

Chapter 726

We Should Probably Get You Out of Here

"We need to talk with my team," Jason said to Allayeth. They were walking through an underground cavern lit by glowing fungus too bright and too convenient to be natural phosphorescence.

"Do they comprehend the magnitude of what this place means? Of what you are?"

"Their frame of reference is perhaps limited, for some of them. My mate Clive, maybe, and my friends that are priests probably understand the scope. Not many people have pushed their souls up against the will of a god or great astral being. Not in an actual conflict, which is when they show you the whole thing. Normally they just poke you as hard as you can take to make a point."

"Will," Allayeth said, focusing on the one word of Jason's. "The will as an element of the soul is not normally something essence users explore until gold-rank."

"Yeah, I've been learning about controlling aspects of the soul in isolation from Amos Pensinata. It's been really handy in expanding my perception without blasting my aura out like a beacon. We never focused on will because I already had a good teacher back at iron-rank."

"Farrah Hurin was your aura teacher at iron-rank. She shouldn't have had any grasp of will back then."

"I'm talking about someone else. From after Farrah died."

"I didn't see anything in your records. Are you talking about Carlos Quillido?"

"No. I'm talking about the Builder."

Allayeth flinched.

"You call it a teacher?"

"Him. He was a man once. A boy, really. I think he still is, in a lot of ways. It's almost like he's..."

Jason frowned as he trailed off.

"Like he's what?"

"It doesn't matter," Jason said, his tone firmly shelving the topic. "He was in the fullness of his power when he pressed his will upon mine and tried to get me to open the gates of my soul. He'd already claimed my body and then came for the rest. I didn't remember it for a long time, because he'd already claimed my brain at that stage. My soul remembered, sort of. Not exactly emotions but kind of. Only the things that impacted my will. Left a mark on my soul. I remember his will pushing against me when I had nothing

left but my own to push back with. He schooled me in the nature of will in the most thorough way possible."

"That is not teaching."

"Maybe not, but I still learned. How to turn my soul into a weapon. He carved that into the surface of my soul as he flayed it, trying to break my will. After that, soul attacks came so easily. Naturally. Like breathing, back when I had to do that."

"I can make soul attacks. It's something you can do after you learn to differentiate your will. It's meant to happen at gold or diamond, not iron-rank. It doesn't come easily either. It's hard to pinpoint your will so sharply, and there's an instinctive revulsion against doing that to another soul. You have to push through that to make a soul attack. I'm told it's possible to inure yourself to that but I have no interest in doing so."

"I never had that trouble," Jason said, his voice low. "Not the difficulty and not the revulsion."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring up such dark memories."

"It's fine. What Carlos Quilido and Arabelle Remore did do was put me back together again after. They built me back strong."

"You rely on the people around you a lot."

"You don't?"

"I don't have a lot of peers. Charist is an inconsistent comfort."

"Your team?"

"I was the only one to reach diamond. The others died or couldn't make it past gold. We weren't as remarkable as yours. I can see many of your team members reaching the peak."

"There is no peak."

"Essence users can't go beyond diamond-rank."

"Not with that attitude."

She looked at his teasing expression and couldn't help letting out a laugh.

"You really do just look at impossibility and put it on a to-do list don't you?" she asked, looking around at Jason's soul realm. They were entering a cenote, a sinkhole with water at the bottom and a hole leading to open sky at the top. A railed wooden deck ran around the circumference with two large grills and picnic seating. The light fell through the hole at just the right angle to illuminate the area perfectly.

"I have my moments," he said.

Allayeth was looking up through the hole when a glass sphere floated overhead. Inside it, a red mass pulsed with internal light, like a massive, glowing heart.

"What was that?" she asked.

"You know how Jen Fin Kaal is a Voice of the Will?"

"Yes."

"And you know that makes her an extension of her astral king's will?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm an astral king in progress. That's my Voice of the Will in progress."

"I think I'd rather deal with the messenger than that thing."

"I suspect that, once he comes out to play, so would the messengers."

Jason and Allayeth rejoined Jason's team in a courtyard lounge where the walls were covered in greenery and lotuses floated on a water feature of raw mana.

"But, to be clear," Humphrey said, "Lady Allayeth is the one who will go and talk to the goddess Liberty, correct?"

"To her high priestess in Yaresh," Allayeth said. "One does not just go speak to a goddess."

Jason's companions all turned to look at him, eyebrows raised.

"What?" he asked. "And really, who doesn't just talk to them? Isn't that what prayer is? Have I been getting prayer wrong this whole time? How does it work, then? Is it catered? Is that why people take all those casseroles to church functions?"

"Is he always like this?" Allayeth asked.

"No, but you don't want him the other way," Neil said and the rest of the group nodded their agreement.

"You know I'm right here?" Jason asked. "You should wait until I'm gone to talk me behind my back."

"Jason," Clive said. "You literally are this courtyard we're sitting in. You're the furniture we're sitting on. There is no behind your back."

Neil turned awkwardly on his picnic chair, twisting to look down at it with a concerned expression.

"I'm not always paying attention. I respect people's privacy."

"The goddess of Liberty might not be extremely open to you, Jason," Rufus pointed out.

"Something to do with the way you go around declaring things and then making everyone accept them whether they like it or not," Neil added, still looking uncertain if he should just be standing up.

“Dominion does seem to have taken quite a liking to you,” Gary said. “He and Liberty don’t like each other very much.”

“He would definitely make the worst possible approach,” Belinda said.

“Like trying to trap the goddess of Liberty maybe?” Sophie postulated.

“I totally know how he’d do it, bro. He’d get a box and he’d prop up one end of the box with a stick. There would be a string attached to the stick so he could pull it and drop the box, and the string would lead to where he was hiding inside a fake bush that he made. The bait he put under the box would be a sandwich and a little card with the word FREEDOM written on it.”

“You think I would try to catch the goddess of Liberty in a box?” Jason asked.

“Yep.”

“That tracks.”

“Sounds like how it would go, yeah.”

Jason ran a hand over his face.

“Why would I do that?” he asked.

“No idea.”

“Doesn’t seem to matter.”

“We never know.”

