She didn't aim for the top-shelf adventurers, which they actually had now in Greenstone. The training program set up by the Geller and Remore families were producing better adventurers, especially now that Adventure Society assessments were being conducted legitimately.

Madam Landry found that the second-tier adventurers were the perfect clientele. Long-term tenants, they had the money to pay but the humility of not being the cocks of the roost. It was an unconventional bit of excitement, then, when one of her adventurers came bursting to the lobby, almost taking the door off the hinges.

"Dean Tuckell, if you take that door off, you're the one paying for a new one," she scolded.

"Sorry, Madam Landry, but I just heard something incredible at the Adventure Society. Is Jerrick here?"

"He's in the bath house, dear, but I..."

Dean shot off without listening.

"...don't think he's alone."

\*\*\*

Gold-rankers were figures of legend in a low-magic town like Greenstone, making Emir's visit all those years ago a real event. Jason remembered his cloud ship sailing up to the private Adventure Society dock in grandiose fashion. But he had also known that Emir had been in the city for days before, in secret.

Jason followed this model, quietly reaching the city with several of his friends, days before his official arrival. His goal was to reacquaint himself with the city, indulging in the nostalgia of his early days as an adventurer. Jason, Belinda and Estella Warnock portalled to an old spirit coin transport waystation, not too far from the city. It had been abandoned years ago, after the local Magic Society director and a local crime boss had an adventurer tortured in the storeroom.

Emerging from the portal, The trio immediately staggered.



“It’s like trying to breathe when the air’s too thin,” Belinda gasped. “What’s happening?”

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- You have entered a region of low magical density. High ranking individuals will suffer deleterious effects without supplemental magic.
  - Stamina recovery reduced by 50%.
  - Health Recovery reduced by 75%.
  - Mana recovery reduced by 99%.
  - Consuming a spirit coin of your rank or ten spirit coins of one rank lower will restore your recovery rates to normal for eight hours. This duration is reduced by using active magic abilities.
  - Rituals and summoning abilities require spirit coins to enact, in addition to any spirit coin cost they already have. Rituals will be unable to function without artificially enhancing the density of local ambient magic.
  - Summoned familiars will need to consume a spirit coin of their rank or ten coins of one rank lower to sustain their vessels. Consumption of spirit coins will allow them to maintain their vessels outside of the summoner for one day before requiring additional coins. This duration is reduced by using active magic abilities.
- 

“Oh,” Belinda said, reading the system message.

She pulled out her summoned familiars, an astral lantern that orbited droopily around her, and an echo spirit that looked like a blurry version of her. She plucked a handful of spirit coins from her storage space, pushed one into the lantern and handed the others to Gemini, the echo spirit, and Estella. She ate one herself as Jason declined the one she held out to him.

“I think I can compensate by drawing magic from my astral kingdom,” he said. He was half crouched, hands on his knees. “I’m still figuring out what I can and can’t do with this body. Just give me a few minutes.”

While Jason concentrated, occasionally making sounds like he was having trouble using the toilet, Estella and Belinda looked around. They were in an area between the sprawling river delta and the bone-dry desert. The waystation itself was an area of magically flattened stone, largely covered in windswept sand. There was a security booth, the glass in the windows long gone, and a large storage bunker. Of the bunker’s double doors, one was missing and the other dangled precariously from the remaining hinge. Beyond, stairs led down.

“How is this a memorable enough place to portal to?” Estella asked. “You haven’t been to this city in a couple of decades, right?”

“Yeah,” Jason croaked.

Belinda looked around, ending with her gaze fixed on the broken door.

“Jason, is this...?”

“Yeah,” he confirmed.

“Why would you bring us here?”

“Like Stella said, it’s memorable. You can still feel a little of my aura imprinted down there, if you look closely. Some things linger. Oh, bugger this, I’ll try again later.”

Jason took out a spirit coin and ate it, making a distasteful face as it melted on his tongue. Shade and Gordon appeared. Shade took a coin from his own storage space and consumed it while Jason tossed another into the nebulous void that was Gordon. He held his palm out and a leech crawled out through his skin. Jason held out a spirit coin for the leech to eat, but it turned it’s tooth-ringed maw away.

“Come on, Colin.”

The leech let out an alien screech of rejection.

“If you don’t eat this, you won’t be able to come out and eat anything else.”

While Jason was coaxing Colin into eating something that wasn’t at least recently alive, Belinda and Estella made their way to the door.

