

Chapter 461

Of Course He Doesn't Have Pants

In an abandoned outback town, there was something unusual on the dry grass of the football oval. Large stones were set into arches, forming a series of concentric circles. Next to the bar, the only properly-maintained building, was a long wooden grandstand, bleached by the sun. Jason and Farrah had been sitting on it for some time, talking.

"It's time," Jason said and stood up.

"You know they're watching us, right?" Farrah asked as she did the same.

"Leave them to their petty squabbles. I'm done."

"Did you end up talking to Amy?" Farrah asked as they left the grandstand and started walking across the grass. "I know you were in two minds about it."

"I did," Jason said. "Not that there was much to say. It was just sad, more than anything. Once upon a time, we knew each other better than anyone. Than we knew ourselves. Now we barely recognise one another. I think we both felt the loss."

"She wasn't angry?"

"She was tired. Kaito made his own choice to stand up for his world and she knows that. It doesn't change the fact that her kids will grow up without their father."

They walked across the football field, through the stone structures Farrah had put in place. In the centre was an empty circle.

"You won't be back for a long time," Farrah said. "If you want a last look around, this is it. A day or two won't make a difference."

Jason opened a portal to his spirit vault and stepped through without looking back.

Jason's spirit vault was increasingly becoming less of a vault and more of a realm. Not only was his rank growing but the racial power that created it had gone through a rare secondary evolution. He had absorbed the power of the Builder's dimensional door and the World-Phoenix's dimensional bridge. Most of all, his soul had undergone tribulations and come out all the stronger.

The layout of his spirit realm reflected his spirit domains, with a pagoda tower at the centre made of dark crystal infused with sparkling, transcendent light. From there, a vast estate of cloud buildings sprawled out into gardens that ranged from wild groves to carefully cultivated gardens to a cave system filled with luminescent fungus.

At the edge of his domain was a wall of darkness that seemed to devour the light around it. Even the starry void beyond was bright by comparison. The most prominent change brought about by the World-Phoenix's bridge was that the wall now had an arched

gate. Beyond the gate, a rainbow bridge extended into the star-speckled dark. In the distance, a stream of light, also filled with rainbow hues, extended into the void past Jason and Farrah's ability to make out where it began or ended.

Jason had god-like control over his spirit realm and with a blur, he and Farrah were standing at the gate. It was a solid construction of the same dark, sparkling crystal as the pagoda. At a gesture from Jason, it sank into the ground, opening the dark wall that separated the physical space of his spirit realm from the astral void surrounding it. The rainbow bridge spanning out towards the distant stream of similarly polychromatic light.

"That's the link between worlds?" Farrah asked.

"Beyond this wall is the deep astral," Jason said. "What we're seeing is more metaphor than reality. My spirit realm trying to quantify that which cannot be quantified."

"So, how does this work?"

"However I like."

Jason flicked his hand in another gesture and his entire spirit realm started moving along the rainbow bridge. It accelerated more and more until Farrah realised that what she thought was a narrow stream of energy in the distance was planetary in scale, simply much further away than she realised. As they drew closer, they reached the point where all they could see was a vast rainbow wall in front of them.

The spirit realm passed into the stream, the rainbow energy engulfing them but not crossing beyond the wall or an invisible dome above it. The gate rose back up and Jason turned away.

The people observing the stone formation from several kilometres away in a helicopter watched as the ordinary stone transmuted into dark crystal, the inside of it speckled with shifting blue, silver and gold light. They reported that Jason Asano had left the Earth behind.

Jason's team, plus Rufus, Gary and Jory, stood before Dawn in a confrontational array, with Virid sitting obediently at the picnic table behind them. The twisted remains of the sword Gary once gave Jason still rested in Gary's hands.

The local townsfolk knew adventurer business when they saw it and had already given the group a wide berth. After Gary's stone-shattering roar from earlier, they gave it a wider one.

"Why should we believe you?" Sophie asked Dawn. "If Jason's alive, where is he?"

“Jason is on his own world,” Clive said. His eyes moved side to side as he absently scratched his head, his mind putting the pieces together. He looked up, starting slightly as he noticed everyone looking at him. He turned to Dawn.

“You serve the World-Phoenix, don’t you?” he asked her. She smiled.

“He wasn’t wrong about you being the smart one,” she said. “I spent a lot of time with Jason’s collection of astral magic theory. Your notes are impressively insightful, Mr Standish. Especially given the level of astral magic in this world.”

“What’s a world phoenix?” Gary asked.

“A great astral being,” Clive said. “I only know a little, but my understanding is that it’s largely antagonistic to the Builder. Its domain is dimensional integrity, which directly clashes with the Builder’s plundering of worlds.”

“Then where has it been all this time?” Sophie demanded. “Is its other domain taking a nap when it should be getting off its butt and kicking the Builder in the fruit basket?”

“The World-Phoenix is famously indirect,” Clive said. “It works through agents and pawns, which is why information about it is limited. The very fact that one of its agents is here at all is quite worrying. It makes me wonder what the Builder had planned that would warrant intervention.”

“You are right to worry,” Dawn said.

“What does any of this have to do with Jason?” Rufus asked.

“Jason always said he had a way back home,” Clive said.

“One that he didn’t know how to use,” Sophie added. “He showed it to me once. It was an item. Red, with a picture of a bird on it.”

“So it’s true, then,” Clive said. “World-Phoenix tokens really can bring back the dead.”

“Yes,” Dawn said. “This is why they are handed out sparingly. Jason Asano was reborn in his own world.”

“I thought his world didn’t have magic,” Gary said. “What would someone like you be doing there?”

“Jason’s world held many secrets. On returning, he found himself with responsibilities that someone of his rank should not have had to shoulder. Enemies whose power utterly dwarfed his own.”

“No change there, then,” Jory muttered. “Still picking fights he can’t win.”

“I never said he didn’t win,” Dawn said. “Jason managed to provoke my counterpart within the Builder’s forces into overstepping his bounds. This has forced certain compromises on the Builder’s part, allowing for my presence here. There are extreme

restrictions on my power to intervene directly on events but I have already started preparing this world for what comes next.”

“Which is what?” Humphrey asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Sophie said. “The issue is Jason.”

“Since I left Jason’s world,” Dawn continued, “he apparently provoked the man again. In recompense, I am allowed a single instance of intervention on behalf of this world, using the full measure of my power. I intend to use it well.”

“If you were in Jason’s world,” Sophie said, “why didn’t you bring him back?”

“I told you that he has responsibilities,” Dawn said. “Once they are complete, he will return on his own. Further explanation can be left to Jason himself, once he returns, other than to say that when he does, the monster surge will begin.”

“Why?” Rufus asked. “How?”

“And I’m thinking we should get those further explanations now,” Sophie said.

“I will explain the details to Mr Standish soon enough,” Dawn said. “He’s the only one who would truly understand what is happening anyway and can explain it for you in turn. As for further explanations, I have something that you will want to see more.”

“Hold on,” Humphrey said. “You’re doing a lot of talking, but words are easy. I haven’t seen anything to prove you aren’t just playing some game with us.”

“And he said you were the naïve one,” Dawn said to Humphrey. “Mr Blacksmith, would you care to reassure them?”

“The sword,” Virid said, standing up. The group suddenly remembered the blade in Gary’s hands.

“If it’s truly soul-bonded to your friend and your friend is alive,” Virid continued, “then it cannot be hidden from Gary in the process of reforging. It will give us a definitive answer.”

“Still,” Belinda said to Dawn. “He could have at least given you a recording crystal to bring back to us for evidence.”

“He did,” Dawn said. “I’ve been trying to tell you that but you keep interrupting. No wonder you all became his friends. You’re as bad as he is.”

“How much time did you spend with Jason?” Rufus asked.

“You just can’t stop, can you?” Dawn asked. “You genuinely all deserve each other. I spent more time with Jason than you, Mr Remore. My powers were severely restricted, however. For most of our time together, he was more powerful than I. Now, if you’re all quite done, does anyone have a recording crystal projector?”

Jason and Farrah lay back in lounge chairs made out of cloud stuff, watching the rainbow energies pass over Jason's spirit realm. Then they spotted a figure float swiftly past and they both sat up.

"Was that...?" Farrah asked.

"TV's Patrick Duffy, yeah," Jason said. "I didn't know he was an interdimensional being."

Farrah gave him a flat look.

"Or, it's possible that my spirit realm imprinting physical reality onto a non-physical space is causing anomalous manifestations projected from my psyche."

"And what your mind threw out was Patrick Duffy?"

"He was in *The Bold and the Beautiful*, *Dallas* and *Step by Step*, Farrah. That's a daytime soap, a primetime soap and a classic nineties sitcom; all iconic examples of their respective genres. He's a titan of the industry."

"Most of that is from before you were born. Your father has a lot to answer for."

"Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it, which is probably why they rebooted *Dallas*. Also, you know a lot for someone who claims to hate television."

"I really, really need to get back to my own world."

Clive's crystal projector was set on the picnic table Virid had been sitting at, the group now all gathered around it.

"I haven't seen this," Dawn admitted. "We were both rather caught up in events and he handed it to me as I was leaving his world."

"You don't have an image projector?" Humphrey asked.

"It's primitive magic," Dawn said. "My dimensional vessel doesn't have one. I could have gotten one while I was here, but it seemed right that you should all see it first. He made it for you, after all."

She placed the crystal in the projector and an image blinked to life over the table. It was Jason, covered in blood and dust, wearing nothing but boxer shorts with love hearts on them. He was sporting a slew of wounds, although they were closing at a rate fast enough for them to see.

"Of course he doesn't have pants," Rufus laughed, the delight at seeing his friend thick in his voice.

"I haven't done this in a while, the magic being kind of crap in my world," Jason said.

"So, the recording crystals don't work so well. I'll catch you all up at some point but I'm kind

of in the middle of something right now. I guess I can hit the highlights. Farrah's alive; that's a winner. So am I, for that matter, which may be—”

Gary's hand slammed down, pausing the projection.

“Yes,” Dawn said. “She's alive. I've spent quite some time with her, in fact. You could say she is a mutual friend.”

Rufus and Gary shared a look; hope and joy tempered by a fear that all this was some cruel, elaborate ruse. Sophie, who had only heard about Farrah, reached out to resume the recording.

“...more surprising,” Jason continued. “I die kind of a lot. Is three times a lot? I mean, three isn't a big number, but not many people hit the triple when it comes to carking it. I think three counts as a lot.”

He panned the crystal away from himself, showed off some kind of city street with an architectural style that none of them were familiar with. There was debris all over the street, courtesy of a collapsed nearby building. Jason panned the crystal back to himself.

“I'm saving the world, so I'd best get back to it,” he said. “As you can see, I'm standing in my underwear in the middle of the street, covered in blood, next to a building I just blew up. The street is in an extradimensional city I'm taking over so a hole doesn't get blasted in the side of the universe. Mondays, am I right? Oh, wait; you have a six-day week. Still, it's a day of the week. It's not that hard to pick up from context.”

“Hole in the universe?” Clive asked. “How is that even possible, and why is—”

“Clive,” Jason's projection cut in, wagging a disapproving finger. “I know you've got questions but stop interrupting. People are trying to listen to the recording. Be courteous and wait.”

The group burst out laughing at the expression on Clive's face, the tension they all had breaking like an overflowing dam. They watched Jason pull out a flask of cleaning solution and pour it over himself. He winced as it stung his wounds.

“Jory, if you're watching this, I want you to know I have a new appreciation for the quality of your crystal wash. I am going to need quite a lot of it once I get back, by the way. Like, a lot. I don't want to go running out again, so waaay more than last time.”

Jason tipped another flask of the cleaning solution over some strange looking weapons before putting them away in his inventory.

“Anyway, none of my essence abilities work here, which sucks. I spent the last few hours fighting it out with a small army of astronauts with ray guns, which was pretty awesome. I'll explain what they are later.”

Jason reached up to the crystal and the projection ended.

Chapter 462

Connotations

A bird fluttered out of Humphrey's jacket, then transformed into a puppy as it landed on the table and started pawing at the projector. Humphrey scooped him up and petted him gently.

"It's alright, little buddy," he cooed soothingly.

"That's it?" Neil complained as the recording ended. "That didn't tell us anything. I'm so glad he's alive and I can go back to hating him."

"Neil," Humphrey scolded.

"What?" Neil asked.

Clive shook his head while Belinda snorted a laugh. Jory was contemplating the return of the crystal wash vampire while Sophie was looking shell-shocked. Humphrey reached out to her but she flinched away. He looked hurt and she winced apologetically.

"I..."

Sophie couldn't get out any more words and left in a half-run. Humphrey moved to follow but Belinda placed a restraining hand on his arm.

"You'd do more harm than good at this point," she told him. "She needs a friend, not... whatever you are."

"I have to do something."

"You had plenty of time to do something," Belinda said, the barbs in her voice dripping venom. "If you'd mustered up some courage any time in the last two years then she wouldn't have been stuck between a ghost and a coward. Now the ghost is coming back, so it's time to give it up or rummage around those fancy pants and see if you can't dig out some balls."

She snatched puppy Stash from Humphrey's arms and marched off in Sophie's direction, leaving a crestfallen Humphrey behind her.

Rufus and Gary were looking at one another as if asking for permission to hope. Seeing Jason alive was one thing, but hearing about Farrah without seeing her had a fearful unreality to it. They shared the fear of their hope being cruelly snatched away.

"Mr Standish," Dawn said. "Perhaps you can join me for a lengthy discussion."

Farrah groaned as she watched Jason go through a meditative sword dance. Again. They were on a terrace in Jason's spirit realm, the rainbow lights of the world link washing over them.

“How long until we get back?” she complained.

“I told you that I don’t know,” Jason said, his smooth, graceful movements continuing uninterrupted. “If that changes, I’ll let you know.”

“Are you going to meditate all day, every day? I know training is important but you’re getting worse than Rufus.”

“I’ve been on Earth too long,” Jason said. “Standards are going to be higher than I’m used to and I have no intention of falling behind. It wouldn’t hurt you to do a little practise yourself.”

“Fine,” Farrah conceded. “At least change it up a bit, though. How about a spar?”

“As in a practise fight or a fizzy bath?” Jason asked.

“There’s a spa bath here?” Farrah asked, perking up.

“There can be,” Jason said. “How about we do both?”

Farrah was disoriented as she suddenly found herself standing in front of Jason in a wide-open duelling area. She looked down to find her Earth clothes had been replaced with a training gi.

“Did you use your tin-pot god powers to change my clothes?” she asked.

“Nope,” Jason said. “You were wearing that the whole time.”

Farrah conjured her sword.

“I’m going to enjoy this.”

Belinda walked through the dark outside the town, her way lit by a floating silver lantern shedding a clean, white-blue light that gave a refreshing feeling as its aura replenished her mana. This was Shimmer, her astral lantern familiar.

She found Sophie sitting on a rock on a small rise, staring up at the night sky. She sat next to her friend, leaning into her by way of greeting.

“I’m not looking to talk,” Sophie said.

Belinda passed Stash into Sophie’s lap and plucked a bottle of amber liquid from her storage space. She took a swig and handed over the bottle.

“Who said anything about talk?” she asked.

They sat in silence, passing the bottle back and forth as Sophie scratched the napping Stash behind the ears.

“I don’t... gods damn it,” Sophie said.

“I haven’t seen you in how long and that idiot still hasn’t done anything,” Belinda complained. “Humphrey’s an idiot.”

“He’s not an idiot.”

“You’re both idiots,” Belinda said. “Since when do you dance about instead of taking what you want?”

“You know since when,” Sophie said. “It’s like Jason has been sitting between us this whole time and now...”

Sophie took a big gulp, letting the silver-rank liquor burn her throat.

“And now he’s coming back,” Belinda finished as Sophie handed her the bottle.

“What do I do, Lindy?” Sophie asked, her voice uncharacteristically small.

“The thing about death,” Belinda said, “is that we don’t look back at things the way they were. We tell ourselves the stories we want to remember and act like they’re real memories. After a while, we forget that they aren’t.”

“What are you saying?”

“That he’s coming back and it’s not about the stories anymore. I knew Jason better than you, Soph, because I wasn’t tied up in nine kinds of mess the way you were. You hated him, and then you... I saw what he was, Soph, while he was always one story or another to you, even before he died. You thought too little or too much of him and never what he really was.”

“Which was what?”

“Some guy. He was kind of amazing and kind of a turd, but he was just some guy. But now he’s some myth in your head and you can’t expect him to live up to that.”

“I don’t seem to be coming off well in this description,” Sophie said, taking the bottle back.

“You weren’t in a well place, Sophie. And Jason never really knew you, either. You spent your whole life building a fortress and he was long gone before you took it down. He was going through his own stuff, too. If you think either of you are the same people you were then you’re deluding yourself.”

Belinda pushed herself off the rock, wobbling with drink.

“In the end, Humphrey and Jason don’t matter,” she said. “It’s about you. Be who you are. Make sure you’re chasing what you want and not what you think you should want. That will only hurt everyone, yourself most of all.”

Belinda staggered off into the darkness in the vague direction of the town, her familiar bobbing after her.

“What if I’m already hurt?” Sophie whispered.

“...which is why Jason’s return to our world will trigger the monster surge,” Clive concluded. Some of the villagers had stopped to listen in with initial fascination, only to drift away as Clive started explaining astral magic to the group.

“Did the explanation have to be that long?” Neil asked. “The monster surge isn’t happening because of a bad magic thing that some stupidly powerful whatever made. Jason, being Jason, heard ‘stupidly powerful,’ immediately decided to annoy it and blew up its magic thing. Now the monster surge is back on, with a bonus invasion, and Jason’s coming here to probably get us all killed.”

“I wouldn’t characterise that as entirely accurate,” Clive said.

“Why is Jason building this bridge to this place anyway?” Neil asked. “Where even are we?”

“He’s not coming to this place,” Dawn said. “What he’s doing is outside of even my experience. He may arrive at the same place he arrived the first time, somewhere completely random or at a location equivalent to one of his...”

“What is it?” Clive asked after Dawn trailed off.

“Some things are better not said aloud,” she said. “Suffice to say, any potential location for Jason’s arrival would be a guess on our part.”

“Then what are we doing all the way out here?” Neil asked. “Does this town even have a name?”

“Of course it has a name,” Jory said.

“What is it?”

“I don’t exactly remember,” Jory admitted.

“Mr Xandier was here,” Dawn said. “I needed his help and this place has fewer eyes and ears. I had enough influence with the Adventure Society to send you all here, so I did.”

“You’ve been warning the Adventure Society,” Humphrey said.

“Yes,” Dawn acknowledged. “This will not merely be cultists snatching away astral spaces. This will be war.”

Dawn departed from the group to resume her work preparing the Adventure Society as best she could. Rufus returned to Greenstone, both to settle his affairs before Jason’s arrival and in case it was the place he arrived. With no better plan than to wait, the others left for the city of Zartos. Home to Gary’s mentor, Virid and the diamond-ranker’s personal smithy.

“It’s the best place to forge a great work,” Virid said.