“At this point, we just watch and lay the occasional side bet,” Neil said. “Speaking of which…”

The team started taking our spirit coins and handing them to Neil.

“Did you make some of kind of bet on me?” Jason asked.

“Nope,” Neil transparently lied as he stashed away his winnings.

“There may have been a betting pool on how long it took you to find a new transcendent being to out-rank her now that you were dealing with diamond-rankers again,” Humphrey said. “Belinda started it as soon as another diamond-ranker came in here and Neil picked ‘immediately’ as his time. Which wasn’t fair, since we all—”

“I yelled it out first,” Neil said. “You know the rules.”

“You make bets like this enough that there are rules?” Allayeth asked.

“Yes,” Belinda said. “And Humphrey has no room to complain because he picked the big battle in Yareh for the next time someone much stronger than Jason came to kill him, died, and then had something absurd looted from his body.”

Allayeth blinked several times, her expression nonplussed.

“What kind of absurd thing?” she asked.

"He still hasn't told us, so he's not going to tell you," Sophie said. "He refuses to until he figures out how to use it."

"I think I need the soul forge," Jason said. "I'm pretty sure there's a... look, that doesn't matter. We need to concentrate on the next step. We're going to have some cranky officials waiting for us if we just wander back outside."

"Sorry about that," Clive said sheepishly.

"Hey," Jason said, putting a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Who amongst us hasn't defied authority or committed a bunch of crimes or rewritten city-sized chunks of reality in their own image?"

"What?" Allayeth asked.

"Humphrey, obviously," Jason continued. "But the rest of us have all done something shady. Maybe not Neil. You need to get out more, Neil. Get drunk and steal a land skimmer or something."

"You leave Neil alone," Humphrey said. "He's a respectable young man. Now, what solution do you have for the problem of what awaits us outside? I assume you have one."

"Maybe not a solution," Jason said. "But I can probably put off needing to deal with it immediately. Give Allayeth time to calm things down."

"I am meant to excuse the behaviour of your team, am I?"

"Yep," Jason said. "I'm pretty sure I can use the archway on the outside as an anchor point to open a portal inside the normal portal range. Meaning that I can probably portal myself back to the tree house and then open up the soul realm and out you all waltz."

He turned to Allayeth.

"Best if you scarper first," he said. "I don't want my portal arch to vanish and have them think I've absconded with a diamond-ranker."

"That's something else we need to discuss," Sophie said. "*Should* we abscond with a diamond-ranker? Are you sure you want to let her out with what she's seen?"

"We have to trust someone," Jason said.

"Do we though?" Belinda asked. "I mean, the Adventure Society seems to get in the way more than help us, you only have to ask Clive about the Magic Society and as for local government, you remember that guy you sent packing, Jason."

"What did you show him that sent him running?" Allayeth asked. "This whole place is certainly intimidating, and only more so the stronger your perception powers, I suspect. But not enough to make Lord Bynes the younger flee in a mad panic. I don't think."

"You remember that big door?" Jason asked. "The vault-looking one with the sign?"

“That sign was rather hard to forget,” Allayeth said. “The Astral Gate Containment Centre and Standish Family Adult Recreation Retrospective, was it? I’m assuming the astral gate part is what so disturbed Lord Bynes.”

“I wouldn’t rule the other bit just yet,” Belinda said. “What Clive’s parents were doing with those jellied eels is plenty disturbing itself.”

“Those are not real images,” Clive insisted.

“You haven’t even seen them,” Belinda said.

“Have you?” Clive asked in horror.

“No one has,” Humphrey said firmly. “Because they don’t exist. Jason is not going to create fake images of one of his friend’s parents doing obscene things. Are you, Jason?”

“No,” Jason begrudgingly admitted. “I recreated Clive’s mum’s voice a bit, but it’s mostly just squelching noises over some videos from my world that Farrah put on a recording crystal.”

“I need to get that crystal back, now you mention it,” Farrah said. “A girl has needs. Do you know what it’s like trying to get some action in Rimaros? Some gold-ranker got the fever over me but he’s about eighty and refuses to make a proper move until I’m at least half his age. No one else will go near me because they don’t want to offend him, though, but I’m not waiting quarter of a century for my next tumble. The equipment needs to be taken out and fired up from time to time or it’ll go rusty in the shed.”

“We need to put that aside,” Rufus said. “Very, very far aside, and concentrate on Sophie’s question of whether we should retain Lady Allayeth here rather than let her out with however many of Jason’s secrets she has managed to uncover. For my part, I am firmly against taking her prisoner. Prisoners taken in battle is one thing, but taking allies who know too much? I won’t be a party to that.”

“Jason said all that needed to be said,” Humphrey declared. “We need to trust someone. While I recognise your concerns, Belinda, regarding the various institutions that have sometimes — often, even — acted with less integrity than we would like. But I am willing to bet that the people who have gained power by turning from duty to politics in the name of power are in the minority. That minority tends to occupy the upper echelons of those institutions, it’s true, but even there I would wager that corruption is not ubiquitous.”

Humphrey stepped out and turned to face the group as a whole, Jason keeping his mouth closed and trying not to cheer at Humphrey for falling into a monologue.

“We have to trust,” Humphrey said. “We just have to. There are far too many problems in the world for the people in this room to solve them all. Yes, we’ve encountered our fair share of people who have surrendered their integrity. They see Clive’s mind or

Jason's... whatever it is with Jason, and they seek us out. They're opportunists, hungry and shameless. But I promise you that there are so many people out there doing the right thing just because it's the right thing. You don't see them because they aren't looking for glory or power. They're just looking to fulfil their duty."

He nodded to himself.

"Yes, they make mistakes. Anger, pride, vanity, greed; they lead us to make bad choices. But I have no doubt that most of the people in the Magic Society are just like Clive: trying to take magic and make the world a little bit better tomorrow than it is today. Do you think the people working in the Yareh government are all looking to fill their pockets and raise their status? Some, yes, but I promise you that most of them are trying their best to put the city back together again and help the people who live in it. And I hope I don't have to tell you about adventurers. They are unquestionably more susceptible to the pride and vanity I mentioned, but every person in this room has seen them step up and risk everything because it was their duty to do so. And a lot of them never made it back."