“That’s a good boy,” Jason said, scratching the top of the leech after it finally ate the coin. As Colin retreated back under Jason’s skin, Jason moved to join the others as they looked down the stairs.

“Shade and Gordon weren’t with me when this happened,” he said. “We’d just fought a water tyrant. Silver rank. It destroyed both of their vessels and left me with what, to this day, remains my largest scar. Colin was with me for this, though. Wouldn’t have made it through without him.”

“Made it through what?” Estella asked.

Instead of answering, Jason walked around them and went down the stairs.

“Jason,” Belinda called after him. “Are you sure you want to go down there?”

\*\*\*

Elsbeth Arella was not happy. Being director of Greenstone’s Adventure Society branch was always intended to be a stepping stone. The first stage in a career that would lead her out of the magical and literal desert that was Greenstone. Then came the disastrous expedition. The aftermath of that failure, and the investigation that followed, undid everything she had worked for.

Her backroom dealings were dragged into the light, as was her status as daughter of an Old City crime lord. She barely held on to her position, which went from the first step in

a storied career to a purgatory she could not escape. Twenty years later, nothing had changed. Even her father had risen, from last man standing of the Big Three crime lords to legitimate mayor of Old City. They were both important members of Greenstone Society, now, but where he felt elevated, she felt trapped.

Leaning against the desk in her office, Elspeth rubbed her temples as she stared at a spot on the floor. Twenty years ago, she had used her powers to lift some jumped up iron-ranker by the throat, dropping him on that very spot. Now, that same speck of nothing was scheduled to arrive in just a few days, to great fanfare.

Twenty years on, things were very different. He was a gold-ranker, well-trained and battle hardened, with countless accolades to his name. She was a core-using silver-rank bureaucrat with a dead-end career. She'd heard the stories, even across the world. Running around with diamond rankers, coming back from the dead. Driving off the Builder, which was even more nonsensical than the rest. It all sounded like fanciful nonsense. But she'd seen the missives from the Adventure Society, and they weren't treating it like nonsense. There was an actual standing order to put a branch on low alert if he entered its jurisdiction.

She had been much happier when Asano was dead the first time. Giving his life to save the city made him a useful figure of noble sacrifice, but martyrs were awkward if they didn't stay dead. There was even a statue of him somewhere on the campus grounds. She'd had a bush grown in front of it after he came back to life.

She doubted he would forget that she tried to teach him a lesson that didn't take. Two ranks higher than him, her power wrapped around his throat. She didn't even remember what it was about. What she didn't forget was the defiant eyes that would rather let her choke him out than yield to her authority.

Would he kill her on this very spot, where it happened? The Adventure Society would give him a slap on the wrist, if that. They wouldn't chastise their interdimensional golden boy over a dead bureaucrat with a dead-end career. Not after everything he'd gotten away with already.

She sighed and pushed herself off her desk. There were a lot more feathers than hers to unruffle before Asano arrived, so she might as well get to it, on the off chance that she survived his visit.

\*\*\*

Jason reached the basement storage area. The dry climate had preserved the interior enough that it hadn't completely degraded, but it showed the years of abandonment. A little sand had blown down the stairs, although not so much as to cover the bloodstain

spread out like a carpet. The blood pool spread out through the large storage room, too much to have come from one person under normal circumstances. Jason's self-healing had replenished him over and over as he bled out, but only Colin's help sustained him. His own regenerative power had been insufficient to last him through the ordeal.

The chains were still there, seized and rusty now. They lay on the floor where he'd yanked them from the ceiling in his escape. When he was last in the room, there had been a pile of tiny star seed fragments, pushed out of his body and leaving many small scars behind in the process. Those were long gone, no doubt claimed by the magic Society. Those were the early days of the Builder cult becoming active, making the fragments prime materials for study.

Belinda and Estella followed Jason down the stairs. They didn't share Jason's ability to see perfectly through the dark, so Belinda tossed out a floating glow stone to reveal the macabre scene.

"What is this?" Estella asked. "Is that your blood?"

"Yeah."

"All of it?"

"It was a rough day."

"What happened here?"

"This is where I found out who I am," Jason said. "When you strip away everything until there's nothing left to take. I don't recommend the experience."

His gaze didn't shift from the blood stain. The two women shared a side glance, then looked at Jason still facing the other way.

"This seems like a bad place to forge a personal identity," Estella said.

Jason laughed, the sound incongruous in the grim remnants of the torture chamber.

"Yeah," he said. "It very much is. But sometimes, you don't get to choose."

