

## Chapter 730

### Drunken Lies and Mythic Legends

In a ghost town largely reclaimed by jungle, Jason and Allayeth watched Raelia open a portal and leave through it.

“She held up well,” Jason observed.

“She did,” Allayeth said. “It didn’t show in her body language at all. Do you think she was more scared of me or you?”

“I’m hoping you.”

Jason smiled but his expression was resigned.

“It’s funny,” he said, his tone suggesting that it wasn’t. “I used to work so hard to be scary. I don’t do that anymore, yet now people are starting to be scared of me.”

“Are you genuinely surprised? People don’t understand your power or your behaviour. Your reputation is based on little-understood events that land somewhere between drunken lies and mythic legends. You have a problem with authority yourself, but authority is just the power to impose your will on the world around you. Everyone who tries to impose their will on you falls short, myself included. When you decide to impose your will, what happens?”

“You make it sound like I’m breezing through life, doing what I will.”

“Aren’t you? You’re not getting everything you want, Jason, but when you truly need something to happen, has anyone ever stopped you? Gods? Great astral beings? Death itself? Somewhere near the top of the list of questions I still have is that there’s been talk of you remaking chunks of reality. Putting aside how, tell me why you did that?”

“I had to. The dimensional membrane around my home planet was brittle and cracking. Dimensional events were punching holes in it that would have destroyed my world if I hadn’t patched those holes.”

“And when you went to do that, you already had the power to do so?”

“I kind of figured it out as I went.”

“So, the universe decided to break down and you decided to not let it.”

“That is an extremely skewed way of looking at it.”

“But is there anything you do that can’t be looked at that way? You need something to happen, or not happen, and you get your way, regardless of the people, entities or natural forces of the cosmos pitted against you.”

“I can see how that might seem like it’s the case, but every instance was a mad scramble of exploiting circumstance, other parties using me as a proxy and a big wet sack full of luck.”

“And I can see how it might not seem special when you went through these events one at a time. But there are only so many dogs you can murder before people start calling you a dog murderer.”

“A dog murderer?”

“As a random example.”

“That doesn’t feel random. Do you think I’m running around murdering dogs?”

“No, Jason, I think you’re running around doing impossible things. You have your own private universe. You keep a temple to yourself in a bottle that you hang around your neck.”

Jason touched a finger to the miniaturised cloud flask hanging on the necklace with his magic amulet.

“Jason, *I’m* scared of you. When your rank catches up to everything else, a planet won’t hold you. You’ll be like your friend Dawn, needing to restrict your behaviour on planets like this so you don’t break too much of them. And I’m not telling you anything you don’t know. You knew that even a fragment of what you’ve shown me would alarm me to the point that I considered killing you. It’s why you warned Charist and myself off.”

“That backfired. It might have warded off your friend, at least for now, but it didn’t stop you.”

“No. Charist doesn’t like how evasive I’ve been, by the way.”

“He’s not scared of me?”

“I think he is, and that’s the problem. He went to kick a rock out of his path and stubbed his toe, and now he’s wondering what’s under that rock.”

“Will he be a problem?”

“I don’t think so, but this tension between your team and the Adventure Society has gotten him more aggressive about getting answers from me.”

“What did you tell him?”

“That he needs to stop thinking of you as a silver-ranker and start seeing you as a peer.”

“And how did he take that?”

“He asked me why I think that. I told him that, if nothing else, there wasn’t much point killing you. That I believe the Builder’s assertion that you couldn’t resurrect again until gold rank was wrong, out of date or a lie.”

“You picked up on that, then.”

“I felt immortality in your astral realm. Even if your ability to resurrect is limited, you’ve stopped ageing, haven’t you?”

“So have you,” he said defensively, getting a laugh from the diamond-ranker.

“Look, what is it you’ve brought me out here for?” he asked. “Something about this town and a plant monster?”

She sighed and looked around the town. Not a single building was intact and the ruins were all but buried in growth.

“What does this town tell you?” she asked.

“That something came through, trashed the place and left behind something that massively accelerated plant growth. These ruins aren’t old enough for how much jungle is crawling over them. And there are no animals. Not bugs, not birds.”

He concentrated his aura senses on the ground.

“No worms. Something’s dug into the soil. Plant roots?”

“Fungus.”

“Some kind of roaming mushroom creature? It consumes anything or anyone made of meat and turns them into super-fertiliser?”

“Something like that. Not quite so straightforward, unfortunately,” she said. “Have you ever heard of an amalgeth?”

“No,” Jason said. “Shade?”

“An amalgeth is a fungal monster,” Shade said as he emerged from Jason’s shadow. “An extremely dangerous one, from recollection. I believe that they are intelligent and able to shape-shift.”

“Yes,” Allayeth confirmed, “but that is only the beginning. In addition to being able to consume living things and take on their forms, they can mask their auras almost perfectly.”

“That’s why me,” Jason said. “You want someone with a better chance to spot them in hiding.”