Gary and Virid spent days examining the sword, seeking to understand it. They carefully selected the supplemental materials they would use and familiarised themselves with the soul echo bonded to the weapon.

The forging was a collaboration, not just between Gary and Virid but also Jason. In many ways, it was the soul-bond that guided the most critical aspects of the work and shaped the final result.

Zartos was a subterranean city built around an underground river, largely populated by celestines. While Gary and Virid worked, the others enjoyed their reunion. None of them had felt entirely whole as a team since Jason's death. As with Rufus and Gary, the loss of a friend and companion had led to them taking separate paths where previously they would have resisted.

Gary and Virid were sealed away in Virid's smithy for nineteen days before they finally emerged. The sword Gary showed the team was wholly unlike what it had been before. Before even its appearance, the blade had a domineering aura that gave a sense that even looking at it was somehow a transgression. There was a benevolence as well, but one looking down from above.

"That's quite a weapon, Gary," Humphrey said. "A real aura from a weapon is quite a feat, especially an aura that strong."

"The aura comes from the soul bond, and Virid covered many of my flaws," Gary confessed. "He pushed me to heights I could not reach alone. The soul bond also guided me. It's like the sword knew what it wanted to be."

The hilt was a simple design of milk-white metal with onyx embellishments and bone grip. The blade was a black so dark as to be unnerving, as if looking upon it was forbidden. Symbols were carved into the blade, starkly contrasted in white.

"That's the same language used in the brand Jason inflicts with his spell," Clive said. "The one that applies the mark of sin affliction."

"That brand was on me once," Sophie said. "It actually means something?"

"It's an ideographic language," Clive said.

"A what?" Sophie asked.

Like Jason, Clive had the power to speak and read all languages. Unlike Jason, he had used it as a springboard for study.

"It's a language where a single symbol can embody a complex concept," Clive explained. "Whether a symbol is alone or contextualised by others can hugely impact the meaning. The symbol from Jason's brand translates to sinner, which makes sense. It's accompanied by an affliction called the mark of sin."

“Are these symbols Jason’s native language?” Belinda asked.

“No,” Clive said. “This is something much older.”

“I don’t even know what it says,” Gary admitted. “It just kind of felt right to mark them on the blade as I was working it. It’s the soul bond. I named the original sword Dread Salvation, but I think it might have renamed itself and that’s what we’re looking at. What does it say, Clive?”

“Hegemon’s Will.”

“You said one symbol conveys a complex concept, right?” Sophie asked.

“It can,” Clive said. “This language has the primary, conceptual symbols, and the secondary, contextual symbols.”

“The sword has six symbols,” Sophie said. “That seems like a lot of context for a short name.”

“There are connotations,” Clive said.

“What kind of connotations?” Sophie asked.

“You felt the aura,” Clive said. “Those kinds of connotations.”

“Oh, great,” Neil said. “Sounds like Jason’s time away gave him the humility he so badly needed.”

The journey was proving immensely valuable to Jason. The tiny bubble of his spirit realm was a projection of his soul being cast through the infinity that was the deep astral, only the world link it clung to saving him from drifting helplessly forever. His soul was immersed in magic at its most pure and powerful, with even simple meditation accelerating his insights into the most fundamental aspects of cosmic power.

His most common meditative technique was the dance of the sword fairy that Rufus had taught him. Jason was trying to use it to get a better grasp of entering the combat trance state, which he was still struggling to fully master. More than just a simple battle trance, he sought oneness with the cosmos that he was closer to now than he was likely to ever be again.

“You’re not Luke Skywalker,” Farrah called out from her lounge.

“Shut up,” he said, continuing his sword dance uninterrupted.

“Anakin, maybe. Prequels, not Clone Wars.”

Jason stumbled.

“That’s just low,” he muttered as she laughed.

Farrah was less enamoured than Jason of the journey. For her it was more waiting, which she’d done plenty of while Jason was in the two transformation zones. She became

increasingly agitated as her home, family and friends grew closer, yet felt so far away. Days turned into weeks as they continued their passage through the astral.

Jason went back to his meditative dance as she was listening to music on a recording crystal, lounging in a deck chair made of clouds.

“This is not traditional meditative music,” Jason commented.

“If you don’t like Laura Branigan, that’s not my problem.”

Jason stopped his sword dance again.

“I’m the one who... you didn’t give her essences as well, did you?”

“I wouldn’t do that without telling you.”

“No? Do we need to discuss Pat Benatar?”

“Who told...? I mean, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I should have worked harder to get you back home,” Jason said, shaking his head as he tilted it back to look helplessly at the rainbow sky. “I think you’ve gone native.”

His eyes narrowed, still looking up.

“Was that a tree?”

Chapter 463

What a Monster Surge Feels Like

Gary and Jory and Jason's team were on the open deck of a skyship, heading into the range where they could portal to Vitesse.

"Is everyone feeling that?" Humphrey asked.

"I am," Neil said, the rest of the group agreeing. A tremulation in the ambient magic started small but grew rapidly in strength and was shortly creating turbulence for the skyship.

"What is this?" Sophie asked. "Is this what a monster surge feels like?"

"No," Clive said. "No, it isn't."

The rainbow light over Jason's spirit realm slowly faded out to be replaced with a blank grey. Even as it did, increasing amounts of foliage, branches and even whole trees were blasting past, their number increasing as the light faded. By the time the light was entirely gone, there was a constant stream of debris passing overhead, ripped through the air by devastating winds.

"What's going on?" Farrah asked.

"We've arrived," Jason said. "In the middle of a storm. A cyclone, from the looks of it. There goes my plan to step out and take in a lungful of clean, fresh air."

"We don't breathe."

"Oh, yeah."

Belinda and Clive had already rushed below decks to see if they could help the engineers right the skyship as it moved from poorly controlled flight towards poorly controlled fall. Neil and Gary were ushering other passengers below decks while Sophie and Humphrey had jumped overboard, using flight, teleport and other movement powers to retrieve the few already bucked off by violent turbulence.

There were other adventurers amongst the passengers who likewise stepped in to stem the chaos. Eventually, the ship righted itself and Clive and Belinda came back up, accompanied by the chief engineer.

"...I didn't even know you could do that with resonating cascade rods," the frazzled engineer praised Belinda.

“Improvisation is a specialty of hers,” Clive said. “If you ever need to take her prisoner, I’d just have a guard hit her on the head every time she regains consciousness. And sometimes when she hasn’t to make sure.”

“Hey...” Belinda complained.

“I once saw her take down a trap barrier from the inside with a broken wand and a device for checking the freshness of fish,” Clive continued.

The team regrouped on the top deck, along with key members of the crew and some other adventurers who had likewise helped out.

“Any idea what’s happening?” the captain asked the chief engineer.

“It’s not a problem with the ship,” the chief engineer said. “Ship sensors are reading massive disruptions in the ambient magic as far as they’ll reach. We’ve managed to cobble together an adaptation to compensate but it won’t hold. We need to get on the ground slow before we hit it fast.”

“It’s the monster surge,” Clive said. “It’s starting.”

“I’ve lived through three monster surges,” the captain said. “Monster surges don’t do this.”

“This one does,” Clive said.

“We picked something up on the ship’s sensors,” the chief engineer said. “Something big and strange, somewhere off to starboard.”

They all looked but no one saw anything but clear skies.

“I think your sensors are wrong,” one of the adventurers said.

“No,” Clive said. “You don’t see it because it doesn’t exist yet.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” the adventurer asked. “You’re talking out of your...”

He trailed off as a rainbow light erupted in the sky, above and starboard of the ship. It was the rainbow light of a magic manifestation, but the size was almost incomprehensibly vast.

“I don’t suppose there’s any chance that’s a really, really big awakening stone,” Neil said.

“It has to be a diamond-rank monster, right?” one of the adventurers said. “That’s too big even for gold rank.”

“I saw a diamond-rank manifestation, two monster surges back,” the captain said. “Even that wasn’t this big.”

“Captain,” the chief engineer said. “I take back what I said about getting onto the ground. Let’s get out of here as fast as we can.”

The captain and engineer ran off toward their stations.

“This is what Dawn warned us about, isn’t it?” Belinda asked.

“I think so,” Clive said. “I don’t think being nearby is a good idea. We should go help the engineer keep this thing afloat while we get out of here.”

“Normal manifestations take a while, right?” Jory asked. “Especially the big ones?”

“Yes,” Clive said. “Hopefully we’re well away before something comes out of that light.”

Jason opened a portal from his spirit realm and he and Farrah finally set foot back onto Farrah’s homeworld. It was not a friendly welcome as they were immediately blasted with horizontal rain and the powerful wind that was tearing up the plants and trees of the tropical jungle in which they found themselves. Even as silver-rankers, they could barely stay on their feet because they didn’t weigh enough. Farrah had to conjure her heavy stone armour while shadow arms reached out to anchor Jason to nearby trees and rocks.

Farrah pointed to a rocky rise and they moved downwind of it, hunkering down as the storm raged past them. Their clothes were already drenched, clinging to their bodies as they crouched down, out of the worst of the wind.

“I wish I still had my magic umbrella,” Jason said through voice chat. Trying to speak over the howling wind would be pointless. “I left it with Emi.”

“It was iron-rank anyway,” Farrah said. “It would have a hard time with a storm this strong. We’re in a high magic zone and this storm has soaked up some of the ambient magic.”

Jason pulled up his map power and zoomed out to a global scale. Their location was marked as somewhere in the Caribbean Sea. As he had never been to this world’s equivalent, he saw no details, only the outlines of landmasses. There seemed to be three additional major islands compared to Jason’s world, south of the Greater Antilles. Jason and Farrah were on an island sufficiently minor that at the current scale it didn’t even appear on the map. Jason shared the ability to see the map with Farrah.

“The Sea of Storms,” she said. “Makes sense. We’re in the Storm Kingdom, which rules the islands of the Sea of Storms, along with many of the surrounding coastal regions.”

“Your world doesn’t have Christopher Columbus or cruise lines, so it’s probably nicer here than in mine,” Jason said.

“Don’t be so sure. We have magic and it’s called the Sea of Storms for a reason. There are major storms every month or so during storm season, which is two-thirds of the

year. And during that time, there's always at least one powerful, localised storm happening somewhere in the Storm Sea."

"But it's nice otherwise?"

"So I've heard," Farrah said. "I've never been. Emir has, but he's not allowed back. He stole something from the royal family a few years back."

"That rings a bell," Jason said. "I think he told me about that once. Speaking of Emir, how about we find the coast, pull out a cloud ship and change into some dry clothes?"

"I like this plan."

"Shade, what do you have for us?" Jason shouted into the wind. Darkness spilled out of Jason's shadow, taking the form of a beetle the size of a short passenger bus. On the beetle's back was a dome of translucent chitin, the inside of which was hollow. The beetle had a pair of large, multi-jointed arms that were longer than its other legs.

The translucent chitin opened a gap as the hard substance turned to liquid and flowed to make a round hole. The long arms picked up Jason and Farrah and deposited them inside as climbing or jumping in the blasting wind would be a difficult proposition. The gap closed behind them, shutting out the wind and rain and noise. Chairs made of soft, comfortable shadow-stuff rose from the dark chitin under their feet.

"Nice one, Shade," Jason said.

"It seemed appropriate for the terrain," Shade said.

"This is a treasure beetle, right?" Farrah asked as she started stripping off her wet clothes and pulling dry ones from her dimensional bag. "I've heard of them but never seen one because they get hunted down as soon as they're found."

"I'm assuming that's something to do with why they're called treasure beetles," Jason said, turning to look away despite Farrah's unconcern. He changed his clothes using his inventory system, dark mist emerging and swapping his outfits before dispersing again.

"They're very sensitive to materials with large amounts of magic," Farrah explained as she changed. "Ores, magic herbs, items left behind when some adventurer died alone. They can burrow very well and harvest herbs without damaging them using those big arms. They store them in the domes on their backs, which preserves the magic."

"They're a walking treasure trove. Not a fantastic survival trait."

The skyship was shuddering as it pushed its speed while also running on jury-rigged modifications to handle the disrupted ambient magic conditions. Anyone not an adventurer or crew member had been banished below decks, although there had been few complaints.

Belinda and Clive were working with the engineer in the bowels of the ship while the rest of their group was watching the manifestation they were hoping to escape before whatever was coming out of the rainbow light appeared. They realised that they had underestimated the size of it as they moved away rapidly yet it continued to loom large in the sky above them.

“On the bright side,” Gary said, “this means Jason and Farrah are either here or will be soon, right?”

“That’s what Clive said,” Jory confirmed. “Then it’s just a matter of finding them.”

“It’s going to be a mess getting information with a monster surge going on,” Humphrey said. “Especially this one. The Adventure Society is going to be tying up all the public water-link chambers, making long-range communication tricky. My family always has a private link chamber in our family compounds, although they will no doubt be busy as well.”

“Church of Knowledge?” Neil suggested.

“Jason had a way to come back before he left,” Sophie said. “If she didn’t tell us that after he died, why would she help us now?”

“It’s worth trying anyway,” Humphrey said. “Our best bet is the Adventure Society, though. If Jason checks in with any branch, his status will be updated across every branch. Then we’ll know where to go.”

"Look," Neil said, pointing. "I think it's happening."

The rainbow light started to fade and something was appearing in its place, shimmering into being like a ghost.

“Dawn was telling the truth,” Sophie said weakly. “It really is a city.”

As she said, an entire city was coming into being in the air, floating high above the ground. The underside was all rock as if the city had been ripped from the ground, while the rest was a stone city surrounded by high walls, with towers jutting out over the top.

“Well, damn,” Neil said.

The island Jason and Farrah were on proved to be both small and uninhabited. Shade’s treasure beetle form navigated the jungle terrain handily and they soon reached the coast where Jason opened up his cloud flask. The clouds streaming out were teased by the wind but no more, the cyclonic power of the storm insufficient to disrupt the cloud flask’s magic.

Soon, a very large pleasure yacht was resting calmly on a sea that was anything but. It wasn’t in the Earth style but more like the ones Jason had seen at the Greenstone

marina. He had spent a pleasant day with Cassandra Mercer on a smaller version of such a boat, not that long before she dumped him. Jason and Farrah went aboard and Shade took position as pilot.

“My map is a blank other than raw geography,” he said. “Should we just steer towards a big island and see what we get?”

Jason brought up a map of the Sea of Storms on the wall. Because the cloud flask was soul-bonded, it was able to replicate his map ability, at least to display a map. The more tactical functions, like enemy tracking, were still restricted to Jason himself.

“These islands here,” Farrah said, pointing off the coast of what on Earth was Venezuela.

“I think one of those is Aruba,” Jason said. “Works for me. I’m pretty sure the boat can handle the weather, so you can set out, Shade. What is this place we’re going to?”

“The capital of the Storm Kingdom, Rimaros,” Farrah said.

“Rimaros?” Jason said. “I met a woman named Rimaros. I heard she was the princess of something, which I guess is here. Hey, I know a local.”

“You might not want to lean on that connection,” Farrah said. “We should keep our heads down and not make trouble. Which, I’ll remind you, is kind of not your thing.”

“Oh, I learned that lesson,” Jason said. “I got to be a famous superhero and it turned out to suck. I say we find the nearest Adventure Society branch, quietly do our part with the monster surge, find our teams and finish up this magic bridge without making any waves.”

“You know it’s never going to be that simple,” Farrah told him. “You don’t seriously think you can avoid being caught up in the Builder invasion, right?”

“A bloke can dream, can’t he?”

“What’s that?” Humphrey asked. “Are those airships coming out of the city?”

One of the adventurers around them cast a spell and the air in front of them shimmered. When it settled, everything seen through it looked much closer and they could clearly make out the skyships. They rose over the walls of the city and even emerged from tunnels in the rock underneath.

“Am I mistaken in thinking that it looks like two of those things are coming right for us?” Neil said.

“No, you’re not,” Humphrey said. “Sophie, go get Lindy and Clive.”

Chapter 464

Strategic Doctrine

“Clive,” Humphrey said. “Is that a kind of skyship you’re familiar with?”

“No,” Clive said.

The group watched the two approaching skyships using the vision-magnifying spell one of the other adventurers around them had shared.

The two approaching skyships were unlike any the group had seen. If Jason had been present he would have noticed a resemblance to old ironclad ships from the US civil war. They had a decidedly industrial look, with plenty of thick, crude metal plating and smoke pouring from a pair of stacks on the top. On the deck of the approaching skyships there were construct creatures, humanoid in shape but resembling their vessel in that they were made from crude industrial metal.

“The craftsmanship isn’t there to be true golems,” Clive assessed. “Are those constructs what the Builder cult was using when they attacked the expedition from Greenstone?”

“Similar,” Neil said, “although those were monster shaped, rather than people shaped. What’s the difference between a construct and a golem?”

“Golems are a specific type of construct,” Gary explained. “Usually shaped like oversized people, they’re more powerful than most other constructs. They’re less common because they’re expensive and hard to make.”

Gary was more familiar with Builder construct creatures than most, having studied them extensively in the wake of the expedition that claimed Farrah’s life.

“Clive,” Humphrey said. “If our skyship gets attacked, can it stay in the air?”

“I’m not sure it can stay in the air even if it doesn’t,” Clive said.

“Can we outrun them?” Jory asked. “For what look like flying lumps of iron, those airships seem fairly fast.”

“The crew is already pushing it harder than they should to maintain this speed,” Belinda said. “If we don’t crash first, they are going to catch us.”

“Alright,” Humphrey said. “That narrows our options.”

He turned to the other group of adventurers on the deck with them.

“We’ll take the first airship. Are you good to take the second?”

One of the adventurers stepped forward.

“I don’t see as we have a choice,” she said. “We’ll get it done.”

Humphrey nodded and then turned to his own group.

“Gary, Jory, are you in?” he asked.

“I may have given up adventuring,” Gary said, “but I’m not going to just stand around when trouble comes looking.”

“I need to stop spending time with you people,” Jory complained. “I only ever get in fights when you’re around.”

“Good man,” Gary said slapping on the back almost hard enough to send him over the side.

“Clive and I can port four people each,” Humphrey said. “I’ll go first with Sophie, Gary and Lindy to claim some ground and Clive will follow up with the rest. Everyone ready up.”

Everyone started grabbing gear from dimensional bags and storage spaces or conjuring it outright. Sophie pulled on a pair of tight, thin gloves while Jory put away his coat and pulled out another one, covered in pockets. Clive took out a wand and a staff and started drawing ritual circles in the air with his finger to attach to the ends of them. Gary wore armour that looked like an overheating furnace and took a shield and hammer from his dimensional bag. Belinda was engulfed in silver mist, which quickly faded to reveal a female leonid with forged armour, shield and hammer, courtesy of Gary. Gary’s eyes went wide.

“Oh, hey, Lindy,” he said. “Uh... how’s it going?”

“I’m not really a leonid, Gary.”

“We’re essence users,” Gary said. “It’s not who you are on the inside that matters. It’s what you look like that counts.”

“You’re going to let that go?” Neil asked Jory.

“Yep,” Jory said.

“You don’t feel any need to defend your lady?”