"You said you found yourself down here," Estella said. "That's a little concerning, if I'm being honest. Who did you find out you were?"

"Don't encourage him," Belinda hissed. "We don't want him going all dark and broody again."

Jason turned and gave her a smile.

"It's fine, Lindy. Sometimes we need scars to remind us that we can heal. Yes, the worst experience of my life happened in this room. But a lot of who I am, good and bad, began right here. If I can't face that, I'll be stuck in this room my whole life. And as for your question, Stella, I was put here by a conspiracy of forces that included a church, a cult, a

crime lord, a corrupt Magic Society director and a great astral being. I was iron rank. Ambushed by a silver ranker and chained up, naked but for a suppression collar.”

“How does that explain who you are?” Estella asked.

“Lindy, do you remember what I was doing when you all arrived and found me?”

“You were upstairs, adjusting the cuff links on your suit like you’d just walked out of the theatre.”

“That’s who I am, Estella. The guy who wins. It doesn’t matter who or what you are. How many people or how much power you have. You might kill me, you might scour my soul, but I’ll come back stronger, and I still won. That’s who I am.”

He walked past them and back up the stairs.

“That,” Estella said, “is the single most arrogant thing I have ever heard in my life. And I spend a lot of my time spying on aristocrats.”

“Well, sure,” Belinda said, “but we’re all shaped by our experiences. I’ve seen Jason fight a god, but I’ve never seen him lose.”

Estella looked at the blood stain again.

“Did all that really happen?” Estella asked. “The crime boss, the church, everything.”

“It was the Church of Purity, before people started to realise they were going bad. We actually killed the archbishop not that long after this.”

“And Jason just walked away?”

“Oh, gods, no. That thing with the cuff links? It was basically the last vestiges of his mind doing what he does, which is put on a smug façade to hid that he’s half a step from losing his mind. What he didn’t mention was the months of catatonia and intensive therapy that followed. Not many people manage to throw off a star seed implantation, so they called in a mental specialist and a soul specialist. The best the church of the Healer had. It still took them months to stitch a functional person back together.”

“So, the cult and the corrupt official and whatever else. What did an iron ranker do to get that many people going after him?”

Belinda looked up the stairs.

“You remember Jory?”

Her face took on an uncomfortable expression.

“Yes.”

“Me and Soph were in a real bad spot. And I mean it started bad and had been getting worse for months, like fermenting a turd.”

“Lindy..”

“Sorry. But the whole city was hunting us. Duke’s guards, adventurers, everyone. Even the crime boss that was meant to be protecting us was getting ready to sell us out. Jason and Clive were the ones that caught us. Jory wanted to help, but how could he? He’d have to go up against some of the most powerful people in the city.”

“Which sounds like exactly what Jason would do.”

“Now you’re getting it.”

“But he was the one that caught you?”

“Clive caught me. Didn’t think the Magic Society had anyone that smart. Jason caught Sophie; messed her up bad in the process. Those afflictions of his, you know? Caught up to her being healed by Jory, and that’s where things get interesting. He found out that Jory wanted to help us, and Jory was his friend, so he did. Just like that. No questions, no hesitation. Went up against the Director’s of the Adventure Society and the Magic Society, for two thieves he only knew from the time one of them kicked him in the face. We all thought he was crazy.”

“But he wasn’t.”

“Yes, he was! The guy’s a lunatic. Make those sorts of enemies and you’ll find yourself chained up in a hole somewhere, being bled out.”

Estella turned back to look at the blood stain and the rusty chains. Belinda leaned against the taller woman, slipping an arm around her.

“He saved Sophie and me when everyone else couldn’t or wouldn’t,” she said. “He went up against powerful people to make that happen, but he won. This was the price he paid.”

“Is he going to be alright, coming back here?”

“I don’t think he would have, if he wasn’t. It’s kind of his thing. One time, we were out on a road contract, and he took us to a place where a cult tried to sacrifice him to summon a blood monster.”

“Is that the same cult involved in all this?” Estella asked, gesturing at the blood pool.

“No, it was a different cult.”

“And different to that Order of Redeeming Light Purity cult back in Rimaros? The one Sophie’s mum belonged to?”

“Yeah. Also different to the Order of the Reaper, which Sophie’s mum also belonged to, and the Cult of the Reaper, which Sophie’s mum’s boyfriend belongs to.”

“Why does he keep getting involved with cults?”

“I stopped asking questions like that a long time ago. You just have to go with it.”