Humphrey moved to Belinda and put a hand on her shoulder.

"I know that you have less reason to trust than most," he told her. "But we have to, even when it doesn't work out the way we hoped. Because if we don't, then what's the point? I was reluctant when Jason brought along two thieves and said they were going to be adventurers. Now look at you: you're glorious. This is not the team I envisaged building when I was growing up, and you'd best believe that I envisaged it a lot. But now my team is better than I ever imagined because I was convinced to trust when the smart choice was not to. So, I'm going to keep making that choice. And if any of you want to make a different one out of fear or anger or bitterness, then I'm going to talk and talk and talk until you all change your minds. And, as I've just demonstrated, I certainly can do that—"

Sophie shoved Belinda out of the way, grabbed Humphrey by the lapels and dragged him into a passionate kiss as the others all looked on.

"Does anyone else feel like this undercuts the gravitas of Humphrey's big speech?" Neil asked.

"It was such a good monologue," Jason said proudly. "I would have put in some jokes, but I also would have whinged about how hard I have it with all my money and vast cosmic power, so it balances out."

Rufus moved next to Allayeth and leaned close.

"We should probably get you out of here," he said quietly.

Chapter 727

The Questions You're Asking Don't Matter

Allayeth went through the portal arch, leaving Jason's soul realm. Jason and his companions all looked at one another.

"Do you think she bought it?" Belinda asked.

"Bought what?" Humphrey asked.

Sophie patted him on the arm.

"Don't worry about it," she told him.

"Don't worry about what?"

"Belinda's question," Rufus said, "related to our 'plucky group of adventurers caught up in something crazy' routine. Essentially, whether she believed that we were a quirky group forced into challenges beyond us by circumstance."

"That was a routine?" Humphrey asked. "Why didn't anyone tell me?"

"Because your mind would be constantly churning over the idea that you're faking something," Jason said. "And we weren't faking. We were just playing up our natural proclivities a little."

"That doesn't explain why you wouldn't tell me."

"Humphrey," Jason said, "you're as much a liar as I am a modest and humble churchgoer. You're one of those people who, when told to act natural, turns into a robot."

"What's a robot?" Humphrey asked.

"Basically, an overcomplicated golem," Farrah said.

"Shouldn't she have been able to read our emotions anyway?" Humphrey asked.

"Not here," Jason said. "In this place, I can limit her senses. But she's got more life experience than all of us put together. I doubt she needs her perception powers to read our body language. We just played up our natural inclinations so they didn't come across as false. But Hump, you trying to act natural would have been a massive red flag."

"How she chooses to react to what she encountered here will play a big part in how things go for us from here," Rufus said. "If she supports us, things get a lot easier. The other diamond-ranker will stop pressuring Jason and the Adventure Society will be more accommodating. If she decides that Jason needs to be stopped before he becomes so powerful that's not an option, things get a lot harder."

"Do we think that's likely?" Gary asked.

"I wouldn't think so," Jason said. "While it is possible that she was fooling me, I picked up enough of her emotions to think that she's going to support us."

“She didn’t seem hostile,” Sophie said. “The opposite, if anything.”

“I think that I’ve accomplished something with her that I’ve failed to do many times in the past, to my cost,” Jason said.

“What’s that?” Rufus asked.

“Impart the magnitude of the powers and events he’s at the centre of,” Farrah said. “On Earth, the various factions only ever saw enough to covet. They never understood what he was doing or the price everyone would pay if they stopped him.”

“That was on me,” Jason said. “I never explained things properly. I was always angry or bitter. I never took the time to truly show people what I was doing or why. Sometimes that was necessary to avoid them trying to exploit me, but a lot of times I was just too burned out. Honestly, I’d reached a point where I didn’t feel the world deserved an explanation. It was my chance to be the bigger man, but my small-mindedness only made things worse.”

He looked over at the portal arch.

“I may be in danger of doing that again. I think I should sit down with the Adventure Society director, and some of the power players from Yareh. Explain it all from my perspective. Maybe then we can work together the way we should have from the start.”

Jason turned to look at Humphrey.

“It might be time to stop trying to do everything myself, and show a little trust.”

Allayeth emerged from Jason’s portal arch and it closed behind her, sinking into the ground without a trace. She surveyed the area and saw that the outpost the Adventure Society was building had developed at a startling pace. She was in an outskirt area used mostly for storage, now filled with massive wooden crates reinforced by metal.

She levitated into the air using her aura, a trick any silver-ranker could do. She contrasted it with what Jason and the messengers could do and it fell significantly short. Even at diamond rank, she could only affect herself and the levitation was still quite easy to disrupt. After seeing the inside of Jason’s soul realm, it made an apt metaphor for her own position.

She was powerful. One of the most powerful beings on the planet, but so much of what she found herself involved with was not from her planet. The Builder invasion, the messenger invasion. She was ostensibly at the end of her path to power and found herself poorly equipped to face it. Jason was far weaker, yet he was a part of that wider reality. Part of a cosmic community that she was not.

Those who were like her didn't see it. She and Charist had long ago become content to be large fish in a small pond, leaving Soramir Rimaros and his ilk to explore the realms beyond their world. She had put a box around her mind and was unable to clearly see anything outside that box. The Adventure Society was like her in this regard, their considerations limited by the constraints they unconsciously placed on themselves.

Seeing Jason Asano's soul from the inside had broken that box. Now she was able to see what Soramir Rimaros, Dawn and even the gods had seen from the beginning: Jason belonged to a wider world. For the first time in a long time, Allayeth found herself running into her limits and becoming dissatisfied with them.

Diamond rank was the end of the path. Not only was this an absolute that had been taught to her from the beginning, but the very idea of reaching it was a dream few adventurers could reach. When she did, she had been satisfied. She had no need to roam out into the cosmos, placing herself at the bottom of a new ladder she had no idea how to climb. She had achieved every goal she had ever set for herself, and it had always been enough.

But now, the cosmos she had declined to explore was intruding on her world, and in Jason Asano, she had caught a glimpse of how the climb might work. There was a man so far below her, yet also, so far above. He had a long way to go, but he would not so much as slow down at her level, let alone stop.