“She can take care of herself,” Jory said. “If she wants my help, she’ll ask. She’s not shy.”

Leonid Belinda leaned down to give Jory a peck on the cheek.

“That tickles,” he said as her fur brushed his face.

“If we’re quite done?” Humphrey asked. He had conjured up his dragon armour, the scales shimmering with rainbow colours, and sword stylised as a dragon’s wing.

Sophie, Humphrey, Gary and Belinda vanished as Humphrey teleported them to the closest skyship.

From inside the massive yacht, Jason and Farrah lounged in luxury as they watched the storm rage outside. The wild seas and sweeping winds did not trouble the cloud ship,

the interior resting as gently as a baby in a cradle even as the exterior smashed through waves like a battering ram.

“I need to run you through some important aspects of local culture before we arrive,” Farrah said. “With the monster surge there will be a lot of adventurers that aren’t local, so people will be a little more accommodating in regards to etiquette, but that will only go so far.”

“That’s a good idea,” Jason said. “Easier to lay low if I know the rules. I didn’t think you’d been to Rimaros, though.”

“I haven’t, but it’s one of the big adventuring cities, like Vitesse. If we’d had time to train you properly, you’d have learned all this but you had more than enough to catch up on as it was.”

“Okay. Sexy teacher Farrah time it is.”

“Are you looking to get spanked?”

“Is that a trick question? I have been a naughty boy.”

“That’s enough out of you,” Farrah said.

“Yes, Mistress.”

Farrah shook her head.

“At least that brings us to the first and most important thing you need to know, which is that everything about you is bad and you shouldn’t do it.”

“That’s a little harsh.”

“Jason, Rimaros isn’t some little provincial town where people will leave you be because you have a few high-rank friends. There is an expectation of respect to those both higher and lower rank than you. What this means is that if a gold-ranker messes with you, the Adventure Society will come down on them like a hammer, so long as you weren’t acting like you. If you talk to gold-rankers like you talk to everyone with more power than you, they’ll slap you through a wall and no one will say a thing because you were asking for it.”

“Sounds fair.”

“I wish Gary was here. We could bet on how many hours it takes for a gold-ranker to punt you into the ocean.”

“I can be respectful.”

“A conclusion based on what evidence?”

“That’s a little hurtful.”

“Look, just don’t get up in anyone’s face,” Farrah said. “There’s a lot of reasons not to go roaming around during a monster surge, especially this one. First and foremost is that

whatever else we have going on, we're adventurers. This is the time where we step up and earn all the privileges we enjoy."

Jason nodded his agreement. He wasn't going to skip out on the monster surge, which was exactly the level of responsibility he wanted. After having the fate of the world on his shoulders, the idea of being an inconsequential, rank-appropriate part of a larger effort was exactly the palate cleanser he was looking for.

"There are other reasons for participating in the monster surge, of course. The chance to kill some of those Builder pricks is at the top of my personal list. Plus, if the Adventure Society finds out you did anything other than report to your nearest branch and do what you're told, you'll find things get tricky after the monster surge. Getting decent contracts suddenly gets hard and accessing society resources gets harder."

"So, we'll report in, do our part and then move on," Jason said. "Two, unremarkable silver-rankers who came back from the dead. Maybe it won't be a big deal because Knowledge told people I was alive."

He thought about it for a moment.

"No, she didn't see me die," he said. "Knowing her, she'd probably say something about being the goddess of Knowledge and not the goddess of Solid Deductions Made on the Basis of Reasonable Evidence."

"Knowing her?"

"We're acquainted," Jason said. "I wouldn't say friends, though. There's some tension there."

Farrah put her face in her hands.

"We haven't even met a single person and you're talking about socialising with a deity," she complained.

"It's fine," he assured her. "I mean, have I met a bunch of gods? Yes, but it's not like we hang out."

Farrah gave him a flat look.

"I told you, it's fine. What's the next thing I need to know about our destination? What's the signature drink? Does it have coconuts? I love coconuts."

"I don't know the signature drink."

"What kind of half-baked training did you go through? I should make some notes for Rufus and his family's academy. They could do Responsible Service of Alcohol certifications. What's better than an adventurer? An adventurer with an RSA."

Gary's huge hammer had its name, Gary's Medium Hammer, engraved on the metal shaft of the handle. Held in one hand, he smashed it down onto another of the crude metal constructs. Most of them were only bronze-rank, which was good because they were tougher than equivalent-rank monsters and there were a lot of them. The silver-rank ones scattered amongst them were extremely tough, along with being overpoweringly strong. If not for their relatively slow and clumsy movement, the numbers swarming the open deck of the skyship would have overwhelmed the team.

Fortunately, Gary's hammer was the right tool for the job. Ever since Farrah's death, he had made his personal weapons specialised to fight constructs and the freakish cultists that incorporated construct parts into their bodies. Even so, the silver-rank constructs boasted an almost implausible resilience. Belinda was wielding a replica of Gary's hammer he had made for her but the rest of the team would exhaust themselves before dealing with all the constructs.

The team had a lot of abilities that allowed them to endure, from cooldown reduction to mana recovery, in auras and active abilities. Even so, more and more of the constructs kept emerging from the lower decks, as if there was a barracks down there where the constructs were slowly waking up.

For this reason, the group switched to a strategy based on using the strengths of the constructs against them. The power and resilience of the constructs also made them heavy. Combined with their chosen mode of transport, a skyship, the solution was made obvious by Jory. He had drunk a large potion that transformed him into a hulking brute even stronger than the constructs and started flinging them over the side. Even if they survived the two-kilometre drop, they were no longer an immediate threat.

"We aren't over a town or something, are we?" Humphrey yelled out to Clive. Clive was off the side of the skyship, floating on top of his familiar, Onslow. Clive looked down and saw only uninhabited, rocky badlands. Clive gave Humphrey the thumbs up.

"We're switching to a fall guy strategy!" Humphrey bellowed and the team moved into action. Humphrey had been the driving force in building a comprehensive tactical and strategic doctrine. Jason had been the driving force behind the names.

Jory wasn't familiar with the team's strategies but was already ahead of the curve in throwing enemies overboard. Gary's powerful roar could blast the weaker bronze-rank ones off the ship in small clusters and Belinda, currently in leonid form, could do the same. Gary and Belinda were holding the line while the rest of the team went to work.

Sophie seemed to be everywhere at once. One moment she was stalling a construct long enough for a team member to deal with it. The next she was positioning herself so

that Neil could drop an explosive shield on her and blast one or even two constructs over the side. Then she leapt overboard herself, where Clive used his switch-teleport spell. Sophie was suddenly amongst the constructs again, having swapped places with a construct now plummeting towards the ground.

Most of the team's familiars were also in play. Belinda's lantern was mostly serving to replenish mana as its attacks did little to the constructs. Her other familiar was replicating Humphrey, swinging a huge sword at the enemy.

Onslow was hitting constructs with various elemental powers. At silver-rank, his abilities were more sophisticated, with control aspects to go with the existing raw power. Electricity attacks were especially effective on the metal constructs, although focused wind and water attacks also knocked them around and sometimes off the boat entirely.

Stash was more elusive, mostly going unseen. Then a giant bird would scoop up a construct and drop it off the ship or a tentacle would snake over the side and drag one overboard.

Occasionally a different and more dangerous enemy would arise from below decks. One was an ogre-like construct, obviously more powerful than the others along with being much better made. This was a true golem, not as clumsy or slow as the others.

Belinda used her Pit of the Reaper ability to conjure an inverted, extradimensional pit of shadows over the ship. Shadow arms reached down from its maw, plucking up constructs and dragging them in. Many arms picked up the golem but couldn't haul it into the pit. It fought itself free of the arms with prodigious strength but it was too late. The skyship was still on the move and in the time the golem freed itself, the pit had been left behind. The golem fell through the air in the skyship's wake.

The golem was not the last dangerous construct to emerge from the bowels of the ship. The next was much smaller, but also much prettier. A complete divergence from the heavy constructs and even the golem, this was a finely crafted and delicate sculpture. With many long, thin, interwoven parts, it looked somewhere between a winged insect and a chandelier. Sunlight glinted from its polished silver body, with many legs and four mantis-like blade arms. It was as much artwork as death machine.

It could fly but mostly moved in fluttering hops, quickly darting about. It made its way around Belinda and Gary with flickering ease, darting right at Neil, who didn't bother to dodge. The blade arms moved in a blur, almost too quickly to see. Sophie, however, was moving fast enough to be all but invisible.

"Mine!" she called loudly as she blocked the flashing attacks of the construct with her hands. The construct had four blade arms but Sophie had hands, feet, knees, elbows and

a forehead, all of which peppered the construct with attacks. Its body was sharp, yet even headbutting the creature left Sophie uncut as her powers negated retaliatory damage.

Despite looking delicate, the construct was remarkably tough. Sophie didn't hit all that hard but every attack came with resonating-force damage, bane to even the hardest armour.

Sophie had long ago accepted that her attacks would never deliver powerful, singular damage outside of careful setup and unusual circumstances. What her attacks did do was reliable damage, no matter how tough or strange the opponent. Her solution, then, was just to attack a lot. The construct was fast but it was like lightning trying to outpace light. Slowly but surely, the construct was reduced to a ball of wiry scrap.

The team was eliminating constructs faster than they were emerging from below and they finally took the fight below decks. What they found was an automated construct factory, which they decommissioned with some judicious violence directed by Clive and Belinda. Eventually, they found the only living enemy of the ship, which was a pilot. When they burst into the bridge he exploded as a huge crystal star erupted from his insides, ripping his body to shreds.

"Haven't seen that in a while," Sophie said as she wiped pilot off her face. "So, do we steer this thing into the ground?"

"Seems like a waste," Belinda said. "Especially when our own skyship is getting a bit wonky."

Chapter 465

I've Seen Your Best

Farrah paused from her explanation of what Jason could expect from their destination once the cloud ship cleared the storm. In only a few moments they went from blasting horizontal rain and mountainous wave crests to calm seas and blue skies. They went out onto the deck of the boat to take a look, leaning against the railing as a cool ocean breeze pleasantly offset the warm air.

Behind the yacht, the edge of the storm just stopped, as if trapped behind glass. Even the seas swiftly calmed beyond the boundary, massive waves dwindling to nothing in a boat length. All around was a bright sky and gorgeous turquoise water, the air undisturbed by the storm raging only hundreds of metres away.

"This doesn't seem natural," Jason said.

"And what's natural?" Farrah asked. "This isn't Earth, Jason. Our magic doesn't come in discrete bubbles. If there isn't something strange and magical going on, people start investigating. Remember the expedition where I died? That started because magic water stopped turning up in the middle of the desert."

"Oh, yeah. I'm still getting into that magic mindset."

He flashed her a grin.

"It's good to be back."

Jason and Farrah moved to a pair of loungers on the open deck with an awning to shield them from the bright sun. As they relaxed, Farrah continued preparing Jason for their destination.

"Adventuring culture in Rimaros," Farrah, said, "is a little bit notorious."

"Oh?" Jason prompted.

"They're obsessed with extreme specialisation."

"Isn't overspecialisation bad?"

"Yes," Farrah said. "For one thing, it's tricky, expensive and unreliable. When you're picking up essence abilities, your power set tries to round itself out. Some people are more specialised than others but the abilities you gain as you fill out your set will naturally cover your weaknesses to some degree. If you want to get around that, you have to very carefully choose your essences and awakening stones and the order in which you use them. The Magic Society in Rimaros has been at the forefront of gaming essence ability acquisition for decades. Centuries, maybe; you'd have to ask Clive."

“But there are no guarantees, are there?”

“Just the opposite; it can go very wrong. You remember when I was first teaching you aura manipulation and I told you about high-rankers with no aura power?”

“Sure. You end up hurting normal-rank people because your aura is powerful and uncontrolled.”

“Most of those stories come from Rimaros. You have to severely interfere with your ability acquisition to avoid aura powers and perception powers.”

“But in Rimaros, that’s what they do?”

“Exactly. They aren’t trying to avoid aura powers, because that’s idiotic, but sometimes things go wrong. And because the people with the money and connections to attempt this are from the top end of town, the failures still frequently get resourced enough to reach high rank. Usually through cores.”

“What’s so worth all that cost and effort and risk?” Jason asked.

“It’s the idea of being the very best at something. Look at you, for example. You’re an affliction specialist, except in Rimaros, you aren’t. There, with your stealth, utility, mobility and summoning powers, you’re a generalist. In Rimaros, there are no focused or wide area affliction specialists. There are only affliction specialists and dabblers. Every power that doesn’t either inflict or interact with afflictions is a mark that you aren’t good enough.”

“That’s bollocks. What about diminishing returns? Barely more than half my powers are affliction abilities and it’s already a highly synergistic power set. Trading in everything else for more powers would just add lots of bugging about. Maybe an extra power or two to round out my weak spots, but ranking up is doing that just fine. Every ability I gave up would cost me more than whatever minimal power bump I got from another affliction power replacing it.”

“For people in Rimaros, that minimal power bump is enough to trade off the rest. Because then they’re the best at what they do.”

“So is Wolverine and he sucks. Magneto can just make him keep stabbing himself in the plums, only for them to grow back so he can do it again.”

“Yeah, I don’t like Wolverine,” Farrah agreed. “Hugh Jackman was so much sexier in *Kate and Leopold*.”

“I know, right?” Jason said. “The way that man talks about butter. I mean, bloody hell. What were we talking about?”

“Diminishing returns.”

“Right, yes. My power set brings a lot of assets to a team. This super affliction guy you’re talking about would need a whole team around him to be viable at all.”

“Now you’re getting it,” Farrah said. “That kind of overspecialisation isn’t practical on a wide scale. It’s the people with the strongest backgrounds who get that level of attention and care, which is only a small portion of adventurers. The most prestigious teams will have one extreme specialist, with the entire team built around capitalising on their specialisation, whatever that might be.”

“I’ve seen the same strat in video games,” Jason said. “It can be powerful, but you put a crack in that egg and the whole thing can fall apart.”

“I’m not arguing,” Farrah said. “Despite the sketchy basis for your tactical thinking, I agree that it’s a terrible approach. It’s building a strategy around everything going right when being an adventurer is about everything is going wrong. It’s not like the Adventure Society doesn’t understand that, though. The majority of Rimaros adventurers are no different from you or I. The reason I’m telling you all this isn’t because it’ll have a big impact on who we might work with. Those Rimaros elites won’t have anything to do with the likes of us.”

“You’re telling me because of attitudes.”

“Yes,” Farrah said. “You need to be aware that while not many adventurers in Rimaros will be specialised like that, it permeates their thinking and values. You will be judged based on your level of specialisation. You can overcome that with performance, of course.”

“Which is another reason not to stand out,” Jason said. “If someone perceived as a generalist starts doing well, I’m willing to bet a certain section of the adventuring community will start paying some unwelcome and unfriendly attention.”

“I don’t know, but it makes sense,” Farrah said. “I’ve never actually been there; this is all second-hand information. Just don’t go off on any of your ‘here’s why everyone but me is wrong’ speeches.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Could you strive for my best?” Farrah asked. “It’s just that, you know... I’ve seen your best.”

“Are you feeling that?” Jason asked, sitting up in his lounge. “Something’s going on with the ambient magic.”

Farrah concentrated, making her magic senses as delicate as possible. The strength of Jason’s soul didn’t advantage his magic senses as much as his aura senses but it did still improve them. His unusual nature of being both a physical and spiritual entity also increased his sensitivity to magic, especially astral magic.

“Yes,” Farrah said. “What is that?”

Farrah was also an outworlder, and while not as sensitive to astral forces as Jason, still had an astral affinity that helped her detect the disturbance in the magic around them.

“Astral energy is seeping through the dimensional membrane and starting to raise the magical saturation,” he said. “More magic is coming in and the monster surge is starting.”

Unlike Jason’s team, who had found themselves next to an abnormal manifestation, the ambient magic around Jason and Farrah was not as heavily disturbed. They shared a look, knowing that they had been the ones to trigger the events that would lead to a lot of death and destruction.

“It was going to happen, one way or another,” Farrah said. “If it had taken longer, the surge would be even worse. We actually made things better by starting it off, even if it doesn’t feel that way.”

“I know,” Jason said giving her a sad smile. “I have enough regrets that I don’t need to borrow ones I didn’t earn.”

“It should still be a while before the magical saturation starts causing manifestations,” Farrah said. “We should get to Rimaros before things start going wild.”

The first sign of civilisation that Jason and Farrah encountered were windmills the size of eight-storey buildings, standing on rocks jutting out of the sea. They were spaced out, roughly half a kilometre apart, in a line stretching out into the distance.

“Storm accumulators,” Farrah said. “They drain magical energy from storms, which causes them to collapse before reaching population centres. Anywhere big enough uses them not just to shield the towns and cities but also fuel the magic infrastructure. It turns what should make it incredibly hard to live here into a massive asset.”

“What about places that aren’t big enough to have these things?” Jason asked.

“Not sure,” Farrah said. “I was mostly interested in the accumulators themselves because that kind of wide-area array magic is exactly my field. These things run in a twenty-kilometre ring around Rimaros, so we’re getting close. I’d love to get a closer look at one, but I’ll need to get permission. The protection on these things is no joke.”

“I suppose they’d have to build their towns as shelters,” Jason said. “Lots of basements and the like.”

“Don’t expect to see that here,” Farrah said, pointing. “This is Rimaros, the city of islands.”

Jason’s gaze tracked where she was pointing to a point in the sky. Courtesy of his silver-rank visual acuity he could make out an island floating in the sky. Nestled amongst

tropical plants atop it was a small village. The underside of the island was a smoothly carved curve of stone, with two holes in the middle. A thick stream of water was spilling down from one hole, while the other had a stream rising from below to enter the island.

“That’s pretty neat,” Jason said.

“Neat?” Farrah asked. “It’s a flying island.”

“I’m not saying it’s not great,” Jason said. “I definitely want to take a look for myself but I own two interconnected pocket-universe cities. My bar for amazement has shifted up a little.”

“I suppose that’s fair.”

“So, you said the city of islands, meaning there’s more of those?”

“Yes,” Farrah said. “Rimarus covers a huge area based around three islands that hold the majority of the population. Those with enough money and power live on artificial islands, which can hold anything from a single estate to a small town. Some of them are in the water, which are for merchants and the like with money but limited connections. Also, adventurers in the silver-rank range who don’t have strong backing and are just starting to make their way.”

As the boat moved forward, they spotted more of the sky islands.

“The flying islands are for the cream of society, as you’d expect,” Farrah continued. “Big name adventurers, long-standing adventuring families and aristocrats, which are usually the same thing. Any family that becomes known for producing good adventurers usually finds itself inducted into the nobility. Any noble house without some good adventurers will find itself falling into obscurity sooner or later.”

“Where do the Magic Society and Adventure Society fit in?” Jason asked.