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Dean didn't notice the sounds coming from inside the bath house as he tossed aside the 'occupied' sign in front the door, which he flung open and rushed through. There was an immediate splashing and yelling.

A few moments later, Dean had his back turned and his arm over his eyes for good measure. His teammate was in the bath, half-standing to shield the elf lady sharing the bath and using him as a privacy screen.

"I'm charging an extra half if he's going to watch," she said.

"Dean," Jerrick growled. "What in the Healer's bag of smoking herbs inspired you to come in here like that?"

Dean moved to turn around in his excitement but managed to stop himself.

"I heard something at the Adventure Society," he said.

"You'd have heard something inside this bathhouse if you weren't fired up like a bog lurker in heat. What's got you so—"

"He's coming back! Jason Asano is coming back to Greenstone!"

"When?"

"I don't know. I just heard it and rushed straight over."

"Well, we need to find out more."

"Yeah!"

Jerrick lurched out of the bath and started rubbing himself dry with a towel.

"Sorry, Lucy, I have to go. Feel free to charge me for the whole hour."

"Damn straight, I'm charging you for the whole hour. I don't care how big your—"

"Jerrick, are you coming or what?" Dean called from outside.

\*\*\*

Jason parted ways with Belinda and Estella, after several reassurances to Belinda that he was fine. Once she accepted that he wasn't lying *too* much, she took off with Estella for the city, in a Shade-produced land skimmer.

Jason looked to the nearby delta edge, a shift from desert to verdant growth so neat it could only be magic. The Mistrun River carried water dense with life and water energy, making for the rich and swampy delta. Greenstone rice and tea from further upriver were both local specialties, although a small slice of trade compared to spirit coin export.

Back before he had a team, Jason would blow off steam by heading into the delta on foot. He'd roam the tall embankment roads that ran between mangrove swamps and paddy fields, moving from village to village. He developed a gliding-running style that used his cloak to reduce his weight. It allowed him to travel at relatively swift speeds without exhausting his mana or stamina.

It was a technique he had long ago left behind. Before Shade, before he had a team around him. Before the Builder's star seed was put inside him, setting him on a course to fight angels, gods and monsters with the fate of worlds on the line.

He had used the technique to roam the delta for a week or more at a time, taking trips alone to clear his head. He'd roam the towns and villages of the delta, healing the sick and clearing off contracts from their adventure boards. He looked back at the storage room door, then back at the delta. He laughed to himself, conjured his cloak and set off.

Almost immediately, he stumbled and landed face first in the sand.

He laughed again as Shade emerged from his shadow.

"Mr Asano, what are you doing?"

"An old trick. I seem to have lost the knack."



## Chapter 910

### That's What Adventurers Do

With the impending arrival of a literal shipload of gold rankers, things had been busy for the senior officials of the Greenstone Adventure Society branch. Everything about Vincent Trenslow was drooping except for his immaculate moustache, poking stiffly out from each side of his face. He was going through a list of requests from local nobility who, sadly, held enough influence that he couldn't just dump the whole stack of papers in the bin. He looked up at a knock on his office door, grateful for any reprieve.

"Sir?" his assistant Gretchen said after poking her head in. "We've had bit of an odd report from the jobs hall."

"Odd how?"

She opened the door properly and moved into the office.

"It's about adventure boards in the delta. Someone has been marking off contracts as complete, but none of them have been turned in at the hall."

"How many contracts?"

"As far as we can tell... all of them. In about a day and a half. A few adventurers came back from the delta and reported that every village had the adventure board marked as complete. We've sent people confirm, and the monsters are gone in every instance we've checked."

"I assume some of the delta residents had some light to shed. Surely someone saw whoever was responsible."

"Yes, sir. Some reported a stranger who did some healing and, in one case, briefly operated some kind of food kiosk at a lumber camp."

Vincent leaned back in his chair and let out a long, slow breath.

"You know what this is, sir?"

"I do," he said wearily. "Tell the jobs hall to mark the contracts as closed, no reward claimed."

"Is this about the gold rankers?"

"No, and that's an order. The official position of the Adventure Society is that there are no gold rankers operating in the city or its surrounds until they arrive here by ship the day after tomorrow. Do not let me hear you have been so much as implying anything else, Gretchen."

"Is it that big a deal, sir?"

Vincent sighed.

“Dear gods, I hope not.”