Allayeth looked at the outpost being built. The ragged hole that had been blasted outward was already covered in foundations that moved inward and down like a sunken theatre. Mostly it was prepared ground; sealed foundation waiting for buildings to be placed atop it. Some buildings were already in place, though, and Allayeth watched as more were formed in just minutes through magic.

She could see that this was not crude stone-shaping. The expert construction combined rituals, essence abilities and expert design knowledge. Charist was right to be angry that this level of industriousness had been pulled away from the reconstruction of the city.

The rapidly-forming outpost was an edifice to the opportunism of those with ambitions of power. They lacked the expansiveness of Allayeth's new perspective, seeing only the old squabbles. They didn't realise that power and the balance thereof had fundamentally changed. The Builder invasion had not been an isolated incident; it was an event that brought their world into a larger reality.

Although many of the people bustling about had seen her in the sky, they respected that her aura presence was undetectable, taking the hint and staying away. Only Charist

had the perception to notice her aura and had set off in her direction the moment he had. It took him only moments to arrive, and when he did, he moved to float in the air beside her.

“You went through Asano’s portal,” he said in lieu of a greeting.

“Yes.”

“Did you figure out how he could even produce a portal that you could use?”

“Yes.”

“Did you find out what power is backing him?”

“Yes.”

Charist rolled his eyes.

“Do you have any interest in giving an answer longer than one word?”

“The problem, Charist, is that the questions you’re asking don’t matter.”

“Then what does matter?”

“If Jason Asano and whatever he has going on is good for us or bad for us.”

“And?”

“It’s definitely bad for the messengers.”

“Tell me everything.”

“No.”

“No?”

“His secrets don’t hurt us.”

“And you expect me to take your word for that?”

“It will be a little hurtful if you don’t. But I understand how some unknown agent of unknown power could potentially compromise even a diamond-ranker, so we should make sure that hasn’t happened.”

“How? There’s no church of Purity to check if you’ve been affected by something.”

“The church of Liberty. They can tell you if my free will has been compromised.”

Charist nodded.

“Agreed,” he said. “Let’s return to Yaresh and we’ll head straight for the temple.”

Vidal Ladiv was not good at driving the flying skimmer he used to approach Jason’s cloud palace, currently a series of tree houses linked by rope bridges. Out on an open balcony, Travis Noble was working on a device the size of a transit van. It was a clear mix of magical and technological elements, most prominently a protruding shaft of metal. A cloud of gemstones floated around the shaft as if held in place by magnets.

Travis looked up at the approaching skimmer, watching curiously as it arrived unsteadily at the edge of the balcony. Vidal left it floating next to the rail and awkwardly hopped from the vehicle to the balcony.

"You don't seem great at that," Travis said. "No offence."

"Not at all," Vidal said. "I hate this thing. Back in Rimaros, my water powers were more than enough to get me around. But this far inland, there aren't enough waterways to get me where I need to go. Mr Asano moving to a treehouse in the middle of nowhere certainly doesn't help."

"Are you sure you should be driving that?" Travis asked. "It's a flying car and you get around in it like a nervous kid in driver's ed. It seems like there should be regulations or something against that. Aren't people worried you'll crash it into some lady's stroller and kill adorable twin girls?"

"That's oddly specific," Vidal said, looking at the massive device Travis was working on. "What's this?"

"Right now? Annoying. If I can solve the cyclical alignment issues, it'll be a rotary beam cannon."

"Some kind of weapon? I thought you were working on a communication device."

"It's more of a comprehensive communication grid. Also, that's work. This is more of a hobby."

Vidal looked over the monstrous and complex device.

"A hobby?"

"Yeah. Something to do for fun."

"You're building a weapon the size of a trade wagon for fun?"

"If you can't have some fun with a rotary beam cannon, I don't think you can have fun at all. What brings you here, Mr Ladv? Is it something to do with that giant explosion this morning? I saw the cloud getting sucked up into the air."

"Indirectly. Has Mr Asano returned yet?"

"Nope. Last I saw, they were all headed for the cloud. I don't even know what happened."

"Altered messengers broke out from deep underground."

"That was the explosion?"

"Yes."

"That seems weird. They dug all the way up to the surface and then made a big explosion for the last bit? Setting off something like that while underground with it is a terrible idea."

“The messengers were far from in their right minds.”

“I won't blame them for that. I'm building a giant Gatling laser in a tree house in alternate-universe Brazil. I'm not entirely convinced that *I'm* in my right mind. For all I know, I'm in an asylum somewhere staring into the distance and yelling 'pew pew pew' over and over.”

“Uh, alright. I need to talk to Asano.”

“They aren't back yet.”

“You don't seem worried about that.”

“Jason once got stuck with a bunch of his gold-rank enemies in a dimensional space that was on the verge of ripping a hole in the side of the universe and wiping out our planet. The one gold-ranker that manage to survive ran away and hid until Jason left that universe. As for the dimensional space, Jason turned it into a magic city that his clan lives in now. It kills anyone who tries to get near it with ill intentions, and it's kind of a temple to himself. And that was before he had his team with him so, no: I'm not worried that a bunch of second-rate angels with mental health issues will do them in.”

“I really need to get a look at Asano's unredacted Adventure Society record.”

“Oh, that was back in my universe. It won't be in there. Now that I think about it, I'm not sure I should be telling you this stuff.”

Travis looked at Vidal thoughtfully, then at the device he was working on.

“Can you go stand in front of that long metal bit?” Travis asked.

“No,” Vidal said.

Chapter 728

Political Price

On the balcony of Jason's treehouse, Vidal Ladiv was looking warily at the spherical device at the end of the pole he was holding.

"What exactly is this thing?" he asked.

"Don't worry about it," Travis said distractedly as he rummaged through a large box, absently tossing out crystals. "Just don't let it get too close to you. I've almost certainly resolved the organic proximity combustion issue, but better safe than sorry."

"What?"

Before Vidal could ask more questions, a portal arch appeared on the balcony. Jason and his companions emerged, with Farrah immediately looking at the spherical device.

"How did you resolve the organic proximity combustion issue?" she asked Travis.

"I put it on the end of a pole," he said.

"Oh," she said, and then turned to look at Vidal with a sympathetic grimace.