“The Magic Society has the second-largest sky island in Rimarus, right after the royal palace. The Storm King is a gold-ranker, which you have to be before they’ll let you take the throne. Most nations shield their royalty and bring them up with cores, but that disqualifies you from becoming monarch here. All the potential heirs from every branch of the royal family are adventurers trying to prove themselves. Not just in monster fighting but statecraft, diplomacy, administration. It’s a decades-long contest until the current monarch is satisfied, chooses an heir and steps down.”

“So, the Hurricane Princess is just one of many.”

“Yes, although the designated frontrunners are always the children of the current monarch. The Hurricane Princess is the title given to the firstborn daughter and the Storm Prince to the firstborn son. At least, the firstborn ones that are competing. Many royals

bow out from the start, preferring to be adventurers or magical researchers or join a church.”

“They aren’t looked down on for that?”

“Not so long as whatever they do, they excel. There’s no shortage of people vying for the crown, so any path that brings prestige to the royal house is acceptable.”

“And whoever wins, the king just steps down?”

“Or the queen, yes. Voluntary surrender of the throne is a cornerstone of their society. Besides, there are rumours of some diamond-rank ancestor quietly watching over things from behind who would step in if any of his descendants got power-hungry.”

“Sure,” Jason said, “but I bet every decent-sized country in the world has pretty much the same rumour.”

“Just about,” Farrah said with a laugh.

“I think we can happily stay out of that mess,” Jason said. “I don’t anticipate bumping into Zara.”

“Zara?”

“The Hurricane Princess.”

“Oh, it’s Zara, is it?”

“Come on, I met her twice.”

“Did you give her any baked goods?”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Jason asked, avoiding Farrah’s gaze. Then he changed the subject.

“Hey, you didn’t talk about the Adventure Society,” Jason said.

“They’ve claimed what amounts to dominion over one of the natural islands. They’re a largely independent district within Rimaros where all the shops and services for the rich and powerful are concentrated. They also have the main entertainment quarter, most of the magical trade and the second-largest skyship port.”

“Skyships?” Jason said, perking up. “I just remembered; this thing can fly. I’ve just never had it somewhere with enough magical density before. I’ll have to shrink the size for the flying form, but still.”

Jason hung his head. “I guess I’ll wait until we’re leaving. A regular boat is less attention-grabbing than a flying cloud boat.”

“Yes, it is,” Farrah said. “You’ll have plenty of time to play with your boat later.”

Jason blinked and then broke out in a happy grin.

“I will, won’t I? No Network alternately trying to kidnap me or leech off me. No gold-rankers hunting me down. Just good, old-fashioned adventuring.”

Chapter 466

Responsible Dad

Two skyships moved side by side through the air. One was a traditional vessel crafted from wood with floatation crystals set into the hull. The other was a monstrosity of rough iron and heavy bolts. Despite their differences, both were running damaged.

The wooden ship had been through rushed patchwork modifications to handle the unusual magic conditions it had passed through. It was too late to undo them now that the magic around them had normalised and the crew were doing their best to keep it running until they reached a port and could put it in dry dock for repairs.

The other ship functioned through wholly different design principles and had no trouble handling turbulent magic. It had suffered battle damage, although the basic functioning of the ship was minimally affected. Clive and Belinda had been careful in destroying as little as possible in shutting off the construct factory that took up the bulk of the vessel.

The wooden ship broke off from the other, diverting from its original destination due to the need for emergency repairs. The passengers and goods aboard would need to be transferred to another vessel before they could resume the journey to Vitesse. The iron ship was not equipped for living passengers, its internal space being taken up by industrial production infrastructure. The closest things to cabins were the storage racks for the constructs aboard.

The iron ship was a prize vessel currently captained by Clive. The other iron skyship sent after them by the vast flying city had been crashed into the ground by the other adventuring party. Rather than deal with all the constructs aboard and the factory producing more, they searched out the ship's flight systems and destroyed them.

Although they had then escaped back to the wooden ship, the other adventurers decided to descend to the ground and get left behind to hunt any constructs still functional after the drop. There was the threat of the floating city and the other airships it sent out, which fortunately had not yet been spotted again. The adventurers insisted on staying anyway, the silver-rankers were confident they would safely make their way out of the badlands.

Below decks in the iron ship, the cavernous, industrial space was lit up by Belinda's lantern familiar, Shimmer. Belinda herself was in the control room, steering the vessel while Clive was making sure none of the damage would send this ship plunging towards the ground as well.

With only the team, Jory and Gary on board, it was good that the design of the ship meant that it could be operated by very little crew. The skyship had originally been piloted by a single cultist using the unthinking constructs for manual tasks, a role Clive and Belinda had passed onto Gary and Humphrey. They also had one more assistant who was more enthusiastic than actually helpful.

“Goodbye, rubbish!” yelled a four-armed, two-headed ogre as he threw a large metal object through a hole in the side of the ship.

“No!” Clive yelled out. “Stash, that wasn’t rubbish. Stop throwing things off of the ship.”

“I am strong and big and strong!” Ogre Stash in a booming voice as he held out four massive hands. “Biscuits please.”

“You ripped a hole in the side of the ship,” Clive complained. “That wasn’t even battle damage.”

“I needed a place to throw the rubbish,” Stash complained.

“IT’S NOT RUBBISH! You’re stripping pieces off the ship and throwing them overboard! HUMPHREY, GET UP HERE.”

A shirtless Humphrey, smeared with dark grease crawled up through a hatch in the floor. He had a large wrench in his hand.

“What?” he asked unhappily. “I’ve almost managed to get that panel off without damaging the thing you said I really need to avoid damaging.”

“Which is pointless,” Clive said, “if your familiar keeps yanking random parts off the ship and tossing them out through the hole in the hull.”

“Gary was meant to be watching him,” Humphrey said. “Where is Gary?”

“Taking a nap,” Belinda’s voice called out from the control room. “I heard a rumbling and thought something had shaken loose, but it turned out he was just snoring really loud. I didn’t have the heart to wake him.”

Humphrey was looking at the hole in the hull.

“That wasn’t there before, was it?” he asked.

“No,” Clive said, his jaw clenched. “No, it was not.”

“What happened?” Humphrey asked.

“What do you think happened?” Clive asked, turning to stare at ogre Stash.

“I’m helping! Poo-head Clive won’t give me biscuits.”

Clive stepped up to the giant ogre, completely unintimidated.

“I’ll give you biscuits, you little—”

“Alright,” Humphrey said, stepping between them and holding up his hands. “Stash, why don’t you go up and see if Sophie has any biscuits.”

The ogre rapidly shrank into a small bird, flapping its wings as it hovered in their air.

“Clive sucks donkey balls,” bird Stash chirped as it flew out the hole.

“Stash!” Humphrey scolded as the bird made good his escape.

Humphrey leaned out of the breach to look down with trepidation where Stash had been throwing things. They had moved out of the sparsely inhabited badlands and were now passing over verdant lands as they grew closer to Vitesse. Now they had the ship to bring back they no longer intended to portal for the last leg of the journey. News of the city and the skyships it released had already been delivered to the Adventure Society by the passengers of the wooden skyship after it stopped in a major city.

“He was throwing things out of here?” Humphrey asked as he drew his head back from the hole.

“You need to get your familiar under control,” Clive said.

“Yes,” Belinda said, emerging from the control room. “Because dragons are famous for responding well to being told what to do. Especially when they have Jason Asano as a role model.”

“It does feel like he takes after Jason more than me,” Humphrey said. “That doesn’t seem fair.”

Belinda laughed, slapping Humphrey on the back.

“That’s because Jason’s the fun uncle and you’re stuck being the responsible dad. You need to impress the little guy.”

“Little?” Clive asked. “He was a massive ogre. If this deck didn’t have extra height to fit the constructs built in here, he wouldn’t fit.”

“I’m not going to run around trying to impress my own familiar,” Humphrey said.

“You should try impressing someone,” Belinda said. “Has Sophie seen this whole half-naked, dirty workman thing you’ve got going on? If not, you should rectify that immediately because it’s a good look for you. Seriously, I’d find an excuse to head up on deck right now. Maybe tell her that Clive had you down that hatch and you need the space up there to do some stretches. Now that I say it, I might come too.”

“You’re piloting the ship!” Clive told her.

“We’re in the sky,” Belinda said. “It’s not as if there’s anything to run into.”

“This is hardly the time,” Humphrey said and Belinda shook her head at him.

"I don't know if you've noticed how our week is going," she told him, "but I suspect things will be going this way for a while. If you want time, Humpy, you're going to have to make it."

"Please don't call me Humpy."

"Why not? I think it could catch on."

"That's why I don't want you to call me that. Look, I get it. Believe me, I do. But right now we're on a stolen boat and I'm worried my familiar threw something overboard that killed a farmer."

"Oh, you remember that do you?" the increasingly cranky Clive asked. "Lucky for you and your troublemaking lizard, I've got it covered. Just watch."

Humphrey saw the large metal object Stash had thrown float up from the outside of the ship and he shuffled out of the way as it moved in through the hole. Outside of the hull, Onslow the flying tortoise was matching pace with the skyship, several more of Stash's projectiles floating around him.

"He can control metal with one of his shell runes now," Clive explained. "I had a bad feeling when your familiar tore open the side of the ship, so I sent Onslow out as a precaution."

More of the things Stash had thrown out of the ship were floating around Onslow and started moving back into the ship through the hole.

"Could he use that on armoured enemies?" Humphrey asked.

"It's like telekinesis powers," Clive said. "People can block it with their aura. I normally have him use it to throw things at people or use tools. Now that Stash has stopped lobbing things off the ship I can get my non-useless familiar back to actual work."

"Stash isn't useless," Humphrey said. "He's just been a bit excitable since he found out Jason is still alive."

Clive's expression showed his dissatisfaction but he nodded a weary acknowledgement.

"Haven't we all," he said. "Just don't let the little... don't let him back down here."

"I can probably manage that," Humphrey said.

"When do you think we'll see him?" Clive asked. "Jason, I mean."

"I'm not sure. If the monster surge has really started, Jason's out there somewhere but we'll need to report in at the Vitesse Adventure Society branch. It'll be hard to move around until it's over."

"Can't we just not report in?" Belinda asked.

“No,” Humphrey said, his tone brooking no discussion. “No one shirks, not during a monster surge. Especially this monster surge, given what we've learned and what we've now seen for ourselves.”

“Besides,” Clive said. “We'll need the Adventure Society to find him since he could show up anywhere. Communications will be at a premium for a while but Adventure Society records are magically updated across all branches. Jason's a registered member of our team so we can put in a request to be notified of any change in status. Going from dead to alive is a big change in status, so as soon as Jason turns up at a branch, we get notified.”

“Jason's an adventurer,” Humphrey said. “It's not just what he does, but who he is. My mother once said that Jason was the most natural-born adventurer she's ever seen. She told me that because she said it would get him killed and, being Mother, she was right. We saw him die an adventurers death with our own eyes. Wherever he's been, whatever he's been through, I refuse to believe that's changed.”

“Humphrey,” Belinda said. “I warned you to snatch up Sophie before we find Jason and she gets turned around. I'm starting to think that I should have warned her.”

“That's not really a public conversation, Lindy,” Humphrey said. “Wait, what are you talking about?”

“Are you in love with Jason?” she asked.

“What? That's absurd.”

“You didn't just hear yourself,” Clive said. “If I hadn't spent the last year watching you and Sophie dance around each other like awkward teenagers, I'd completely believe it.”

Humphrey went pale.

“You know about... I mean, there isn't anything to...”

His shoulders slumped.

“Does everyone know?”

“Of course they do,” Clive said. “It's completely obvious. But only I had to watch it every damn day. I spend one more night around a campfire with you two swapping winsome glances, I'm going to start throwing rocks.”

“What about Dawn?” Belinda said.

“You think her and Jason?” Clive asked.

“Not that,” Belinda said. “Although, maybe, now you say it. But can't she have the Adventure Society find Jason? She has more pull than any of us. She could find where he is, we go there and register with the local Adventure Society branch there and everything works out.”

“Maybe,” Humphrey said. “If Dawn is willing, it depends on how far into the monster surge he arrives. We aren’t going to wait around not participating. When the monster surge starts, you show up and do your bit. That’s just how it works.”

“We should be doing our bit with Jason,” Clive said and Belinda nodded her agreement.

“The Adventure Society isn’t entirely inflexible,” Humphrey said. “If he’s somewhere Mother has been, they might let her go fetch him back. It’s a question of whether the branch he’s at permits him to go and if Mother gets enough time free. The demand on gold-rankers is especially heavy during monster surges.”

Stash flew up to where Sophie, Neil and Jory were leaning on the rail of the open deck watching the land pass by underneath them. He turned into a puppy and landed in Sophie’s arms to get a scratch behind the ears.

“Biscuit, please.”

“Did Humphrey say you could have a biscuit?” Sophie asked. Neil and Jory shared a look over how much she sounded like a woman who suspected her child had asked his dad for something first and was told to ask his mother.

“Yes!” Stash said. “I’m a good boy who helps out.”

Sophie matched the innocent puppy eyes with a suspicious glare.

“Alright,” she said finally and took a biscuit from the dimensional pouch on her belt. She smiled as Stash happily ate it from her hand.

“Look,” Jory pointed, Sophie and Neil looking up. A large orb was flying towards the skyship faster than the ship itself could move. The orb looked like a snow globe without any snow, containing a full-scale quaint little cottage.

“Well, she did say she would contact us again before we reached the city,” Neil said. “It still seems weird that she flies around in a cottage, though. She’s like the villain in a fable for kids.”

Chapter 467

Surge Protocols

From the deck of the cloud yacht, Jason and Farrah were standing with drinks in hand looking at the islands floating in the sky as they drew closer to the city of Rimaros. One of the three main natural islands had come into view, but since Farrah had no idea which one was the island housing the Adventure Society, Jason had arbitrarily picked the local equivalent of Aruba. Approaching from a distance, their silver-rank vision picked out a lot of colourful buildings poking out from a wealth of tropical bushes, trees and flowers. The mix of rich greens and vibrant colours from buildings and flowers both left Jason with a huge grin on his face.

“I think I’m going to like it here. I can’t wait to buy some actual food. I hope they’ve got coconuts. I really want to drink out of a coconut.”

Neither Jason nor Farrah were fazed by the prospect of a monster surge, with Jason especially unconcerned. Between astral spaces, proto-astral spaces and monster waves, Jason hadn’t seen what Farrah thought of as normal monster activity since iron-rank.

For both of them, it was the prospect of the Builder invasion that held their attention, but until they found out what that entailed, they were looking forward to a relatively relaxing time. A monster had approached their boat at one point, some silver-rank creature from the depths of the ocean. Neither had wanted to go into the water and deal with it so Jason gave it a dose of his aura at full strength and it fled.

Jason narrowed his eyes as he looked into the distance.

“What is it?” Farrah asked.

“I think we’re about to meet the locals.”

Farrah followed his gaze and eventually spotted something moving across the water. It was an essence user, presumably with the water essence by the way they were riding a column of water like it was a speed boat.

“You remember the aura etiquette I taught you way back when?” Farrah asked. “It’ll matter here.”

“Of course,” Jason said.

Greenstone had been a shambles as a society of essence users, but Farrah had nonetheless taught Jason about the importance of aura control and etiquette from the beginning. She had described it as a magical handshake, as well as the first way others would judge people. The polite way to maintain an aura was to have it withdrawn but not

hidden, always under precise control. This allowed others to get a general sense of each other without seeming evasive or being obnoxious.

Jason's aura shifted from that of an outworlder to a human, its domineering aspect toning down to a general rigidity and its unusual aspects, like the lingering traces from his contact with transcendent beings, nowhere to be seen. Jason's control came across as adequate, if a little sloppy. It was much like his aura as Farrah remembered it from Greenstone, but scaled up to silver rank.

She turned to look at him.

"What?" he asked.

"Nicely done," she said. "That is some exquisite aura control."

"Thanks," he said brightly. "I think it's best if you're the one to stand out while we're here. Outworlder, guild member, back from the dead. After that, also back from the dead seems practically mundane. Should I fake some monster cores into my aura?"

"I'd avoid changing anything too much."

"Yeah," Jason agreed. "The more I tweak my aura, the easier to see through it gets. Otherwise, I'd make it look like I have friendlier essences."

"Your aura does make you seem like a bit of a marbula right now."

"What's a marbula?" Jason asked.

"It's an iron-rank worm monster that secretes a glue-like ichor with a horrid stench. It's known for being weak and hiding from combat."

"That's harsh."

"Just don't overdo the aura disguise."

"It's good like this, though?"

"Yes," Farrah said. "I think it would fool low-end gold-rankers unless they examined your aura closely, and that's not an aura worth examining. It won't fool anyone truly powerful or with really sharp senses, though."

"I imagine those people see through everyone's secrets," Jason said. "I won't be special in that regard and I don't plan on being important enough that they care."

"Yes, because plans always work out. Like when Rufus, Gary and I planned to take you to Vitesse."

"That plan can still work," Jason said. "It's just been delayed a little. Delays are normal."

The man approaching in the distance was getting closer. He didn't hide his bronze-rank aura.

“You’re going to let me take the lead here, right?” Farrah asked as they watched the essence user grow closer.

“Of course,” Jason said. “On my world, you followed my lead. Now we’re back on yours, it only makes sense for you to be in charge.”

“Don’t forget your spirit domain.”

“Oh, thanks.”

The buildings and vehicles created by Jason’s cloud flask now contained the full power of Jason’s spirit domain. He withdrew the domain’s effects, although there was no retracting the domain’s presence entirely.

Shade, piloting the boat, was already slowing it down. The man riding a plume of water slowed himself and started moving backwards, his column of water holding him in the air as it matched pace with the boat. Jason stood slightly back and to the side of Farrah, implying a subordinate position.

“My name is Vidal Ladiv of the Rimaros Adventure Society. May I have permission to board your vessel?”

He showed the respect of someone lower-ranked as he greeted them with a slight bow.

“Of course,” Farrah said. “Please come aboard.”

Vidal leapt from his column of water to the open deck of the boat. It had the looks of an ordinary pleasure yacht but there was a deep magic that his senses couldn’t penetrate, and not just because the yacht was silver rank. There was some kind of aura to it, understated but powerful, giving him a strong sense of being in a territory to which he did not belong. Although it didn’t impinge on him at all he could feel an ominous presence behind it, like seeing a vast, dark shape passing beneath a boat.

There were two people on the deck and his casual senses couldn’t push any further into the boat. He suspected it wouldn’t work even if he pushed, which would be a large breach of etiquette in front of two people higher rank than him.

One was a woman, clearly the leader of the two. She was relaxed and composed, clearly in a casual mode with her light blouse, loose pants and sandals. She had pale skin and her shoulder-length, strawberry blonde hair was loosely cinched at the back of her neck. Her aura control was pristine, revealing carefully controlled undertones of fire, earth and raw power. Vidal guessed her to have the powerful volcano confluence. He was also surprised to sense she was an outworlder, which would make a second one in the city.

The man standing behind her was less impressive. His features were unfamiliar, so Vidal had no sense of where he was from. His dark hair was glossy and he masked an overly prominent chin with a neatly trimmed beard. Vidal couldn't help but wonder what his chin had been like if even reaching silver rank hadn't smoothed it into normalcy.