\*\*\*

Hiram had been climbing the mountain trail most days, for most of his life. Age had been catching up to him, but his limbs carried him now with fresh vigour, courtesy of his bronze rank physique. He had told his granddaughter not to waste the hard-fought earnings of an adventurer on an old man and she, of course, had ignored him.

He'd saved and scrimped from before she was even born to give her the opportunity. More than giving him his own chance to become an essence user, she repaid him with the joy in her eyes when she came home and told him the story of her adventures.

He looked up at the water roaring out from a hole in the side of the mountain. The torrent became deafening as he ascended towards the tunnel that would lead him inside. It was even louder in the cave, echoes thundering like the bellow of some primordial beast. The air in the cave was wet, leaving the boards of the wooden walkway slick, thus the grit adhered to the planks for grip. It was getting on time to replace some of the boards and apply fresh grit to the others.

The cave was still beautiful to his eyes, even after all these years. Glow stone lamps lit up the green stone. At the end of the cave was a cavern where the torrent passed through on its way out of the mountain. It was travelling so fast it moved horizontally through the air, a fast-moving wall of water. Blue light shone from it and spray became a sparkling mist that filled the cavern.

Hiram shook his head with a chuckle, remembering when he'd been caught in the water, carried down the tunnel and shot out into the air. He'd been certain he was going to die, and instead ended up with one of the precious essences he was able to gift his granddaughter.

The half of the cavern that didn't have water rushing through it had been carved to a flat surface, with a metal safety rail to keep anyone from getting too close to the water. It was a lot stronger than it once had been, after the incident. Attached to the cavern was a room carved into the wall, with a large window and a door for access.

Made to keep monitoring staff warm and dry, the room was larger and more comfortable than it had been when Hiram was a young man. He'd thought the job would tide him over until he found something better, and he never did. It was an easy job, monitoring the water aperture, so long as you didn't mind climbing the mountain every day.

Hiram headed for the booth to relieve Dave, who was bit of an odd sort. Didn't much care for people, or for daylight, but was friendly enough if you left him to himself. He did

get cranky for a bit after Martha's boy Henry became mayor and had the Adventure Society check he wasn't a vampire.

When Hiram got to the window, he saw it was steamed up from the inside. That happened when someone cooked, but Dave normally brought a packed meal from the Madson girl who was sweet on him. Hiram opened the door to a humid food smell and someone talking.

"...use all kinds of fillings, but I like pork the best. You don't have that here, but the gonku lizard I used in these is pretty close. Which is weird because it's, you know, a lizard."

Dave's response was an incoherent mumble, due to the dumpling sticking out of his mouth. The room was basically a lounge area, with a large low table in the middle that was enchanted to function as a self-cleaning cooking surface, and there was a pan of dumplings sitting on it. Dave was facing the door while the room's other occupant sat across from him, with his back to Hiram.

The man turned around, flashing a big smile at Hiram. It had been a long time, and his features had been smoothed out by rank-ups, but Hiram would never forget Jason Asano. Not only had they been flung off a mountain together, but Jason went on to save the village from a terrible monster, almost dying in the process. They'd found him, almost cut in half, in the rubble that had once been their village.

He'd also gifted Hiram with what became the first of his granddaughter's essences. Hiram knew Jason hadn't been a wealthy man back then, just a freshly minted adventurer. Even so, he'd handed it to Hiram with a smile on his face, as if he was loaning a neighbour some tea.

"You look good, Hiram. All those mountain hikes are keeping you in shape."

\*\*\*

Hiram refilled Jason's teacup.

"We didn't know what to make of it," Hiram said. "First, we hear you're dead. Then we hear you're alive again, and the stories only got less believable from there. But whatever people say about you, good or bad, you're a hero to the people in this town, Jason. The young ones like Dave don't remember, but those of us who were around back then..."

He let his words linger as he sipped at his tea.

"That day was a nightmare. You hear the stories of some high-rank monster tearing through a town, but you don't expect it to happen. Monsters are always a threat, out in these rural areas, but something like that?"

“Yeah, there was a thing messing with the monster surges,” Jason said. “It made the monster spawns a bit off. It’s fixed, now.”

Hiram shook his head.

“The why doesn’t matter to folks like us. What matters is children screaming as their parents drag them out of collapsing buildings. Pushing people onto wagons even as they’re taking off. Afraid that, at any second, some big watery tentacle will crash down and kill you all and there’s nothing you can do to stop it. You were just a kid, but you stood up. Put yourself between us and it. Bought us the time to get everyone out and safe. Now look at you, the big-time adventurer. You know, we never got to thank you properly for that.”