"Don't let it get too close to you," she suggested.

"Travis," Jason said, "take that thing off him. Vidal, I assume you're here because the Adventure Society has decided how to punish us because we wouldn't let them steal all our prisoners."

Travis waved a rod in the direction of an open door. A construct creature that looked like a naked store mannequin walked out and over to Vidal with a rocking shamble. The construct looked like it had been hastily assembled, possibly while drunk, from whatever parts came to hand. Vidal was fairly sure the left forearm was a short length of tree branch sloppily painted off-white.

"What's this for?" Vidal asked, clutching the very end of the pole to keep the device as far from himself as possible.

"Just hand it the thing," Travis said.

"You said this device was dangerous, and that construct does not look stable."

"It's fine," Travis said unconvincingly. "Hardly any explosives are left on it. After the incident."

"What incident?"

"I don't think he's allowed to tell you," Farrah said. "I don't remember the exact terms of the legal agreement, but the gag order lasted at least until the healers figured out how to stop... I shouldn't say any more."

“I don’t think he’s got any confidence in your construct, Travis,” Neil said. “Can’t you just take it yourself?”

“I’m not going near that thing,” Travis said. “And you should be grateful I’m not. You’re the one who would have to figure out how to get healing magic to work through the interference.”

“What interference?” Neil asked.

“The magic on my nethers if there’s another testicular resonance event.”

“Another WHAT?” Vidal asked as he tossed the pole and the device it was attached to over the balcony.

“Hey!” Travis said. “I was joking; it’s perfectly safe.”

The device hit the ground and exploded. Everyone turned to look at Travis.

“Okay, ‘perfectly’ may have been a slight exaggeration,” Travis conceded.

Humphrey went to the rail and looked over.

“I don’t think it’s going to start a forest fire,” he said.

“Of course it won’t,” Travis said. “It’s way too wet here for that. Probably. I might just pop down there and spray some stuff to make sure.”

He ducked through the door the construct had emerged from and came out with a red canister.

“Blue,” Farrah said.

Travis looked down at the canister made a wincing expression and went back inside, emerging with a blue canister instead.

“Dodged a bullet there,” he said and made his way over to an elevating platform. Fitting in with the motif of the treehouse, the platform looked like it was being lowered on ropes.

“It’s fine,” Travis called up from below. “It’s all fine. There are no problems down—”

One of the construct’s arms popped off and went sailing over the rail with the thrum of a spring being violently unsprung.

“It’s fine,” Travis called up again. “On an unrelated note, Farrah could you wash down the construct from the green canister? Nothing dangerous is happening down here, but very very quickly would be ideal.”

Everyone moved away from the construct that was now swaying on its feet.

“Isn’t this the person who built the bomb that felled the Builder’s flying city?” Vidal asked.

“Oh, yes,” Farrah said as she went into the room, then came out with a third canister, this one green. “He’s very good at making things that explode. Or shoot dangerous energy

more or less on command. Emit poisonous gas, often on purpose. Liquefy... oh, not allowed to talk about that one either. You know, Princess Liara knows a number of excellent legal advocates."

She used her Obsidian Wall power to put up a wall of dark stone between the group and the construct, now making a fizzing sound as it turned lopsidedly on the spot. With their vision of it blocked, they watched Farrah spray white liquid from the canister into the space they couldn't see behind the wall.

"I'm not doubting his ability to cause destruction," Vidal said. "My concerns are more about stability. The bomb that took down the fortress city, he presumably built that in the city where I was living at the time. Where my mum and hundreds of thousands of other people were living, right?"

"It was a fun project," Travis called out from below. "It was interesting to... why is this thing turning the plants that colour?"

"Is this something I should be allowing to happen in my building?" Jason asked.

"It's fine," Farrah said, moving to put the wall between herself and the construct as dark, thick smoke started to rise from it.

"Why is there a skull drawn on the side of that canister?" Belinda asked.

"No idea," Farrah said as a hole corroded through the wall. She raised another one in front of it.

"We might have used a few experimental materials on the construct," she confessed. "Just trying to find things that can hold more magic than usual without dangerous resonance."

"Some might say that trapping an escalating magical energy inside a fixed matrix with no release mechanism is dangerous..." Travis called out from below.

Everyone waited in silence for him to continue until finally, Jason spoke up.

"...but," he prompted.

"But what?" Travis called back. "Why did everyone go quiet?"

"We were kind of expecting you to follow up on that last thing you said," Jason told him.

"No, I was done."

"Should we move to a different tree house?" Sophie suggested and they all swiftly moved across a rope bridge to a different house built around another tree. Like all the treehouses that made up Jason's disguised cloud palace, it had a broad balcony. Jason called up a set of cloud-substance furniture for everyone that masked itself as wood to match the house. Despite the appearance, it retained the luxurious softness of cloud

material. They all took their seats which had Jason and his companions all facing the single chair left for Vidal.

“Should we wait for Travis?” Humphrey asked.

“No,” Travis called out. “Also, Farrah, could you bring me the yellow and purple canisters.”

“I thought you couldn’t get the yellow anymore after what happened to the bottling plant,” Farrah called back.

“He said I could take the surviving stock so long as I promised to never come back.”

“Just go,” Jason told her.

She wandered off and Jason turned to Vidal.

“So,” he said. “What has the Adventure Society decided to do about us?”

“To wait,” Vidal said. “There are opinions ranging from revoking your membership to demoting you all to one star. The director has spoken up for you, but he couldn’t override the entire executive council. The most he could manage was to refer it to the Continental Council. They will send an assessment officer to make a final judgement.”

“How long will that take?” Rufus asked.

“I have no idea,” Vidal said. “My guess would be a while, as this smacks of politics and the Continental Council really doesn’t like that. Honestly, I suspect that the executive council in Yaresh made sure it came across as political to slow down the process.”

“Why would they stall like that?” Sophie asked. “I assume it’s so they can bend us over somehow.”

“The expedition,” Jason said. “They need us for that. But they want us to toe the line, so they’re letting us know that there’s disciplinary action waiting for us afterwards. They hope that will put us on our best behaviour and make us more compliant.”

“They clearly haven’t been paying attention,” Belinda said. “We’re not exactly a compliant kind of team.”