Compared to the woman, the man's aura control was sloppy, giving even bronze-rank Vidal more insight than it should. The man deliberately showed off darkness and blood, while inadvertently revealing a core sense of self-preservation. His aura gave the impression of someone who would hide from potential dangers while opportunistically taking for himself.

The man also had small but definite scars on his face, which Vidal had seen others fake to make themselves seem like hardened adventurers. It suggested that the man's magically modified eyes were fake as well. Vidal read the man as a petty and inconsequential figure who likely bullied the weak while sycophantically clinging to the strong.

"As I said," Vidal told them, "I am an official of the Rimaros Adventure Society, although today I also represent the Rimaros Civic Authority Council. I am here to notify you that full monster surge procedures are in effect in the city of Rimaros and all associated territories."

Neither the man nor the woman looked surprised or worried at the announcement.

"As monster surge procedures have been enacted in Rimaros," Vidal continued, "all potential adventurers are being met as they enter the city and being informed of their responsibilities. If you will permit, may I ask a few questions and take notes?"

"By all means," Farrah said, gesturing at the door into the yacht's lounge cabin. "Would you like to come in?"

Vidal's instincts warned him against going further into the boat but he was already in arm's reach of two silver-rankers, so there was no escape if they turned on him. He could most likely escape the man, being on the water where Vidal was strongest. He had no such illusions about the woman, however. If she wanted to trap him, he was trapped.

"Thank you," he said and followed them inside. "I'd like to start with your names and whether you're adventurers. If you aren't, this will be a swift formality."

"We are both adventurers," Farrah told him as they moved into the lounge. "I am Farrah Hurin, out of Vitesse. Burning Violet guild, although I don't have a guild pin on me right now. This is Jason Asano, out of Greenstone. Guild unaffiliated."

That made sense to Vidal. She seemed every inch the guild level adventurer, and from a city with high standards like Vitesse. Asano being from someplace Vidal had never

heard of explained his lack of capability, but not why this woman was letting him follow her around. If the man's one true skill was seduction that might make sense, but she should have no trouble seeing through the man's emotions, given the disparity in their aura control.

Taking out a notebook and pencil as they walked, Vidal was jotting details into it before they even sat down. Although the armchairs in the lounge were plush and comfortable, he sat stiffly upright.

"I need to take down your details," he said. "Then I shall explain the basic requirements placed upon you by the monster surge protocols. Of course, registering for monster surge activity is not mandatory."

"We both intend to register."

"Excellent," Vidal said. "The Rimaros Adventure Society prefers if outside adventurers register within one day of being notified that the surge procedures are in effect. Consider this your notice, which means that you will ideally register by the end of tomorrow. The Adventure Society will be fully staffed at all hours during the surge, so you can do so quite late should that suit your needs. Are there any other adventurers aboard?"

"It's just us," Farrah said. "No one else, adventurer or otherwise."

"And are you two a formally registered team?"

"No," Farrah said. "We've both been separated from our teams for some time. There may be some issues with our records since we are both likely to have our status listed as deceased."

"Why is that?" Vidal asked, not looking up as he took notes.

"Because we died," Farrah said.

"You should know that part of registration will be having your identities confirmed, along with several other tests to weed out Builder infiltrators. I recommend you visit the temple of Death prior to registration and have them formally confirm that you are the people you claim to be, returned from death. Cases like yours are unusual but not unknown and we've found that involving the church of Death greatly accelerates the process. Given how busy things are likely to be, I venture you'll appreciate having done so."

"Thank you for the advice," Farrah said. "We will take up your suggestion."

"Good," Vidal said. "That is everything I need at this stage, but be aware that when you register, you will be put through a more rigorous assessment."

"Because of the Builder cultists," Farrah said. "We completely understand."

“So consider yourselves formally notified that surge protocols are in effect. Your names will be given to the local society branch and they will be expecting you. Do you have any questions before I go?”

“Which island is the Adventure Society on?” Farrah asked. “We know it’s on one of the main islands but we don’t know which. Or even which one we are approaching.”

“The three public islands are called , Arnote and Provo,” Vidal explained. “They’re situated in a line running roughly east-west. We are currently approaching Arnote, the westernmost island. It’s home to many of the wealthier citizens who do not have access to private islands. It is primarily residential and the least densely populated of the three. While there is not a lot of high-rank activity there, I do not recommend trying to throw your weight around as adventurers.”

Vidal turned his gaze on Asano.

“There is a certain relaxed lifestyle on Arnote that is an important part of the Rimaros cultural identity. If you make trouble, you’ll find that we are quite protective of it. There is also a minor branch of the royal family who maintain their primary residence on Arnote, so while you may not see the power hidden on the island, it will see you.”

“Thank you for the guidance,” Asano said, speaking for the first time since Vidal’s arrival. Vidal turned back to Farrah.

"You are looking for the central island of the three, Livaros. How are you navigating?"

"Jason here has a mapping ability," Farrah explained. "It's useful but doesn't show details until he visits a location; just landmasses. Along with his storage and portal abilities, it makes him useful to keep around."

Vidal finally understood something that had been bothering him. Asano didn't fit the company or the setting he was in. Farrah Hurin was clearly a skilled, guild-level adventurer and, from the presence of the boat, a well-resourced one. Someone like Asano was a liability unless he brought something unusual to the table. If he represented a series of excellent utility powers collected into one person, it made sense that she would use him as a glorified magic item. Even so, he marked Asano in his notes for a more critical assessment on registration, just in case.

With that annoying curiosity solved, Vidal had everything he needed and was ready to leave. With the surge protocols in effect, he was one of many officials sent out to collect initial data, direct adventurers to register and notify them of the upcoming surge.

“Livaros is the primary destination for adventurers,” he explained, “to the point that many just call it the adventurer island. Along with the Adventure Society campus, the island boasts the bulk of the services and businesses that adventurers and other essence

users require. Every port around the island has an Adventure Society office and I strongly recommend you seek one out. Their entire purpose is to help adventurers find what they need in the city. They will help you find a berth for your vessel for the duration of the surge, as well as help you find any amenities and services you might need. They can also direct you to the campus administration for registration, of course.”

Vidal stood up.

“If there’s anything else you need, please remember the society offices. As I said, every port has them and they’re easy to find.”

“Thank you,” Farrah said. “I think that is everything we need for now.”

“Very well,” Vidal said. “And please, remember to visit the Adventure Society by the end of tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” Jason said to Farrah as they watched Vidal ride away on a plume of water. “He was suspicious because you’re too good for me. This aura disguise thing might not be as effective as I thought. I may have attracted more attention than I avoided.”

“How many times did I tell you that this isn’t Greenstone? The Adventure Society officials here aren’t just the daughters of crime lords, moustache enthusiasts and a random selection of Berts.”

“I miss the Berts. I’d love to get a new wardrobe from Gilbert.”

“You’ll find a perfectly satisfactory tailor here,” Farrah said. “I think you’ll find Vidal was underselling how impressive the adventurer island will be. We should go straight for Livaros.”

“I knew you’d say that,” Jason groaned. “Look at Arnote, right there.”

Jason waved his arm in the direction of the nearby island as if Farrah had somehow failed to see it.

“Look at the trees,” he said. “The lush, green plants. The bright flowers, the colourful houses. Imagine yourself wandering down a sleepy street, drinking chilled fruit out of a coconut and feeling the ocean breeze on your face.”

“We can go there once we’ve settled in. First, we get the lay of the land. Register with the Adventure Society and do some proper shopping. I haven’t seen a properly-stocked trade hall since before you and I met.”

“I don’t want to live at some marina again,” Jason said. “I want to find a nice little spot, maybe buy an out-of-the-way plot and put my cloud house on it. Arnote is perfect for that.”

“Livaros will have crystal wash.”

“SHADE! We’re changing course!”

Chapter 468

Disappointed or Relieved

Dawn's cottage bubble flying vessel floated over the deck of the skyship. Dawn emerged from the cottage, walked down the short garden path to the bubble surrounding it and stepped through, like passing through a waterfall. She dropped lightly to the deck and the bubble shrank before dropping into her hand. She then placed the vessel into a pouch on her belt.

Sophie, Neil and Jory watched this happen, with a grimy and half-naked Humphrey coming up on deck just as Dawn was putting her astral ship away. Dawn looked over at Humphrey, then at Sophie.

"Did you ...?" Dawn asked her.

"This wasn't me," Sophie said. "Neil, Humphrey's pretty dirty. You should go help soap him up."

"You're a degenerate," Neil muttered as he marched towards the stairs leading below. "I'll go get the others."

"Thank you for loaning me this, by the way," Dawn said, handing Sophie a recording crystal.

"What's that?" Jory asked.

"You don't need to worry about that," Sophie told him. She deftly avoided puppy Stash, cradled in one arm, from snatching the crystal from her fingers and slipped it into a pocket.

Soon the rest of the group was coming up on deck. Gary was yawning while Belinda argued with Clive.

"It'll be fine," Belinda said. "I put a metal bar there to hold the thing in place and tied a rag around it so it wouldn't slip."

"That is not any way to fly a skyship," Clive argued.

"I told you before: we're in the sky. There's nothing to run into."

"We don't even have a full handle on how this thing works," Clive said. "Not to mention someone's troublemaking lizard was tearing random parts off the ship."

"There's a lizard?" Stash exclaimed, leaping out of Sophie's arms. "I'm gonna catch it!"

Puppy Stash scrambled across the deck, dodging between legs and disappearing down the stairs.

“I need a break,” Clive said. “I hope we find Jason on a beach somewhere, grilling meat.”

“It does sound pretty likely,” Gary said. “Remember when we were rushing to rescue him when he was kidnapped and found him adjusting his cufflinks with the bad guy tied up?”

“Yeah, and then he passed out for three days,” Neil said. “What kind of idiot uses the last of his energy after getting tortured to put on a sharp suit?”

The group gathered together on the deck, respectfully greeting Dawn.

“The reason I have come to you here,” Dawn said, “is that it would not do you any favours if we were to maintain contact once all the eyes in Vitesse are upon me.”

“Why not?” Neil asked. “Isn’t knowing someone influential a good thing?”

“We’re silver-rankers,” Humphrey said. “We’re better off without gold and diamond-rankers paying us attention.”

“More importantly,” Dawn said, “so is Jason. He has a task to complete and until he does, it would be best if some of the secrets he brought back remain secret. Specifically, he took something the Builder left in Jason’s world. This item was supposed to give the Builder influence over whoever was forced to use it but Jason absorbed the item entirely, purging the Builder’s influence and gaining an amount of power over the Builder’s minions.”

“Well that certainly sounds useful,” Clive said. “If that information gets around, the Adventure Society will tie Jason to a stick and start waving him at the Builder.”

“Shouldn’t they?” Jory asked. “It sounds like Jason could be a powerful weapon. That shouldn’t go to waste.”

“You think Jason is going to hide?” Humphrey said. “You weren’t there, Jory. Six of us went to battle against the Builder and his army of constructs, cultists and whatever it was he turned those priests into. Jason fought the Builder himself, and he died making sure that the rest of us succeeded.”

“And all this was after he was chained up while the Builder tortured his soul,” Neil added. “Say what you will about Jason – which I personally intend to do at length – but the Builder threw everything you can throw at Jason and Jason came back for more. The Builder killed him. With his own hands, kind of. And that still hasn’t stopped the smug prick who probably came back from the dead just to keep annoying the crap out of everyone. Jason roaming around of his own volition will do more to hurt the Builder than anything the Adventure Society can dream up, I can promise you that.”

"I think that's the nicest thing you've ever said about Jason," Clive said to Neil. "While somehow still including the phrase 'smug prick.'"

"It's a low bar," Neil acknowledged.

Sophie stayed out of the conversation and was still watching Dawn.

"You want us to look for Jason instead of you," Sophie said.

"Yes," Dawn said. "It will be odd for you to have the Adventure Society track the status of your dead team member but not attention-grabbing. In any case, I am still in the process of travelling around and disseminating what information I can about the Builder's invasion."

"What about that floating city?" Humphrey asked. "What's being done?"

"The invasion platforms are appearing all over the world," Dawn said. "They are the concern of the Adventure Society. Your concern is Jason."

"There are more of those things?" Gary asked

"That's how the Builder is invading?" Clive asked. "Flying cities?"

"Not all of them fly and not all are cities. The scale is roughly the same with each, but the power level is not. The strongest invasion platforms can only appear where the dimensional skin of your world is most permeable."

"So, Greenstone doesn't have some diamond-rank sky city invading it," Humphrey said with relief. Regardless of their feelings about it, every team member but Jason had been raised in Greenstone. The desperate battle where Jason died had been fought to protect it.

"What happens when Jason turns up somewhere?" Jory asked. "They aren't going to let us just run off in the middle of a monster surge."

"We can request a travel dispensation," Humphrey said. "If we bring in this ship for the Magic Society to study, plus do some good work during the surge, the fact that our team member came back from the dead should be enough that either we can get him to us or go to him."

"Young Master Geller is correct," Dawn said. "Using my influence might be faster, but faster is not always better. I shall provide Mr Standish with a discreet means to contact me should you find Jason's location or find yourselves in desperate need of assistance."

"I thought you could only take action once," Belinda said. "You're willing to waste it on us?"

"Jason would not see it as a waste if it keeps you all alive," Dawn said. "In his time away, he came to understand how much he needs you all."

"Maybe not Neil," Belinda muttered.

“Jason has earned my help,” Dawn said. “Both with the sacrifices he has made and the sacrifices to come.”

“What does that mean?” Neil asked. “Does that mean us? I don’t want to get sacrificed.”

Approaching the island of Livaros, Jason and Farrah immediately spotted the differences from Arnote, which they had left behind without making landfall. The shoreline was mostly cluttered with ports, docks and marinas, as far as they could see in either direction. There were a few places, though, where large houses sat behind pristine beaches or atop rocky cliffs. Some of the cliffs had skyships docked against them, presumably connected to the houses through tunnels inside the rock face.

Moving their gaze inland, the island appeared to be a single sprawling city, albeit an affluent one based on the quality materials, craftsmanship and architecture of the buildings. White stone abounded, with wide, tree-lined streets. More skyships could be seen inside the city, docked to towers that loomed over the surrounding buildings.

“Is that a port for flying ships?” Jason asked.

“Yes,” Farrah said. “You’ll see at least one in any city that isn’t magically barren.”

“Okay, this is pretty great,” Jason admitted, mollified after not stopping at Arnote. “Maybe I should get this thing flying.”

Since passing by Arnote, the level of water traffic they saw had steadily increased. Once they were approaching the more populous Livaros, it had been joined by air traffic with skyships flying overhead and smaller flying vehicles moving between Livaros on the ground and the sky islands scattered around.

The vehicles they were seeing ranged from magical boats to flying carriages to trained magical beasts. There was a preponderance of people riding different forms of a creature similar to a manta ray, in a plethora of sizes and colours.

Smaller ones had a single rider and skipped over the water like a stone. Others carried multiple people surrounded by a bubble of air as in plunged under the water. Some were even flying through the sky, one of which was huge and carried more than a dozen people.

“I think you need to tone down the disguise a bit, before we arrive,” Farrah told him. “I think keeping a low profile is the right move but you got caught up in the idea of disguising your aura. It’s impressive, don’t get me wrong, but it’s not like people are out looking for you.”

“Builder cult.”

“Yeah, but you’re not hiding your name, are you? They won’t be going around asking people if they’ve spotted an outworlder with good aura control.”

“Fair point,” Jason acknowledged.

“What you can do with your aura is great,” Farrah said. “Just because you can do something doesn’t make it a good idea. How about instead of transforming yourself, you just act like a sensible person.”

“That’s not my strong suit,” Jason warned. “I’m more familiar with plans that seem great in my head and more-or-less work but have unintended consequences because I really don’t know what I’m doing or just couldn’t keep my mouth shut.”

Farrah turned to give him a flat look.

“What?” Jason asked with an innocent expression. “I can be self-aware. Eventually.”

“I’m just saying,” Farrah said, “that acting like a sensible person makes for a better disguise than turning yourself into a creepy sleaze. Which I would have had time to explain if you’d shown me what you were going to do more than half a minute before the guy reached us.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” Jason said. “I pretty much completely hid my sin essence.”

“Jason, I think you’re underestimating what it takes to stand out in a proper adventuring city. How about you just try being yourself and take the time to get to know this place, its people and the culture before loudly explaining to the most powerful person you can find why they’re immoral.”

“I do like to try new things,” Jason said. “I can give it a go.”

“And don’t try to sleep with their princess.”

“I’m not going to sleep with their princess.”

“I know you’re not going to sleep with their princess. I’m saying don’t try.”

“I won’t.”

“Good.”

“But what if they have a lot of princesses?”

“Jason...”

“That Vidal guy suggested the royal family is pretty big. They might be hard to avoid.”

Farrah shook her head.

“This is not going to go well.”

As they drew closer to the island, someone was approaching the yacht on a small vehicle that looked to Jason like a bamboo jet ski.

“Oh, nice,” Jason said.

The rider approached the yacht, turning and matching speed as it came alongside. A friendly voice called up from the water.

“Hello, onboard! I’m from the Port Esten Docking Office. Can I come aboard?”

“Certainly,” Farrah called back. “You can dock at the rear platform.”

Jason and Farrah moved to the rear of the yacht where a low docking platform for small watercraft emerged from the side of the yacht as a door opened in the hull. The rider approached on his personal watercraft and stepped onto the yacht, lifting the small craft out of the water and resting it on the platform. The vehicle was rather light, making it easy for his bronze-rank strength.

The man was a celestine, with sea-green hair, matching eyes and an easy smile. He was dressed quite like Jason with tan shorts, a bright floral shirt and no shoes. His aura was non-threatening, with the unmistakable feel of heavy core use. This man was no adventurer.

The man looked to be in his early thirties to Jason’s eyes. For a bronze-ranker, that meant he was probably fifty or more. He looked around, taking in what appeared to be a painted metal hull, white in classic yacht style.

“Cloud ship, yeah?” he asked.

“How can you tell?” Jason asked.

“I’ve worked the Livaros ports since I was a wee tacker,” he said. “I’ve seen just about every conveyance ever put to water or sky. You see enough cloud ships and you learn to spot them, even when they’re disguised. We’ve got a few of them docked right now and there’ll be more with the surge supposedly about to jump off. Of course, we’ve been told that before.”

“This time, you can believe it,” Farrah said.

“Yeah? Adventurers are you? Anyway, is this just a cloud ship or one of them fancy ones you keep in a bottle? Don’t see a lot of those, even here.”

“Bottle,” Farrah said.

“Nice. Oh, I’m Albert, by the way, but everybody calls me—”

“Bert?” Jason asked.

“No, Al,” Albert said. “You can call me Al.”

“And you can call me Betty,” Jason said, earning him a slap on the arm from Farrah.

“I’m Farrah and this is Jason,” she said, giving Jason a scolding glare.

“Sorry,” Jason said. “I can’t tell if I’m disappointed or relieved you’re not a Bert.”