“You didn’t have to thank me, Hiram. That’s what adventurers do.”

“I was there, boy. I saw the looks on your friends’ faces. I may not have seen you in twenty years, but I get the feeling you spent a lot of it doing things that maybe adventurers don’t do.”

Jason chuckled.

“Maybe so,” he conceded, and sipped at his tea. “What about that granddaughter of yours? Did she ever become an adventurer?”

“Indeed, she did. A more modest one than you, I reckon, which suits me just fine. I like her coming home with stories of travel and adventure. I don’t want anyone fishing her out of the ruins of someone’s house, looking more dead than alive. No offence.”

“No, that’s a wise approach. Not in the cards for some of us, though. Did I ever tell you where I came from?”

“Not that I recall. I think you said it was somewhere remote. I remember thinking that it was a bit strange for an adventurer, some of the things you didn’t know.”

“Well, I’m not your granddaughter, but let me regale you with some of my stories of travel and adventure. Do you know what a universe is?”

\*\*\*

Time always moved on. For long-lived adventurers, things stretched out, and change was slow. Exploring Greenstone, Jason was confronted with how different it was for those without access to age-extending magic. He stood on a rooftop, his cloak melding him invisibly into the shadow of a chimney. He watched a yard below, where a spry woman of late-middle years was hanging out washing on a line.

“Did you find out who she is?”

“I did,” Shade said. “This is Juliette Landry, the daughter of your former landlady. She inherited this property from her mother, who found a great deal of success in her later

years. She ended up owning five establishments in total. Each is now operated by her daughter or one of her nieces: Josephine, Joanne, Jennifer, and Bertha.”

“Bertha?”

“Madam Bertha Landry hosts the property with more structural reinforcement enchantments than the other. Her clientele can be quite rambunctious.”

“When did my Madam Landry pass?”

“Seven years ago. Apparently to the lament of several elderly but vigorous men who were rather unhappy to find out about each other after the fact. It was, by all accounts, a quite exciting memorial service.”

“Good for her,” Jason said with a sad smile. “All the years I was off doing weird dimensional stuff. How much did I miss back home, Shade?”

“You haven’t called Earth home in a long time, Mr Asano.”

“I suppose I haven’t.”

\*\*\*

“You know that Arella thinks you’re going to kill her,” Vincent said.

“I’ve killed people for doing a lot less than she did,” Jason said. “But I’m not here to kill anyone.”

“Do you mind if I go change out of this bath robe?” Vincent asked. “I didn’t dress for a home invasion.”

“Sorry,” Jason said. “I wanted to be discreet. That’s why I waited until your husband left.”

“Oh, he’d have been delighted. He loves the adventurer stuff.”

Vincent left the sitting room of his town house and continued the conversation from the other room.

“You’d think that the messenger war and the rest of it would dampen his enthusiasm,” Vincent said. “He’s like a child sometimes, always looking for an adventure story.”

He walked back out in simple linen pants and a tunic he’d implausibly managed to put on without disrupting his moustache.

“Why are you here, Jason?”

“There are some organisational things we should probably sort out to make things go more smoothly.”

“Yes, but I have office hours.”

“But you were very clear with Gretchen that I’m not officially here.”

“You’re spying on me?”

“Uh... no?”

Vincent sighed.

“Gold rankers. This is why I transferred back to Greenstone, you know. I’ll go get my notebook.”

He walked over to a chair where a satchel had been tossed. He pulled out a notebook and a pencil, then gestured Jason into a seat. He sat opposite and was about to ask Jason a question when he stopped and set the pencil and book down on the couch beside him.

“How is Rufus?” he asked softly.

“He left this world. Fifteen years ago, now.”

Vincent sat bolt upright.

“He’s dead?”

“What? Oh, sorry, no. I mean he literally left this world. He’s been living on the one I came from. He’s fine. He’s really into jellybeans, like *really* into them. The fancy ones with weird flavours like ‘Barcelona asphalt’ or whatever. He’d definitely have diabetes if he wasn’t magical. I sent him to meet this person I’m trying to recruit over there, and he came back with about a wheelbarrow full of them.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. Which is very nostalgic for me, so I suppose we’d better get to it.”

He picked his notebook back up.

“Now, we might as well start with nobles who want a meet and greet on arrival versus those asking for a more in-depth meeting.”

“There’s no reason for me to…”

Jason stopped himself, grimacing as he thought back over Danielle’s lessons. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Okay,” he said. “Nobles who want meetings, you say.”