“No team is,” Humphrey said. “Not any of the good ones, anyway. Adventurers have to be independent thinkers, able to take responsibility for their own choices.”

“Agreed,” Rufus said. “Any good Adventure Society branch respects that. It’s when politics get involved that it goes wrong. I might not think much of the way they train adventurers in Rimaros, but their Adventure Society strikes the right balance between directing adventurers and trusting them.”

“You look nervous, Vidal,” Jason said. “Unhappy.”

“I’m an Adventure Society official,” he said. “It doesn’t sound like you intend to make my life any easier.”

“Don’t forget what being an adventurer is about,” Rufus told him. “It’s not about the society and it’s not about us. It’s about helping people. Protecting people.”

“I don’t think you all being at odds with the Adventure Society will help a lot of people,” Vidal pointed out.

“And I think that excuses like that are how people who have corrupted the Adventure Society’s purpose get good adventurers to go along with bad intentions,” Rufus shot back. “All that accomplishes is getting people to stay quiet while the poison spreads.”

“Let’s not pile it all on Vidal, here,” Jason said. “He’s just the guy stuck in the middle, telling both sides things they don’t want to hear. That must suck. He’s not a local and is just as new to the political situation here as we are. Plus, he doesn’t have the same leverage we do to tell people to sod off.”

“Thank you,” Vidal said. “I had concerns about what I would be caught up in when the society assigned me to you as a liaison, but it has been more trying than anything I imagined. But I have a duty, and part of that duty is to give the society my best assessment of what you will do next.”

“For now,” Jason said, “we’re going to do what we were doing already: continue the contracts we signed up for.”

“Because it’s about the people who need help,” Rufus reiterated. “They don’t care about the politics. They only care about the monsters threatening their homes and families.”

“And we’re going to help them,” Humphrey said.

“Out of curiosity,” Rufus asked, “how resistant were the people calling for our heads to bringing in the Continental Council?”

“The Aristocratic Faction is a political bloc that crosses all major institutions in Yaresh,” Vidal explained. “They have members in any area prestigious enough and influence any place that isn’t. This is hardly unusual as aristocratic families hold a firm grip on most cities. There are other political factions, of course, but my experience has been that most places have only two main groups with any real influence. One is a conservative faction, usually led by aristocrats and others with wealth and power whose interests begin and end with maintaining the advantages they’ve built up over generations. The other group is also usually made up of aristocrats and people with power and money. This group believes in making changes and doing what’s right. They also believe that they are the only ones who know what’s right, so they make sure the changes are all either made by them or by those they control. Also, what’s right never seems to involve them giving up any of their money and power, oddly enough.”

"That sounds uncomfortably familiar," Jason muttered.

"And we come from another universe, bro."

"Those two power blocs, or some variation of them," Vidal said, "exist in every state and city-state that I have had dealings with as an Adventure Society official. Where those political blocs exert a significant influence on the Adventure Society, that is where they start to lose track of that mission Mr Remore was talking about."

Rufus nodded.

"I sorry, Mr Ladiv," he said to Vidal. "It would seem that you have more passion and integrity than I have credited you for, and I apologise for that."

"Thank you, Mr Remore," Ladiv said. "I have been far more involved with the Adventure Society here than any of you. I can tell you that while there is more political influence than I would like, the Yaresh branch is not as far gone as you might fear. The director, from what I can tell, is a good man. He manoeuvred the Aristocratic faction into calling on the Continental Council, not realising how inured they are to the influence of local political forces. Only the proper adventurers in their faction opposed it, knowing the reality, but the director's timing was deft. So, to answer your question, Mr Remore, the only people 'calling for your heads' who resisted calling in the Continental Council were the actual adventurers who understood what that entailed. Now that they have time to explain it to their fellows, they are trying to reverse that decision."

"Will they be able to do that?" Rufus asked.

"There are no guarantees," Vidal said, "but I suspect not. The Adventure Society director tricked the Aristocratic Faction into expending too much political capital. They pushed too hard for the executive council of the Adventure Society to go up against the director. They won't get them to go up against the director a second time to undo the thing they were influenced into doing in the first place."

"The Aristocratic faction members are nobility," Humphrey said. "Their rights are theirs by blood and can only be taken from them for transgressions on the level of treason. Any political setback for them is temporary."

Humphrey glanced at Jason before turning back to the group.

"The bureaucrats at the Adventure Society don't have the same security in their positions," he continued. "They will do what their political masters want, but only while it still benefits them. A nobleman can be seen taking wildly different positions from one day to the next because his family name will always place him on the upper echelon. Calcifer Bynes ran out of the large meeting we had all but wetting himself. He'll pay a political price

for that public humiliation but it doesn't change the fact that he is and always will be a man of wealth, influence and power."

"A good example," Vidal said. "Calcifer Bynes is part of the executive council, and while he'll fade into the background for a time, he's not going anywhere. But the bulk of the group are career bureaucrats. They have suckled at the teat of larger political forces, but when their careers are in danger, they will act in their own interests. This is why they will almost certainly not revoke the call for Continental Council intercession."

"That makes sense," Rufus said. "Calling in the council and then telling them to go home before they arrived would have severe political repercussions."

"What can we expect from this Continental Council?" Belinda asked.

"Last time I got involved with them," Jason said, "they demoted me. Along with almost every adventurer in the city."

"You hadn't just let loose a cohort of enemies to attack adventurers, though," Clive said regretfully. "I think I've earned us all worse than just demotion."

Neil leaned forward in his chair to put a comforting hand on Clive's shoulder.

"Don't worry about it," Neil said. "Everyone here agrees with you."

"Yes," Humphrey agreed. "We've just been talking about the things that negatively impact the Adventure Society. The way we fight back against that influence is by remaining independent. The way they're meant to allow adventurers to be. If we had just capitulated, we would have been contributing to the problem."

"Look at you, fighting authority," Belinda told Humphrey. "You're turning into Jason."

Humphrey looked at her for a long moment, then took a plate from his storage space and held it out for her.

"Sandwich?" he asked in a deadpan voice and everyone but Vidal started laughing.

"This is a very weird team," Vidal said.