“You're a bit of an odd duck, aren't you?” Albert said, looking Jason up and down. “Still, can't fault your taste in clothes. Are you fine folks looking to dock the boat and live on it, or will you put it back in the bottle and seek other accommodation?”

“I think we'll put it away,” Farrah said, nodding her head at Jason. “This one has ideas about buying a little plot of land on Arnote and living the quiet life.”

“Can't fault you there,” Albert said. “I'd like to do that myself, someday. Got some family there. It's not a bad choice, either. Most of you adventurer types like to stay in the action, so there'll be competition for places on Livaros, be it in the marinas or the inns. There's been a lot of activity lately, with the latest round of rumours about the surge. Arnote might not be as convenient to the Adventure Society but you shouldn't have trouble finding a place. Just make sure you don't go causing trouble.”

“That's what we've heard,” Jason said. “So, what do we do now?”

“If you're going to bottle up your boat, then that simplifies things for all of us. I'll guide you into port, you get rid of your boat and we're all done. I can point you straight at the Adventure Society port office if you'd like.”

“That would be great,” Jason said. “We appreciate the...”

Albert and Farrah looked at Jason, whose eyes had gone wide as he trailed off. He was frozen for a moment and then snapped into action. He pulled out his cloud flask and set it down and the still-moving yacht started the slow process of returning to the flask. It would take around ten minutes for the yacht to completely dissolve around them.

“I think you're jumping ahead there, friend,” Albert said.

“Shade,” Jason barked. “Give us two of those bamboo watercraft. Once the cloud flask is done collecting the yacht, collect the flask.”

Two patches of darkness moved from Jason's shadow to the water behind the yacht and turned into black replicas of Albert's small vehicle.

“Sorry Al,” Jason said. “We'll be making our own arrangements, but thank you. Farrah, we need to go.”

Without waiting, Jason jumped onto one of the vehicles and it launched off towards the island, spraying water behind it. Farrah gave Albert an apologetic smile.

“Sorry,” she said. “He can be a bit dramatic.”

“What's going on?” Albert asked.

“No idea,” she said and then jumped on the other black watercraft and immediately shot away.

Albert shook his head and then pushed his watercraft back into the water.

“Adventurers,” he muttered to himself.

Chapter 469

More Paperwork

Unlike most of the temples in Rimaros, the city's main temple of Knowledge was not to be found in the temple district on the island of Livaros. Instead, it could be found on the second-largest of the city's sky islands, one of the few which could be accessed by the public. The island was primarily known for being the location of the Rimaros Magic Society campus, which held ownership and control of the island.

In a major city like Rimaros, the temple of Knowledge was an important resource for the many magical researchers and had a symbiotic relationship with the Magic Society branch. Within the temple was a chamber specifically for incoming portals. A portal appeared and two people emerged before it closed behind them.

"This had best be as important as you claim," Rufus Remore said darkly. "I have my own concerns."

Rufus was tall and lean, with dark skin and a bald head. He was wearing loose clothes, having come from the humid Mistrun Delta in Greenstone.

"I am a priestess of the goddess of Knowledge," Gabrielle Pellin told him. "I am fully aware of your concerns. You used to be more polite, Mr Remore."

Gabrielle was no longer the teenage iron-ranker that had been Humphrey's girlfriend. With age and rank, her already impressive looks had blossomed into dangerous beauty, with olive skin, chocolate hair and graceful poise.

She led Rufus forward, out of the chamber and into the larger temple. It was mostly comprised of a vast library covering multiple wings, each with multiple storeys.

"How long have you known they were alive?" Rufus asked.

"When Jason Asano both died and came back to life, Mr Remore, he was beyond the vision of this world's gods."

"But you knew."

"I serve the goddess of Knowledge, Mr Remore, not the goddess of assumptions. If I told you that Jason Asano was alive and I was wrong, how would you feel about that? And as for Miss Hurin, that came as a surprise to even the goddess."

"Are you saying they are already here?"

"As we speak, a local Adventure Society official is directing them to the island of Livaros."

"We're in Rimaros?"

"We are. I imagine you will wish to greet them on their arrival at port."

Rufus frowned.

“I apologise, Priestess Pellin. You have done me a service, only to receive discourtesy in return.”

“The last member of my church you spoke with, you slapped in the face,” she said, her voice tinged with amusement. “I consider discourtesy a welcome step in the right direction.”

-
- [Contact \[Rufus Remore\] has entered communication range.](#)
 - [Contact \[Gabrielle Pellin\] has entered communication range.](#)
-

The personal watercraft Shade had taken the form of all but flew over the water. Only magic kept the ultralight vehicle from flipping over. Jason was an experienced jet ski rider and this strange bamboo variant wasn't that different. He was in a half-crouch as it skimmed over the water, moving between larger boats as he made his way into port.

Jason homed in on the familiar aura like a beacon until he spotted a bald, black head on the busy dockside. He conjured his cloak and launched himself into the air, then glided down to land in front of his friend. As the cloak dissolved around him, he flashed the stunned-looking Rufus a huge grin.

“G'day, bloke.”

Rufus looked Jason over. The strange eyes, the aura that had yet again gone through massive changes. Now they were equal rank, Rufus had a new appreciation for its oppressiveness. As Jason's aura withdrew to a discrete state, Rufus realised Jason had unveiled it so that Rufus would sense the personal crest marked upon it.

“Farrah thought I was a shape-shifter or something,” Jason said.

Rufus clasped Jason in a fierce hug.

“Crikey,” Jason croaked. “It's good to see you mate, but it feels like you're trying to juice me.”

“Farrah,” Rufus said, not letting Jason go.

“Look behind me, mate.”

Rufus released Jason and looked out at the water. Farrah was just rising from her own watercraft on wings of fire, swiftly joining them on the dock. She and Rufus joined in a wordless hug.

As they did, Jason turned to the priestess.

“Gabrielle,” he greeted.

“You were quite correct, Mr Asano. She is not the goddess of Solid Deductions Made on the Basis of Reasonable Evidence.”

Jason chuckled.

“Still don’t like me much, do you?” he asked.

“I am glad that you are no longer dead.”

“That’s still goodwill, so I’ll take it. I assume that your boss is responsible for getting Rufus here?”

“There was a brief window before the Adventure Society starts claiming the time of every portal user, including those belonging to the church. Even my trip here will last until the monster surge is done. My Lady sent Rufus Remore here as a gesture, having not let your companions know of your likely resurrection. Your other companions are currently indisposed and by the time they reach Vitesse, it will be too late to bring them here immediately. They will need to make their own way to you.”

“They’re all alright, then?”

“They are well and together.”

Jason gave Gabrielle a bow of gratitude, startling her.

“Even though she already knows my gratitude, please convey my thanks to your goddess, Priestess Pellin.”

“I will do so, Mr Asano.”

“Why did she send you too?” Jason asked. “To keep an eye on me?”

“You have an important task to complete, Mr Asano.”

“And what do you know of that?”

“My goddess only told me that it is your secret to share or – and she wished to voice her strong preference on this – not to share.”

Rufus and Farrah came up behind him, Rufus’ arm slung over Farrah’s shoulder. If the smile on his face was any wider, the top half of his head would have fallen off. He clasped a hand on Jason’s shoulder.

“You have to tell me everything,” he said. “Everything.”

The trio got some directions from the Adventure Society port office and started making their way through the city. There was a lot of personal transportation magic on display in boulevards and avenues thick with essence users. Some rode mounts, others magical carriages. Personal float disks were the most common, although there were some interesting variations. Jason was particularly taken with the ones that produced a mist that made it seem like the rider was drifting about on a cloud.

“Can you do a cloud thing?” Jason asked Shade.

“I can do a black cloud,” Shade said.

“Never mind.”

“Jason,” Farrah said, “this is not the time to be playing Monkey Magic.”

“What’s monkey magic?” Rufus asked.

“She’s talking about Sun Wukong,” Jason said. “It’s a legend from my world.”

“No,” Farrah said, “I’m talking about the old Monkey TV show, as you well know.”

“That’s not what I was thinking,” Jason said.

“Are you going to stand there and tell me the theme song isn’t playing through your head right now?”

“Fine,” Jason admitted. Rufus was looking at them in horror.

“Jason... what did you do to Farrah?” he asked.

“It’s fine,” Jason said. “Shade, some horses, please.”

“Horses,” Farrah said as three dark horses with glowing white manes and hooves were formed out of Jason’s shadow.

“What’s wrong with horses?” Jason asked.

“I thought the reason you couldn’t have Shade turn into a heidel in the other world was that your world didn’t have heidels,” Farrah said.

“Sounds about right,” Jason said.

“Our world doesn’t have horses.”

“You probably just haven’t seen them,” Jason said.

“Shade?” Farrah asked.

“I am merely the vessel, Miss Farrah. The actual power belongs to Mr Asano, and any limitations he has, or chooses to impose, are his own.”

“Come on,” Jason said hastily as he mounted one of the horses. “Can’t hang about all day.”

On the upstairs balcony of a café, just outside the Livaros temple district, a table was covered in plates.

“This is fantastic,” Jason mumbled happily around a forkful of food. “I’ve been living almost entirely on spirit coins for the last couple of years.”

“Because of the food shortages you mentioned,” Rufus said and Jason nodded.

“His world was never equipped for monsters,” Farrah said. “Once the concentrated, localised monster surges started happening, much of the trade and transport infrastructure collapsed.”

“It sounds like your world saw some dark days,” Rufus said solemnly.

“We’ll explain more once we’re a little more secluded,” Farrah said.

Jason mumbled his agreement.

“Let’s just focus on the happy stuff for now,” he said. “Are there any more of those dumplings?”

“What we should focus on is getting ourselves organised,” Farrah said. “As it stands, we don’t have any place to stay and we remain, so far as I’m aware, dead. As far as any records are concerned, anyway.”

“We need to update your status with the Adventure Society,” Rufus said. “The others will be looking for that.”

“So, you met Dawn,” Jason said to Rufus. “How’s she doing?”

“She seemed normal,” Rufus said. “Whatever that means for a diamond-ranker. They appear how they want to appear.”

“Dawn took a little while to loosen up, but she got there,” Jason said. “Mostly. I think it was her boss’ idea. Wanted her to reconnect with her mortality.”

“You’re about as mortal as it gets,” Farrah told Jason. “Which is odd for a man who keeps coming back from the dead.”

“I was expecting something more ominous,” Jason said. “Skull motif, lots of black.”

“No,” Farrah said, “That’s more you and the god of Undeath.”

Rufus, Farrah and Jason were standing outside of what looked like a rather nice memorial centre with lots of tasteful white stone and neatly manicured gardens. It was a long way from what Jason expected from the temple of Death. The trio stepped onto the grounds to start making their way through the pleasant garden pathways to the main building. As soon as he set foot on the path, Jason froze.

-
- You have entered a spirit domain.
 - You may not claim this territory as a spirit domain unless it is surrendered to you.
-

Jason cautiously probed with his aura but got no negative reactions.

“What’s wrong?” Rufus asked.

“I’ll tell you later,” Jason said. “It’s fine.”

“Are these gardens laid out as an array?” Jason asked.

“Good eye,” Farrah said. “The dead are stored in temples of Death, so they all have arrays of ritual formations to protect against any necromantic power, be it inadvertent or deliberate.”

"You can get accidental zombies?" Jason asked.

"It's magic," Rufus said. "You can get anything."

"So, does the god of Undeath get a temple?" Jason asked. "It'd be more of a secret thing that people try and wipe out as soon as they find it, right?"

"Yes," Rufus said. "It's the same for most of the purely harmful gods, although Undeath is one of the worst. They have to hide them because the Adventure Society, the churches and any local authorities will raze them to the ground. Unless the local authorities are in league with them, which is a complete mess."

"That was actually how Rufus, Gary and I met," Farrah said. "We've told you about the zombie plague we all ended up fighting together. There was a temple of Undeath at the heart of it all. The local mayor was the high priest; it was a huge mess."

"I've never seen that many undead," Rufus said.

"I wish I could say the same," Farrah said, Jason nodding his agreement. Rufus gave them both a worried look.

The main building of Death's temple proved oddly pleasant, with clergy wandering around in white robes, open space and plenty of light.

"This is not a place for the dead," an acolyte explained as he led Jason and Farrah through the halls while Rufus waited in the lobby. "The dead have already passed on and their sacred remains are respectfully prepared for their ultimate disposition in the deep places of the temple. This place is truly for those who remain. A place to come together and celebrate their lost love ones and the life that remains."

"Death care is really exploitative where I come from," Jason said. "Your goddess probably stops that kind of thing from happening here, right?"

"My goddess stops it from happening everywhere," the acolyte said.

"Our definition of everywhere," Farrah said, "is more expansive than what you're thinking of."

They were shown into an office where a bronze-rank priest got up from his chair to meet them. His hair and eyes were a matching sea-green colour and he had an easy smile. He appeared to be in his thirties, which meant closer to fifty for a bronze-ranker. Jason and Farrah shared a look.

"I think I'm going insane," Jason said. "People keep wondering and now it's finally happened."

"I'm sorry?" the priest asked.

"Your name isn't Al by any chance, is it?" Farrah asked.

"Ah," the priest said. "You must have met one of my brothers."

"It's happening again," Jason muttered.

"I'm Aldrich Albericci," the priest introduced himself. "But everyone calls me Al."

"You don't happen to have seven brothers do you, Al?" Farrah asked.

"I do," Aldrich said. "Alvin, Alexander, Alan, Albert, Alistair, Alfred and..."

Aldrich rolled his eyes.

"...Alejandro. He's the sexy one."

"You aren't all identical?" Farrah asked.

"No, we are," Aldrich said. "Mr Asano, Miss Hurin, please do sit."

Jason was shaking his head as he sat down across the desk from the priest.

"Is he alright?" Aldrich asked. "He didn't come back from the dead a bit funny did he?

We get that sometimes."

"You know who we are," Farrah said. "You know why we're here, then."

"I do," Aldrich said. He took an envelope from his desk drawer and placed it on the table. "Identity certifications for you both. It's quite unusual for people to both die and come back from the dead outside of our goddess' gaze. She is, however, still the goddess of Death. She knows of each time you have fallen and each time you have returned. She gave me specific instruction to ask you to be more careful, Mr Asano. She may not know the details, but she is aware that death is becoming an unfortunate habit for you."

"Yeah," Jason said wanly. "Coming back from the dead is kind of my thing."

"She would rather it wasn't, so please do her a favour and stop dying in the first place."

"Thank you for this," Farrah said, taking the envelope.

"Helping the living with the affairs of the dead is why we are here," Aldrich said. "It's just that when the living and the dead are the same person, there's more paperwork."

As they were about to leave, something occurred to Jason and he turned around in the door.

"Al," he said. "I don't suppose one of your brothers is a tailor?"

Chapter 470

Multi-Talented

Rimaros was a city of well-trained and powerful essence users, meaning many strong auras and powerful senses. With the number of essence users present in the city, and more pouring in for the monster surge, it was a disorienting cacophony for those able to sense it. This was one of the main reasons that aura retraction was a key point of etiquette.

While any essence user could sense auras, detecting the senses of others being projected out was something that required training. In Rimaros, the appropriate training was commonplace, which is why it was similarly impolitic for people to project their senses to the full extent. Jason appreciated the courtesy others showed in not blasting out their auras and their senses and returned the courtesy in kind.

Standing in a crowd of adventurers, this was especially important. Jason, Farrah and Rufus were outside the administration building of the Adventure Society's main campus, which was the beating heart of the island of Livaros. Adventurers were streaming in from all over the city and beyond to register for the monster surge and even the exterior of the administration building was crowded almost shoulder to shoulder. Jason, Farrah and Rufus were stuck outside, waiting amongst the throng.

Adventurers were being prioritised by rank by the Adventure Society officials managing the crowd, but there was no shortage of silver-rankers. It was a big change for Jason, after Greenstone and then Earth. In both places, silver-rankers were high ranking elites at the top of their respective societies.

"Notice how there aren't any iron-rankers around," Rufus said. "In a true adventuring city like Rimaros, they're considered not much different from normals. If you aren't careful in their training, iron-rankers can very easily die from the monsters that manifest in this region. It's why the training annex I've been building in Greenstone will be so valuable. Part of what has made the Gellers so successful is that they realised long ago that the prestigious high-magic regions aren't better for everything."

"Do you know if there is a branch of the Geller family here?" Farrah asked. "Perhaps they could get word to Danielle Geller."

"I'm not sure," Rufus said. "It's certainly worth exploring, once we're done with this mess."

Farrah looked over at the bronze-rankers, boxed out by the silver's being given priority.

“Bronze-rankers here,” she said, “are much like iron-rankers in Greenstone. They’re inexperienced and untested.”

“Here, and in places like Vitesse, iron and bronze-rankers are coddled. They have to be. When bronze and iron monsters do spawn here, it’s in massive herds. They get thinned out and the low-rank adventurers are set loose on them. No autonomy, no spontaneity. It’s why we jumped at the chance to get out from under supervision and come to Greenstone, and what makes the training annex valuable,”

Farrah put a hand on Rufus’ shoulder.

“We know, sweetie. Your family runs a school.”

Jason snorted a laugh as Farrah turned back to him.

“Silver-rankers like us are the true backbone of adventuring culture in a city like this,” she explained. “That’s the rank where they can reasonably roam about without needing protection beyond their own team.”

“There are far more gold-rankers than you’ll be familiar with seeing, here,” Rufus said. “But that doesn’t make them common. They’re called on at need, but for ordinary gold-rank monsters, one or more teams of silvers are sent out, maybe with a gold-ranker leading a joint force. Actual gold-rank teams are reserved for the largest threats because calling on them usually involves an exchange of favours.”

“Those rules shift during a monster surge, though, right?” Jason asked.

“Very much so,” Rufus said. “During a surge, the golds put aside their interests and agendas and step up. They also aren’t the last line against the larger threats, since diamond-rank monsters usually only turn up during surges. That’s when the hidden diamond-rankers show themselves. You’ll probably see a diamond-rank monster yourself before the surge is done. Hopefully from a very long way away.”

“It’s not the monsters that we’re worried about,” Jason said. “We’ve seen worse than what a monster surge can throw at us.”

“You’re underestimating the surge,” Rufus said.

“No,” Farrah told him. “He’s not.”

“It’s the other thing the surge is bringing,” Jason said, looking at the crowd around them. “They haven’t announced the surge’s bonus feature yet, have they?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” Rufus said. “I can hardly believe it myself, some of the things Dawn told us.”

“This certainly isn’t going to be like the surges we remember growing up,” Farrah said. Both she and Rufus had lived to see two previous monster surges, neither while as adventurers. One had been while they were still toddlers.

Rufus frowned at the crowd. Aside from dividing the crowd by rank, the society officials were organising into three queues. Local adventurers from guilds were getting priority in the fast-moving line, with local adventurers in the slower-moving second line. Outside adventurers were standing in the third line, occasionally spicing it up with a shuffle forward.

"I don't like your coming back during a monster surge," Rufus said. "All I want to do is go off with you both and talk for a week."