“Yes. I know that you are getting ready for the underground expedition, but since you sent your familiar for another batch of contracts, I was hoping to convince you to participate in this one specifically. Your team won’t be the only one on it.”

“An expedition?”

“Similar to the one where the world-taker worms were discovered. Different teams investigating various towns. The teams have all been chosen for having at least one member with powerful or unusual senses. I wanted to use your auxiliary, Estella Warnock, until I realised what you’ve got her doing.”

“You didn’t bring anything down on her, did you?”

“No. I was careful.”

“Thank you. Why are you delivering what amounts to an ordinary contract in person? To give my team and the Adventure Society some space before the adjudicator from the Continental Council shows up?”

“Yes. At my suggestion.”

“Of course it was your suggestion. What lunatic would go around telling diamond-rankers what to do?”

She looked at him from under raised eyebrows.

“Tell me about this contract,” he said and she rolled her eyes at his changing of the subject.

“This town we’re in now was wiped out early during the monster surge,” she said. “It wasn’t discovered to be like this for weeks, with everything that has transpired over the last half a year. People aren’t travelling and communication isn’t what it was. When the town was discovered to have been wiped out, a team of adventurers were deployed. They found nothing alive that wasn’t a plant or a fungus. Even flying insects wouldn’t come near. They swept the region in case the population had been dragged off or they could find what did it, but found nothing. There was a monster surge taking place, so they made a report, flagged it for further investigation and moved on.”

“Why was it discovered now?” Jason asked. “I can’t imagine Yaresh has so little going on now that people are making their way through the report backlogs.”

“It was happenstance,” Allayeth said. “The Adventure Society jobs hall had some records being moved so they could make repairs and someone stumbled across it. They happened to recognise the signs of an amalgeth and passed it up the line with a priority tag.”

“You’re worried about more towns being wiped out?”

“Yes. Most monsters don’t reproduce, but the amalgeth does and its life cycle is extremely predatory. It infiltrates a population centre, usually small and isolated. It claims to be some kind of traveller in distress. Lone survivor of a monster attack or the like, trying to allay suspicion. At first, the creature does nothing. It learns to fit in and becomes part of the community. Then it starts taking things. Slowly at first. Herd animals. Pets. A person, if it thinks it can get away with it, but that usually come later. They’re patient, often timing their predations with active monster activity, to pass off the blame.”

“I think I see where this is going. They slowly escalate until the townsfolk finally catch on that the new person in town is the bad guy, at which point the amalgeth goes ham and kills every living thing.”

“Eventually, yes. But the infiltration is a process that takes months or years, usually. They are quite good at hiding the truth, and the more they kill before being discovered, the stronger they grow. The people and animals they kill become a supply of mutable flesh they can use to heal themselves or take monstrous forms when they finally reveal themselves.”

“My familiar does something similar,” Jason said. “You saw him floating through the sky in a glass cocoon. I call his collection of organic material biomass, which isn’t strictly accurate, but video games use the term a lot.”

“What are video games?”

“Okay, that would take too long to explain. But he keeps leftover biomass inside my soul realm, in a big pit. I don't have any of the paths leading to it; it's pretty gross. The amalgeth save their biomass up as well?”

“Yes. Then, once they are finally exposed, they absorb it and take on a hybrid flesh-fungal form. They go on a rampage, absorbing and killing every single living creature, collecting all that... biomass. Then they use it to form another of their kind, fully grown and with all the memories of the original. This process triggers accelerated plant growth over a fairly wide area. Then they both go off in search of new towns to infiltrate.”

“So we don’t know how many of them there are.”

“No. I have checked several towns myself, uncovering and killing one. But I have an obligation to defend Yaresh in its vulnerable state, along with other responsibilities. That is why the Adventure Society has established this expedition. I have a list of locations and a map, if you accept the contract.”

“I’ll need to talk to the others, but I imagine they will say yes.”

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Jason's cloud palace was a string of buildings set on the face of a cliff, linked by a series of open stairs and elevating platforms. The buildings themselves looked carved from stone with the out-facing walls of each building made of single sheets of glass. Inside the largest building, looking out over miles of rainforest and out to the sea, Jason explained the contract to his team.

“I’ve heard of amalgeths,” Clive said. “They always start at silver rank, but if they reproduce enough times, they advance to gold.”

“Can we face one of them at gold rank?” Humphrey asked.

“It depends on the point of their life cycle they’re in,” Clive said. “If they’ve just eaten a town full of people, no chance. They can forgo reproducing to use all that accumulated biomass for combat. Even a silver-rank one at that stage would be extremely challenging to face. If we get them at the stage where they’ve accumulated a large supply of organic mass but haven’t consumed a whole town, gold-rank would be extremely sketchy, but silver-rank wouldn’t be too challenging. Early stage, when they’re just starting their cycle, we’d have to be careful but I think we could handle a gold.”

“We’ll need to scope out the amalgam if we find one, then,” Humphrey said. “Then we can assess whether to take it on ourselves or call in backup.”

“I have some backup to call in right now,” Jason said. “I know someone I suspect will be very useful, and he’s just about done with his nap.”