Chapter 729

Ordinary Everyday Adventuring

Jason's team had been expecting the emergence of elemental-infused messengers to accelerate the plans of Jes Fin Kaal. Instead, they heard nothing as they continued taking and fulfilling contracts, Shade picking up new ones as he delivered their reports. For the first time in a long time, the team were all together for some ordinary everyday adventuring.

Jason's time on Earth, fighting in monster-filled proto-spaces and later, full-blown monster waves, had allowed him to reach the wall that was the fourth stage of silver-rank faster than his team members. Once he reached it, however, Earth's lack of powerful threats had stalled him out. Through proto-spaces, monster waves and transformation zones, Jason had killed more monsters and other threats than the rest of his team combined. Even so, his progress had been limited by the threat those monsters provided.

Jason had reached a point where few silver-rank monsters were a genuine danger, even in massive numbers. He'd been throwing himself at whole herds or not using various powers to try and push his limits, but once he hit the wall there was little progress to be made on Earth. The few gold-rank threats were too few and too dangerous, as Jason was only willing to take on specific monsters of that rank. If the match-up was bad for his powers, he was still unwilling to take them on.

The monsters of Earth had not been the greatest challenges Jason had faced on his homeworld, but those other dangers were not ones that he could resolve with just his essence abilities. He was forced to wield powerful artefacts, wade into dimensional anomalies and develop spiritual powers he barely understood even now. His understanding of the soul, reality and the wider cosmos expanded, laying out a pathway that would carry him into the distant future. In the immediacy, however, his essence abilities were left fallow, without growth.

Jason's need to rely on spiritual strength continued with his return to Pallimustus. Although his essence abilities did resume a glacial upward trajectory, Jason was again forced to rely on his strange new abilities, and at no small cost. While he convalesced from over-taxing himself, his companions continued fighting their way through the monster surge, slowly but surely catching up to him at the advancement wall.

Clive, Humphrey and Belinda, had an inherent advantage in the form of intrinsic human gifts. Their essence abilities advanced at a slight but measurably faster rate than others, too slight to be of value at lower ranks. Now they had hit the wall and every

measure of growth counted, it gave them a slight edge. For Clive and Belinda, this gave them time to pursue magical study without falling behind the others. For Humphrey, it meant that he could be slightly ahead of the pack, which gave him confidence as team leader.

As their non-stop adventuring entered its third week, Jason was the first to take an ability beyond the fourth level of silver rank, but only by a matter of days. As the team ploughed through roaming monsters and cleaned up contracts, Jason's perception ability finally crossed the line just two days before Humphrey's.

Gary, Farrah and Travis were not taking part in the flurry of contract work. They were in Jason's soul realm, using the advantages it offered to advance their various professions. This left the team eight strong with the semi-permanent addition of Rufus and Taika. Rufus would resume teaching but was in no rush, having rediscovered his love of adventure when not burdened with the leadership role. As for Taika, his goal was Earth and the people he had left behind there. His passage home, however, was entirely reliant on Jason's ability to forge it.

Having shifted their base of operations in anticipation of new contracts, the team watched Jason's cloud flask produce a new cloud palace. They did so from the edge of a mountainous plateau, the cloud-stuff sliding down the cliff to form buildings hanging off the face.

"You have a lot more control over the camouflage version of your cloud buildings compared to Emir," Rufus said.

"Emir never uses his camouflage versions," Jason said. "His are always big and flashy. But yeah, my deeper soul connection gives me a lot more say in the structural details. Hey, who won the betting pool?"

"What betting pool?" Belinda asked.

"I know you make bets on me," Jason said. "Who had me down for the first one to get an ability moving past the wall?"

"That's not really the kind of thing we bet on," Belinda told him. "It's more like what country will declare war on you personally."

"What god you're going to offer a sandwich," Clive said.

"Which diamond ranker you're going to hit on," Taika added.

"When you'll love up Humphrey's mum," Neil said.

"Neil..." Humphrey growled.

"I can't have been the only one seeing that dynamic," Neil said.

“Jason’s like that with every powerful woman he meets,” Rufus said. “We really should do a better job of keeping him away from princesses.”

Shade emerged from Jason’s shadow.

“You have the next batch of contracts?” Jason asked him.

“Not as yet, Mr Asano. I decided to postpone their acquisition as events appear to finally be going into motion.”

“The messengers?”

“There is more activity than we have seen in the last few weeks,” Shade confirmed. “More pressing is that Lady Allayeth asked that I convey a message. She is ready to meet with you and a representative of the church of Liberty.”

“Does she have a time and date?”

“She has designated a location far from Yaresh or any other population centre.”

“I don’t suppose she setting us up for an ambush,” Belinda wondered.

“That’s why I’ll go alone,” Jason said. “If we misread her and it’s some kind of ambush, I have the best chance of getting away.”

Jason was using Shade as a vehicle to fly only a few metres over the jungle canopy. Shade’s form was that of an Earth vehicle, a personal flight device that amounted to a chair in a roll cage with a series of drone-style rotors for lift and propulsion. It was, of course, all black, looking more aggressive and sinister than the vehicles it was based on. It also had more speed and the flight time was essentially infinite.

“I know what you’re doing, Shade.”

“I am conveying you through the air as directed, Mr Asano.”

“You’ve been increasingly using Earth-style transport as I’ve been coming to terms with my time there.”

“Magical vehicles are, for the most part, less practical than technological ones,” Shade pointed out. “Obviously, living mounts and vehicles stylised in the form of living creatures are not as practical as purpose-designed vehicles. Even the more practical vehicle designs, like skimmers, demonstrate a level of inefficiency only seen on Earth when hooligans modify their own cars. Utilising magic to overcome the technical drawbacks of ordinarily non-magical vehicles offers the best of both worlds.”

“That’s well-reasoned,” Jason said. “But we both know that’s not the primary reason. You’re acclimatising me back to Earth with demonstrations of what’s good about it. As I become less emotionally distraught about my time there, you’re introducing the Earth elements you knew better than to pull out when I first returned to Pallimustus.”

Jason snorted a laugh.

"I sound accusatory," he said. "I'm sorry, Shade; what I'm trying to say is thank you. You're always looking out for me."