"This was always going to be the timing," Farrah said, "regardless of when we came back. We shouldn't get into it out in the open, though. We'll tell you about it later."

"We need to get this registration done," Jason said. "Unless the Gellers can help, it's how the others will find us since Knowledge won't tell them."

"I still don't understand what Gabrielle said when we asked," Rufus said. "Something about Knowledge not being a... something. I don't think she knew either."

"An SMS service," Farrah said. "She was talking about communication networks from Jason's world," Farrah said. "I miss my phone."

"You mostly just called me," Jason said.

"It had my games. *Shrubberies vs. Skeletons* might have been a knockoff but I maintain it was better than the original."

"How much of my money did you spend on microtransactions again?" Jason asked.

"You say that as if you paid attention to money," Farrah told him. "You didn't even pay attention to spirit coins after what you got from killing Dawn."

"After he WHAT?" Rufus yelled out.

"Don't make a spectacle of yourself," Jason told him. "We'll tell you about it later."

"We really need to get to later," Rufus said. "You said communication network? Are you talking about the magic item you mentioned that's like a water link chamber you carry it around in your pocket?"

"It's not magic," Farrah said. "We did use a bit of magic on ours, but most people don't."

"How is that even possible?"

"Jason once told us that we would find his world as wondrous as he found ours," Farrah said. "He wasn't wrong. The things they accomplish without magic are incredible."

"They're starting to incorporate magic into them now, too," Jason pointed out. "My world has less magic, but the combination of magic and technology will do a lot to close that gap."

“It empowers normal and low-rank people much more than we see in our world,” Farrah said. “The societies in Jason’s world weren’t built by immortals with vast personal power. They have to accrue power through money and influence, but even the most powerful rarely live to see a century. There is an inherent difference in how people look at things.”

“Is everyone there like Jason?” Rufus asked. He was growing concerned that Jason’s world had somehow infected Farrah’s mind.

“No, he’s strange everywhere,” Farrah said. “That’s not a bad thing, though. The people from Jason’s society weren’t ready for the realities we face here, so the arrival of magic was handled poorly in a lot of ways.”

Farrah put a comforting hand on Jason’s shoulder.

“Jason had to step up and face challenges that people of our rank shouldn’t have to. His family supported him but they weren’t ready to accept the steps he had to take to keep his world safe. What he had to become to take them, and the sacrifices along the way.”

“You did plenty for my world,” Jason told her. “You faced the monster waves. The army of the dead at Makassar. Without you, they may have never figured out how to repair the grid and bring the monster waves to an end. You did more than anyone actually from that world.”

“Jason,” Farrah said, “you’re from that world.”

“No,” he said softly. “Not anymore.”

By the time Jason, Farrah and Rufus finally got into the administration building, it was well past dark. There was an array of officials directing adventurers, who took Farrah and Jason's identity certifications before Jason was directed separately from the others. Rufus and Farrah were a registered team and part of a prominent guild, even if they were a long way from the guild's seat in Vitesse. They separated but the trio would keep in contact through Jason’s party interface.

Jason was led to a small office. He was met with by an adventure society official who waved him to the chair across the desk from her own without looking up from the papers she was reading. Her silver-rank aura was marked by monster cores, marking her as a pure, albeit senior bureaucrat.

Jason waited patiently as she continued to read from the sheaf of papers in her hand, moving through one page, then another. Occasionally she would shift her eyes briefly to give Jason a brief, assessing glance. The office was magically sealed and Jason’s senses

were blocked by the walls. He didn't try pushing them to see if he could get through the block, but he suspected not, given that it also cut off chat through the party interface.

"Mr Asano," the official said, finally looking at him directly. "There are quite a number of irregularities in your record. Let's start with the fact that you're dead."

"I provided a certification of identity from the church of Death. I also have a personal crest you can check against Magic Society records."

"I'm familiar with the documents I'm holding in my hand, Mr Asano. Is this going to be an exercise in you telling me things of which I am already aware?"

Jason forced down his instinctive response. She was clearly testing his equanimity.

"I apologise," he said with a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "This is a new process for me and I've never operated in a city like this before. I'm unfamiliar with the scope and scale of operations here and would welcome any guidance you were kind enough to offer."

"You're an outworlder," she said.

"Yes."

"You trained in Greenstone and came into contact with several families prominent outside of that little provincial town. The Gellers, the Remores. You were also present for an event in which many prestigious young people from around the world were competing for a prize. Which you won, despite the considerable talent in competition with you."

"I had a Geller on my team and no shortage of luck. Your records are very thorough."

"You were implanted with a star seed and made into a minion of the Builder before having the seed extracted."

"Not that thorough, then. What you just said isn't accurate. I was implanted with a seed under unusual circumstances but it didn't take. I got lucky."

"You sound like a very lucky man, Mr Asano."

"I've encountered some good fortune," Jason acknowledged.

"Did you meet anyone from Rimaros around the time of the contest?"

"Yeah, actually. All the teams were split up and we worked with who we could find. There was this bloke. Defence specialist, what was his name... Keane, that was it. He was from some city here in the Seas of Storms. Not sure if it was Rimaros or not, but your city is spread out. It covers a lot of territory, so maybe. I should look him up."

"You, along with your team, made a second incursion into this astral space when it was unsealed a second time," she said.

"That is correct," Jason said. "The first time was for the contest and the second time was just my team."

"The contest executed by Emir Bahadir."

Jason didn't comment on her choice of verb, simply noting it away.

"Correct."

"And how would you characterise your relationship with Mr Bahadir?"

"Friendly."

"Would you consider yourselves accomplices?"

"I cannot speak to what Mr Bahadir would consider," Jason said. "As for myself, I would call Mr Bahadir a benefactor. Gold-rankers don't need iron-rank accomplices."

"I can think of many circumstances in which they would. That would be a failure of imagination on your part, Mr Asano."

"This doesn't strike me as a conversation where imagination will serve me well," he lied.

She leafed through the papers in her hand, skimming the contents.

"During this second instance in which you entered the sealed astral space, your team encountered the Builder cult."

"Yes."

"You fought the Builder cult."

"Yes."

"And out of your team, you were the only one to die."

"Someone has to be the worst," Jason said.

"And your death was confirmed. Your team watched your body dissolve into smoke, like a monster."

Jason's face fell.

"They saw that?" he asked softly, voice slightly breaking. "They saw me... they had to watch?"

"Yes," she said coldly. "What if I put it to you, Mr Asano, that you were still an agent of the Builder at that time and that you turned on your team and was killed by them. That they only told others that you sacrificed yourself to protect their reputations. What would you say to that?"

Jason felt rage rise up inside him like a wild tide but let none of it appear in his aura as he gave her another lifeless smile.

"I would say that unevidenced conjecture that impugns the reputation of a group of people who are objectively heroic for the very thing that makes them heroes is unbecoming of someone representing an organisation like the Adventure Society. Further, I would say that on a personal level you were a petty, bitter and envious little person who does not deserve the seat you are sitting in. If you were to put it to me."

"Where have you been for the last two and a half years, Mr Asano?"

"Home. See the family. You know how it is."

"Would you care to elaborate?"

"No."

"I see. How did you come back from the dead?"

"It's kind of my thing."

"That is not an answer."

"I spotted that too."

"The more forthcoming you are, Mr Asano, the more we can help you."

"Where I grew up, we call that kind of sentence a red flag."

"Your initial contact with one of our officials raised several questions. You were noted as being suspicious."

"I am suspicious. We've just gone through my enigmatic past so you know that better than most. I'm a man of mystery."

"A past on which you refuse to elucidate."

"A girl's got to have her secrets."

"You aren't painting yourself in a good light, Mr Asano."

"That's kind of my thing too. I'm coming to realise it's something I'll just have to accept about myself."

"You deceived our contact agent. He listed your race as human, not outworlder."

"I was testing out some aura self-manipulation with Vidal. He was very professional. Observant, which is why it didn't go so well for me. My friend told me that I should just be myself, which is probably a good lesson for all of us."

She shuffled to another page of the documents in her hand, looking it over.

"Yes, Miss Hurin. She also died, quite some time before you. In another astral space, in another fight against the Builder cult. How did she come back from the dead?"

"Well, I was coming back from the dead myself, so not bringing her with me would have been rude."

"Your familiar is a shadow of the Reaper, yes? And not just any shadow but the very one that had, for centuries, previously managed the astral space in which you died."

"Yes."

"Is it responsible for the resurrections of yourself and Miss Hurin?"

"You caught me," Jason said. "My bronze-rank familiar brought both me and my friend who had been killed an entire year previously back from the dead."

"If not that, then how?"

"I told you. Coming back from the dead is kind of my thing."

"You seem to have a lot of things, Mr Asano."

"I'm multi-talented."

"So I've read," she said, once more looking to the papers in her hands. "Stealth, utility, mobility, self-healing, cleansing, drain attacks. That's a lot of things that aren't afflictions for a so-called affliction specialist. It seems that you're quite the dilettante."

"Cleansing is affliction-related. Affliction-adjacent at the very least. Besides, I like to think of myself as versatile."

"No one cares what you think, Mr Asano. I am referring you to our Builder response team for assessment as a potential threat. If you are cleared, you will be assigned an action quota. You will need to report regularly to the jobs hall where you will be assigned contracts in order to meet this action quota. Is this understood?"

"Yes."

"Given the breadth of your abilities, you will be a liability for most tasks due to your inability to dedicate your disparate powers. You have mobility, navigational and storage abilities, so I am marking you down for solitary missions delivering supplies to isolated, non-critical areas."

"I heard that team-based operations were the standard here."

"You are not from here, Mr Asano. Do you have a problem with the tasks to which I am assigning you?"

"Not at all," Jason said. "It sounds like those people could use some help and maybe aren't getting the attention they need, given how busy things are. I'm happy to pitch in."

The official stared at him silently for a moment.

"An admirable attitude," she said finally. "If it's genuine. Outside this office, you will find a small security team who will escort you to our Builder response team for immediate assessment. If they fail to clear you, then what contracts you may or may not want will no longer be an issue. Good day, Mr Asano."

Chapter 471

Don't Say You Weren't Warned

Jason stepped out of the assessment officer's office to find a stern-looking man and woman waiting for him. They each had a rigidly controlled silver-rank aura.

"So," he said. "Are you two generic security or are you part of this anti-Builder unit?"

"We are part of the Builder cult response team. Come with us, please."

"Absolutely," Jason said. "Take me to your leader."

The pair escorted Jason through the vast administration complex, down through multiple basement sublevels that grew increasingly grim as they went. As they went, Jason could feel a large dead zone below them where his senses stopped cold. Even more than the aura-blocking office walls of the assessor, this was a sealed environment.

He was brought down to the same level as the dead zone, which began at a wall with a large metal door. It was thick and heavy, reaching from floor to ceiling and covered in intricate ritual markings. Perhaps Farrah could have made sense of them but they were far beyond Jason's ritual expertise. Looking at the door, he got the sense of a magical bank vault.

There were two guards outside the door. One was standing to the left of it, with the other inside a secure booth to its right. Both of Jason's escorts had to place their hands up against the glass of the booth, where a previously unseen ritual circle lit up with a green glow.

After seeing the glow, the guard in the booth nodded at Jason's escorts. The guard by the door spoke into some kind of communications device and placed a crystal into a slot in the wall beside the door. The guard in the booth did the same on the other side and the cumbersome metal door slowly descended into the floor. Jason's escorts let him into the wide and high corridor of plain brick behind it.

"Not exactly a cheerful work environment," Jason observed. "You should get some potted plants in. Ones that don't need a lot of sun, obviously."

"Introducing outside materials is a potential point of compromise," the female escort told him.

"That sounds like a super fun workplace."

After passing into the corridor, Jason entered the dead zone. His senses extended through the place but now everything outside it had been cut off. His perception was still politely withdrawn but the subterranean complex wasn't especially large, so he could

sense everything within the limited area. There were two gold-rankers and fourteen silver-rankers, including his escorts.

Most notable were nine people with Builder star seeds inside them, each of which had their auras strongly suppressed. They were in poor condition and all separated, suggesting they were probably prisoners. Jason hoped that was the case, rather than the Builder having infiltrated the anti-Builder taskforce.

There were also people in a similarly poor state who were converted. Rather than a star seed, they had been implanted with clockwork core, modifying them into bizarre amalgams of metal and flesh. These weren't the damaged and repurposed clockwork cores of Earth's superheroes, either.

Fully intact cores turned people into something between victim and minion of the Builder. Jason had seen the results when he and his team fought the Builder in the past when the cult had converted their allies amongst the clergy of Purity. This replaced essence powers with less-potent physical transformations but raised their rank, trading long-term growth for immediate power and obedience.

Jason's escorts led him down several corridors of dark grey brick and through multiple steel doors before stopping in a large room. It looked like a dungeon set up as an office, complete with a heavy wooden desk and a man chained to the wall.

There were no chairs on the visitor side of the desk. Instead, there was only a large ritual circle, permanently set into the floor in brass and multicolour crystal. Jason recognised the ritual, realising it was at least one of the means by which they were testing people for Builder connections.

Chained to the wall, the restrained man's body had metal rods jammed into the torso, arms and legs, the rods covered in glowing runes from which small amounts of mist was rising. Jason got the impression of something being drained from the man and he could feel the rods suppressing the star seed inside him.

The other occupant of the room looked up from his desk as Jason and his escorts entered. He was a gold-ranker that looked no older than his early twenties but only the most oblivious person would mistake him for being Jason's age. There was an air about gold rankers that even normal rankers with no true aura senses picked up on, even if they mistook it for some kind of charisma.

"Thank you. Stay by the door please," he told the escorts in a clipped, military voice. They nodded respectfully and closed the thick metal door before taking positions on either side of it. The gold-ranker then went back to going through the paperwork on his desk and scribbling notes in a book. He hadn't so much as looked at Jason.

Jason shrugged his shoulders and moved over to the man chained to the wall, stepping around the ritual circle set into the floor. The prisoner was hanging limply, eyes open but not seeing. He wasn't dead but in some kind of catatonic state.

"Your décor is a bit garish," Jason said. "I was talking about some potted plants with your employees but that's clearly not the ambience you're going for."

"You find it confronting?" the man asked without looking up.

"I've been worse. But you already know that."

Jason tapped one of the rods with his finger.

"The ability to suppress star seeds without them self-detonating was something they were still working on when I was last in the world. It's come along."

"You've seen them detonate before."

"I have. But you know that too."

The man finally looked up, although Jason didn't turn to face him, still looking at the catatonic prisoner.

"Then why don't you tell me something I don't know, Mr Asano?"

"Because I'm not going to start satisfying your curiosity when you haven't even told me your name."

"Most people show gold-rankers more respect."

"When all I've received is suspicion and rudeness? I'm here so you can determine if I'm a Builder puppet. I haven't been proven one yet."

"If you had, Mr Asano, I think you've seen that your treatment would go beyond rudeness. Stand in front of the desk."

Jason turned around.

"You mean walk willingly into your ritual circle, thereby making myself subject to its effects?"

"Yes."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"I didn't say please because I wasn't asking, Mr Asano."

"I'm just saying that if you want me in a soul projection ritual, you might want to use a smaller one."

"You're familiar with soul projection rituals."

"It's not the first time I've been suspected of being on team Builder. I'm getting sick of telling you things you already know. But that's fine. Just don't say you weren't warned."

Jason stepped into the middle of the room.

The gold-ranker raised his hand and chanted a few meaningless syllables. The ritual activated and Jason felt his aura unleash itself, not just at full strength but fed power and amplified by the ritual. The gold ranker's eyes went wide as the air turned thick as syrup and the glow stone in the ceiling dimmed. Murky darkness filled the room and figures began appearing within it.

The figures were floating dark cloaks, speckled with stars. Inside the cloaks were what looked like portals to places filled with sunshine and blue sky. Around the cloaks were other things, blacker than night. They darted about, quick, and sinister.

The two guards by the door had pressed themselves into the corners of the room, their faces stricken with fear. The man chained to the wall roused from his stupor, eyes clearing as he started thrashing in his chains and screaming a word over and over.

"REJECTOR! REJECTOR! REJECTOR!"

The gold-ranker cancelled the ritual and Jason drew his aura back in as he casually adjusted his floral shirt. The prisoner continued screaming until the gold ranker marched over, grabbed his face and slammed it into the wall, knocking him unconscious. The gold-ranker then went to the closest guard, huddled in the corner. He yanked her to her feet and then did the same for the other.

The door burst open, revealing a gold-rank woman.

"Keel," the newcomer said. "What are you doing in here? Whatever that illusion was, it sent the prisoners berserk. The ones with cores all had seizures and the ones with seeds woke up and won't stop screaming."

The original gold-ranker, Keel, turned to Jason who had a plate in one hand and a fork in the other.

"What?" Jason asked. "I just remembered I had leftover strudel."

Jason was taken into a small, secure room with metal benches set into the stonewalls. Inside, Farrah was already sitting down.

"Sure thing, Farrah," she said to Jason. "I'm going to lay low and not make a fuss. Nice and quiet, that'll be me."

"I told the guy to use a less powerful projection ritual," Jason said. "Have you found these people to be great listeners?"

"The lady I saw was nice," she said. "Is that strudel?"

"I just remembered that I had some leftover. Splitsies?"

"Definitely."

Jason sat down next to her and produced another fork. She grabbed it and he held the plate between them so she could dig in.

“They thought you might be a Builder puppet too?” Jason asked as she groaned happily around a forkful of fruit pastry. She nodded.

“I wonder how long this is going to take?” he wondered. “They’ll probably just leave us sitting here for a while and watch us.”

Farrah threw Jason a curious glance and Jason pointed at a brick in the wall that looked like any other.

The two gold-rankers, Keel and Liara, were watching Jason and Farrah through a seeing stone as Jason pointed it out.

“That man is trouble,” Keel said.

“Yes, but I don’t think he’s a servant of the Builder. Just the opposite, if anything. You felt that aura, just like I did. Its very nature rejected the star seeds and the clockwork cores. You were right about Asano. Whatever he’s been through did something to him. Something that we can use.”

“Perhaps. He’s still only silver-rank and won’t be able to help against the larger threats.”

“I’ll take something that works against the medium threats,” Liara said. “And what was with that aura? Is he another fourfold?”

“No,” Keel said. “His aura is just that strong.”

“How? That strength was practically gold-rank. I’m not sure I even tracked everything floating around in it before you shut the ritual down. That was the touch of gods in there, right?”

“His contact with gods was in his record. It’s nothing we didn’t know. What about the woman?”

“Her aura is outworlder now, instead of human, but clean. She doesn’t have a personal crest, though, so we’ll need to do some more identity verification. We did get something on the power screen ritual. We found traces from a Builder blessing but it wasn’t like the ones we’ve seen from cultists. This was custom. The thing is, though, every racial gift she has was evolved through a blessing.”

“The Builder shouldn’t be able to bestow more than one blessing.”

“It didn’t. Each of those was from a different great astral being. They’re relatively common from the Reaper and the Celestial Book but the World-Phoenix, not so much. As for the Legion and the All-Devouring Eye? The last I heard, they didn’t hand out blessings.”