"I'm glad you can face this with equanimity, Mr Asano."

Jason sensed the presence of a priestess from a good way away, the distinctive whiff of divine power hanging in the air around her. It had surprised him to discover that other people found divine power almost undetectable unless they were looking for it with intrusive perceptual probes. To his senses, it lit up like a beacon.

The location was a town, destroyed and abandoned. The jungle had reclaimed it to the point that there was nowhere to land even the small vehicle. The flight device exploded into a cloud of shadows like a magician's trick, Jason's momentum carrying him out of it to plunge through the air, angling his body. The shadows trailed him as he conjured his Cloak of Night that spread out like wings, turning his controlled fall into a glide.

A massive grin split Jason's face. A few weeks of doing normal jobs with his team and helping out people in need had done more for his mood than all the brooding introspection in the world. Sailing through the air, he was able to appreciate just how amazing the life he was living could be.

"I've got to stop saving the world," he muttered. Although his words were snatched away on the wind, Shade heard them perfectly.

"We both know that you won't step away, Mr Asano. Perhaps you should simply enjoy the moment and leave tomorrow to tomorrow."

"You're a wise man, Shade."

Although Jason had sensed only the priestess, two people were sitting on the low remains of a brick wall as Jason descended towards it. Allayeth turned to look in Jason's direction, the woman with her following suit. Jason swooped in, reducing his weight at the last moment as he landed on a soft-looking patch of moss that could still have hidden some awkward footing.

The two women stood as Jason dismissed his cloak to reveal a simple, casual suit underneath. The fabric was light and breathable, the effect enhanced subtly by magic to be comfortable even in the muggy heat. Jason mentally thanked Alejandro Albericci and his expert tailoring.

The priestess with Allayeth was not a gold-ranker but a silver, meaning that she was not the high-priestess. Allayeth nodded at a section of road not too badly overgrown and they converged on that point. Jason looked around, seeing an incongruity in the ruins.

“What happened to this town?” he asked. “The remains of this building have been weathered about right for the monster surge, but this looks like years of growth.”

“Guess,” Allayeth told him and he took another look around.

“Plant monsters?” he postulated.

“Something like that,” Allayeth told him.

“You didn’t pick this place because it was the closest point that was both convenient and discreet,” he said.

“Later,” she told him. “For the moment, allow me to introduce Priestess Raelia Cass. Priestess; Jason Asano.”

“G’day,” Jason said, shaking her hand.

The priestess was human, compared to the elves far more common in the region. Her dark hair was wavy and long, setting off her typically attractive silver-rank features well. She looked like she was barely twenty-one years old and Jason guessed her to be close to his own twenty-nine.

“I’ve been warned about you, Jason Asano,” she said, her voice curious, not hostile. Jason glanced at Allayeth who shook her head.

“Not by me,” she said.

“My Lady,” the priestess said, referring to the goddess Liberty, “likes to keep a wary eye on Dominion’s favourites.”

“That makes sense,” Jason said. “I don’t suppose you know how to get off that list?”

“I do,” Raelia said. “I fear it is beyond you, however.”

“Oh?”

“What Dominion likes in you is not the autocratic tendencies you consistently demonstrate,” she said. “It is the fact that you rarely regret them.”

“Ah,” Jason said. “It’s hard to be penitent when you feel no need for penance. I fear I will never be in your lady’s good graces.”

“While you have definite tendencies that she does not care for, Mr Asano, she knows that freedom is an important principle for you, despite your inclinations. More importantly, she respects that you are willing to act on that principle.”

“How much do you know about these ‘autocratic tendencies’ of mine?” Jason asked.

“Nothing at all,” she said. “My goddess has only told me that you have them. That you have a habit of deciding the way things should be and then moving the land and the sky to make it so, whatever anyone else might think. Or how they might be affected.”

“That’s true enough,” Jason acknowledged. “But you do know what I want, right?”

"Lady Allayeth has made things clear. My goddess has qualms about participating as she cannot see into the astral space you are holding them in. She is all for freeing these people as any form of incarceration is unacceptable to her, but she also does not want invaders let loose to rejoin their kind's oppressive invasion. She would like to see the leader of your prisoners for herself."

"That's one of the reasons we're out here, then," Jason deduced. "So I can pop out a messenger or two outside of Charist's primary perception area."

"Yes," Allayeth said.

Jason didn't fuss about and immediately brought out Marek Noir Vargas. The messenger answered a lengthy list of questions, ranging from his intentions to his current state to the history of how he landed in his current situation. There were more questions about Jason himself than he was entirely comfortable with. Finally, the priestess allowed Marek to return to Jason's soul realm.

"The goddess is satisfied," the priestess announced. "She will aid you, but the important work must be undertaken by you, Mr Asano."

"I'm not afraid of a little hard work."

"Good. These messengers will need to be released into the cosmos, not just this world, and accomplishing that falls to you. When you do achieve this, the goddess will hide your actions. No one will see or overhear, even should they be in a position to directly observe. The goddess Knowledge will not learn of it, even from your mind after the task is done."

"You can hide things from Knowledge? And keep it hidden?"

"Gods have the ability to overrule other gods when it comes to their own area of influence. Freeing people from your custody, having already freed them from bondage of the soul places this issue very much under Liberty's authority."

"I see. But until I figure out how to set them loose, she won't do anything."

"The gods exist to help and guide our actions, Mr Asano, not to act in our stead."

"I'm very onboard with that stance," Jason told her. "Any tips on how to gate these people out into the cosmos? I have some other interests in dimensional transgression that might dovetail nicely."

"No," the priestess said sternly. "On a wholly unrelated note, she wishes me to convey that choosing to claim the messenger's study was a very wise choice."

Jason's personal condition for working with Jes Fin Kaal had been the sealed study of the dead diamond-rank messenger.

“Good to know,” Jason said. “Is that everything from your goddess? Can I turn my attention to whatever reason Lady Allayeth wanted to meet over?”

“You may. And if I may say, Mr Asano, you were far less difficult to deal with than the rumours have suggested.”

“I’m a perfectly reasonable man.”

“We just had such a good meeting, Mr Asano. Let us not start lying now.”

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.”

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 outfacing 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.”