“Check that with the Magic Society.”

“Oh, I intend to. But whatever is going on with her, I don’t think she’s in the Builder’s camp. The other beings wouldn’t bless her like that if she was.”

“The Builder only blesses its own people.”

“Keel, I think we can safely say that Miss Hurin falls outside of normal circumstances. And she didn’t lie. Did Asano?”

“I don’t know. Couldn’t read his aura until it was projected and I didn’t stop to question him once it was.”

“Did you power screen Asano before the soul projection?”

“No. We know he has a Reaper blessing but after what his aura did to the prisoners I’m not going to bother. I’m convinced he’s clean. As you said, exactly the opposite of in the Builder’s camp.”

“Which means she probably is as well,” Liara said. “We should hold her until we’ve confirmed her identity, at least. I have more records coming from the Magic Society so it shouldn’t take long.”

“Agreed. That leaves the question of what to do with him.”

“I say we stick with your original intentions and make use of him. Both of them.”

“He won’t make for a reliable asset and we don’t know what the Builder is up to yet.”

“Let me run Asano,” Liara said. “We can leave him be for now. Eloise assigned him to solitary delivery missions, as directed. That will let him build up a network of local portal destinations and give any Builder cultists a chance to take a poke. The worst that can happen is we flush some of them out. Once we have a use for him, we step back in.”

“What was Eloise’s assessment?” Keel asked.

“He handled provocation well, but he was aware of what she was doing. He showed anger when she pushed but she thinks it was a show. With that aura of his, she couldn’t read him properly. He’s smart enough but he has impulse-control issues and trouble keeping his mouth closed. He has some connections but nothing local, as far as we can tell.”

“As far as you can tell?” Keel asked.

“The name, Jason Asano. I feel like I’ve heard it before but I can’t remember when.”

“You have the memory of a gold-ranker,” Keel said. “If you can’t remember, you’re either imagining it or it was of incidental importance.”

“I don’t know,” Liara said. “It’s been bothering me.”

“Go through his records if you like,” Keel said. “I’ll hand him over to you entirely. I have this feeling that I’d end up killing him.”

Chapter 472

Contribution

Late into the night, the space outside of the Adventure Society's central admin complex was still crowded with people. To Jason's delight, some enterprising local vendors had wheeled carts into the Adventure Society campus that magically expanded into food stalls, creating an impromptu food market. Since he and Rufus were still waiting for Farrah to emerge, they roamed around, sampling local delicacies.

The streets were lit up not just with plain street lights but different coloured glow stones that painted the primarily white stone buildings and tropical plants. The Adventure Society campus had plenty of wide boulevards and open spaces, which the people and the vendors gave a festival atmosphere.

"It's good that people are enjoying themselves," Rufus said. "If Dawn's warnings hold true, there are dark days for all of us ahead."

"Nope," Jason said. "I've had quite enough of dark days, thank you very much. If the Builder and his creepy steampunk cyborgs want to make things crappy for people, they need to go through me. I'm appointing myself the defender of cheerfulness, friendly barbecues and nice afternoon naps. You have to help, by the way."

"I'll do my best," Rufus said with a chuckle.

"They said Farrah should be out within an hour or two," Jason said. "They're waiting on more information from the Magic Society, though, and I have to imagine that delays are more likely than not with all these people swamping the admin staff."

"I fear you're right," Rufus said.

"Why is it so crowded?" Jason asked. "The monster surge announcement is only hours old. Do even the locals get only a day to sign up?"

"No, they get more leeway," Rufus said. "They still want to get registered as quickly as possible, though."

"They want first pick of contracts while everyone else is still signing up?"

"That's part of it," Rufus said. "The real prize is the contributions leaderboard. Did they explain that to you?"

"Is that like action quotas?" Jason asked. "They explained those."

"Action quotas are the minimum requirements every adventurer has to fulfil during the monster surge," Rufus said. "The contribution board is an incentive system to keep us going beyond our quotas. All the contracts you take over and above your quota are assigned a contribution point value. Contribution points are tallied on weekly and overall

leaderboards, with rewards given out at the end of each week and then major rewards at the end. And those rewards are worth going for.”

“So, it’s not all about duty, then.”

“It would be nice if every adventurer did their part because that’s what being an adventurer is. Not everyone is your friend, Humphrey, though. A little incentive goes a long way, and the incentives on offer aren’t that little. All the major societies, associations and governments give out hefty rewards during a monster surge. Of course, they get benefits as well. They all have interests that need protection and in return for their generosity, the Adventure Society assigns high contribution point values to the contracts that provide that protection.”

“Don’t the big guilds monopolise the top of these leaderboards?”

“They do,” Rufus said, “but that’s okay. Guilds are looking for more esoteric rewards than cash or magic items. They want access to civic services. Organisational benefits from the Adventure Society, Magic Society, Alchemy Association and the like. Material rewards don’t mean much to the top guilds because they’re already able to get their hands on anything money can buy.”

“I get it,” Jason said. “All the material rewards are lower-rung prizes.”

“Exactly,” Rufus said. “They land right where the small-time guilds and independent adventurers can get their hands on them. Plus, the guilds earn their rewards. Not only do they need to reach the highest points on the contributions but they have the highest quotas to beat before they even get on those boards.”

Jason and Rufus were eating deep-fried sausages on sticks.

“In a city like this,” Rufus continued, gesticulating with his food, “about three in ten adventurers are in a guild. One in ten is in what’s considered a high-end guild. And that’s not even counting all the outside adventurers coming in that make their numbers an even smaller slice of the adventurer pie. Yet guilds are given sixty percent of the quotas to fill. Guild adventurers enjoy more privileges than their independent counterparts but the monster surge is when every adventurer pays back. No exceptions. The guilds will be wringing themselves dry over the coming weeks.”

Jason was peering at his half-eaten deep-fried sausage on a stick.

“This meat is pretty great,” he said. “It’s like a saveloy except it doesn’t taste like the animal died in vain.”

“This isn’t meat,” Rufus said. “It’s made of vegetables.”

“This is made of vegetables?” Jason asked, pointing at his food. “This thing here.”

“Yes,” Rufus confirmed. “It’s a mash sausage.”

“There are vegetables here that taste like this?” Jason asked, shaking his head. “I like ratatouille as much as the next guy but my world got ripped off. Vegans would love it here.”

“What’s a vegan?”

“They need to let Farrah out,” Rufus said, sounding bloated. “At this point, I’m fairly certain I’ve eaten my body weight in food.”

“Let’s hear it for converting organic material into autonomically mutable biomass,” Jason said. “Were those dumplings sweet or savoury?”

“Both,” Rufus said.

“As in, they have both sweet and savoury dumplings, or each dumpling is somehow both sweet and savoury? Actually, don’t spoil the surprise.”

Even in the small hours of the morning, the area around the main administration was still full of people. While Jason was waiting in line for dumplings, Farrah was released from the sealed underground complex of the Builder response team and contacted them via voice chat. She, like Jason, had been stuck eating spirit coins for most of the last two years and took to the food stalls with the same enthusiasm he had.

“You never used to mind living on spirit coins,” Rufus said.

“You never used to wax your head,” Farrah shot back before happily biting into a grilled sandwich.

“I don’t wax my…”

Rufus shook his head in resignation.

“What are we doing now?” he said, firmly changing the topic. “This city might be lively at all hours but that doesn’t make this a great time to go hunting for a place to stay.”

“We’ll hit the water,” Jason said. “We can stay in the boat overnight while we travel to Arnote and find a place in the morning. Then we can just portal back to Livaros to take contracts.”

“Or shop,” Farrah said. “I’m surprised you haven’t run off to grab some crystal wash, Jason.”

“I do have some self-control, you know.”

Rufus and Farrah shared a look.

“What?” Jason asked them.

“Jason,” Rufus said. “What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything.”

They both gave Jason a flat look.

“I didn't do anything,” he said again. “I'm just glad people are so open to magic in this city.”

“What does that mean?” Farrah asked.

After Shade turned into a shadow boat that carried them out onto the sea, Jason had used the cloud flask to create a yacht. Shade took the helm was steering them towards the island of Arnote. Jason and Farrah were enjoying the luxuries of the cloud vessel, many of which were unusual to Rufus.

“I'm not sure I understand this music,” Rufus said. “Why are people shouting at this pale boy to play music?”

“To change rock 'n' rolling minds,” Farrah explained. “It's a self-explanatory song.”

“Exactly how thorough was the Adventure Society's identity check?” Rufus asked, narrowing his eyes at her.

While Rufus was familiar with the many amenities of Emir's cloud flask constructs, and while Jason's lacked many of the same, it did boast some that Emir's did not. This was a result of feeding the cloud flask elements only available in Jason's world, including quite a lot of technology quintessence.

The result of this was a variety of effects that could be replicated with magic but were made more convenient with a technological aspect. For example, the extensive media collection in Jason and Farrah's recording crystals could be accessed via menu screens. As Farrah and Rufus were catching up while Farrah shared her new musical tastes, Jason was on the upper deck, laying out a magical diagram.

One of Jason's happy discoveries in his short time on Livaros was that such a cosmopolitan magical city was open to all manner of unusual situations. This included shadowy familiars being seen as perfectly acceptable customers, so long as they had the power to communicate and sufficient coin. In the time Jason had been dealing with the Adventure Society, Shade had been roaming the city's night markets. Along with other critical supplies, he had been purchasing the required materials to resummon Jason's familiar, Gordon.

In Rimaros, finding the materials to summon any silver-rank familiar was a question of money, rather than time. Jason had looted his way through proto-astral spaces, monster surges and transformation zones, the more numerous and high-rank of which came after he stopped supplying the Network with funds. As a result, Jason's coffers were, relative to a silver-ranker, at Scrooge McDuck levels of overflowing.

Monster surges represented a specific economic cycle. While the surges were costly to communities, the rebuilding afterwards was always a stimulus. Governments funded the rebuilding, the money largely sourced from special services offered to adventurers and the Adventure Society. With the increased looting opportunities that surges brought, there was no shortage of demand for such services.

Jason had been going through what amounted to concentrated private monster surges for years. Outside of family wealth, only a gold-ranker who had been operating for a decade could compete with Jason's current prosperity.

Colin, in the form of a Jason look-alike blood clone, was standing next to one of Shade's bodies as they watched Jason prepare to reunite their little family. Jason carefully completed the ritual circle and chanted out the incantation.

"When worlds end, you are the arbiter. When gods fall, you are the instrument. Herald of annihilation, come forth and be my harbinger. I have doom to bring."

Under the night sky on open water, the stars were bright. The city island of Livaros was beautiful at night with its cornucopia of lights, but without the light pollution, the sky was a sea of twinkling lights, ruled by the twin moons.

As Jason completed his ritual, the light of the moon and stars dimmed as darkness shrouded the boat. Eventually, the light was fully expunged, only Jason's power to see through darkness allowing him to see. Two motes of light appeared over the ritual circle, one orange and one blue. More lights appeared, slowly at first but accelerating until the individual motes became a cascade of blue and orange radiance. It swirled together to take the form of an eye-like nebula that was a match for the ones in Jason's eyes. Finally, the light coalesced into Jason's last familiar, a dark cloak draped over the nebula and orbited by smaller nebula eyes. Jason broke into a huge grin.

"Welcome home, mate."

In the early light of morning, the cloud yacht was approaching the island of Arnote. Jason was on the deck cooking breakfast with ingredients that Shade had picked up in the night markets of Livaros.

"Fair warning," he told the lounging Rufus and Farrah, "I don't know what most of this stuff is, so it's going to be trial and error for a while."

The Sea of Storms was calm, as was normal in any part of it not being subjected to the magical weather for which it was named. After breakfast, as the cloud yacht pulled into a small port, Jason stretched his arms out lazily, finally feeling like himself again. Eating

actual food, fresh from a crystal wash shower and with trusted companions by his side, he felt at home on this unfamiliar sea in a way he never had on Earth.

Miles Cotezee looked up as Humphrey and his team, plus hangers-on in Gary and Jory filled up his office.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve asked me to do for you?” he said without preamble. “How busy I am right now?”

They had returned to Vitesse aboard a Builder airship they casually picked up along the way, which the Magic Society had been very happy to take off their hands. They had immediately started scooping up contracts that others had passed over for being a pain, portalling around to clear a half dozen of them in two days.

Their behaviour made it obvious that they had wanted something from the outset, with Miles the one they sought to get it through. Travel dispensation to an as-yet-undisclosed location during a monster surge was no small request.

“Asking for a status update on a dead team member is weird,” Miles said without preamble. “And another from your team, Mr Xandier, which involved some administrative hoops, given your inactive status with the Adventure Society. Fortunately, your prompt registration for the monster surge brought you some goodwill in the eyes of the society.”

“You have news?” Humphrey asked.

“You know, Humphrey, I thought you took after your father, seeming like such a sensible young man. It turns out that you’re your mother’s son after all.”

“He asked if you have news,” Sophie said, placing both hands on the desk sitting between them.

“Calm down, Sophie,” Miles told her. “It does seem that you are right. Your dead team members have arisen from the grave and are alive and well in Rimaros, in the Sea of Storms.”

The group shared looks of relief and joy.

“I made another discovery along with information, though. Mr Xandier, your other team member has registered his participation in the monster surge in Rimaros, alongside the other two.”

“Rufus is there already?” Gary said. “How?”

“You now know as much as I do,” Miles said.

“Rimaros is the other side of the planet,” Clive said.

“Yes,” Miles said. “Which makes obtaining a travel dispensation quite the task.”

“Is there anything you can do?” Humphrey asked.

“Of course there is,” Miles said. “It’s me. Clive, the operation that was delayed when you were sent away is not only back on but has been given priority. You pull this off with the kind of success you outlined in your initial proposal and I can get you your dispensation. You’ll have to travel by airship, though. I can’t shake loose a gold-rank portal user for this. Not even your mother, Humphrey.”

Humphrey nodded.

“I haven’t even seen her since we got back,” he said. “They’re keeping her busy.”

“So we just have to do whatever Clive was up to before we all met up?” Neil asked.

“Yes,” Miles said. “The remnants of the church of Purity have been quiet for years but we’re anticipating a big move from them during the monster surge. The society is looking for ways to hit them before they hit us and your plan, Clive, is one of many proposals being put into action. The new priority comes with a new caveat, however.”

“Meaning?” Clive asked.

“The society wants a three-star silver in charge of it and none of you are higher than two. Someone else will be in charge of your team for the course of the operation.”

Chapter 473

Small-Town Lifestyle

Jason's yacht arrived at the narrow reef passage to a lagoon on the island of Arnote. Normally inaccessible to large water vehicles, the cloud vessel had no problem skimming over obstructions that would ground vessels with all but the most shallow of drafts.

Jason, Rufus and Farrah stood on the yacht's bow as it moved into the lagoon, taking in the postcard-perfect circle of white sand and turquoise water. To their left, pristine sands curved halfway around the lagoon. There they met the base of the cliffs that ringed the other half of the lagoon's span.

Behind the beach was a town that rose up over low hills, with colourful houses set amongst palm trees and lush greenery exploding with tropical flowers. The cliffs weren't a sheer drop. Instead, it boasted more plants and trees, with winding pathways offering passage from the beach to the houses built along the cliff top. A waterfall spilled over the edge, tumbling down over the rocks to join the water of the lagoon.

"I told you right?" Jason said. "You can't go wrong with a lagoon."

"It is very nice," Rufus acknowledged. "A little quiet."

"We've earned some quiet," Farrah said.

"Yes, we have," Jason agreed.

Children were playing on the beach, their parents watching over them. They stopped to watch the boat, much larger than most vessels that entered their lagoon. The kids understood that a boat that big meant magic and magic meant excitement. Not everyone was looking for quiet.

There was only one pier, which was far too small for the yacht to even pull alongside. What room there was had already been occupied by a handful of shallow-draft boats and a couple of magical water skimmers. Jason placed the cloud flask down to reclaim the yacht and opened a portal to the pier, allowing Farrah, Rufus and himself to step through.

Jason glanced over at the beach, smiling as the parents stopped the kids from rushing over to harass the unknown adventurers. A laconic middle-aged man came strolling along the pier, biting into a piece of fruit in his hand. Like most of the local celestines, he had caramel skin. His lanky hair was the colour of iron, matching his eyes and his iron-rank aura. He was wearing only a pair of shorts and a straw hat.

He stopped in front of the trio, looking from them to the yacht dissolving behind them. It was being drawn back into the cloud flask like a genie returning to its lamp.

"Adventurers, then?" he drawled.

“That’s us,” Jason said. “Looking for a nice, quiet place to settle in for the surge.”

“If it’s nice and quiet you’re after, you’ve come to the right place,” he said. “Just make sure that is what you’re after, yeah?”

“We’ll get more excitement than we’re looking for on the job,” Jason said. “We want a place where we can leave all that behind. I’m Jason; this is Farrah and Rufus.”

The man swapped the fruit to his left hand to shake hands with Jason. “Emmett Dillivan, but folks just call me Argy.”

“Argy?”

“Like the fruit,” Argy said, waggling his half-eaten fruit in front of him. It looked like a large tangerine. “My family’s grown them here longer than most can remember. Sell ‘em at markets all over the island. Including here in Palisaros, if you’re interested.”

“Believe that he is,” Farrah said. “Palisaros is the name of your lovely town?”

“You didn’t know before you came here?” Argy asked.

“This one was just obsessed with finding a lagoon,” Rufus said, thumbing a gesture at Jason.

“And it was completely worth it,” Jason said. “It’s a genuine paradise you’ve got here, Argy.”

Argy chuckled.

“It is at that,” he agreed.

“I don’t suppose you know where a bloke could lease or even buy a plot?” Jason asked.

“You’ll want to talk to Pelli,” Argy said. “Once you’re done with your ship in a bottle, I’ll take you along.”

“Oh, we can head off now,” Jason said. “It’ll get picked up once it’s done. Is Pelli the local land broker?”

“Mayor,” Argy said. “She has been since before my family started growing fruit.”

Argy led them down the pier and into the town. Farrah and Rufus were largely silent as Jason and Argy chatted, forming an easy rapport, Jason happily falling into Argy’s laconic pace.

Argy led them onto streets that were sealed with something that felt like asphalt but was more on an earthy light brown colour, flecked with white. Argy exchanged greetings with people dressed in light clothes, with loose shirts and sarongs the norm for both men and women. There were also plenty of skimpier clothes in evidence, with many men wearing only shorts and woman in shorts or sarongs and bikini-style tops. Footwear was either none or sandals and many had straw hats like Argy’s.

None of the people were using transport, magical or otherwise. It was a small-town lifestyle with none of the residents in any kind of rush. Compared to Livaros, even more busy than usual with the impending monster surge, the town Palimaros was laidback and inviting.

Jason sensed a handful of silver and gold-ranked auras around the town but the people on the street were mostly normals, or irons and bronze-rank, core users. The other auras noticed the presence of Jason and his companions as well, none of whom were hiding their presence or power. The people were mostly caramel-skinned celestines with hair and eyes in various shades of gemstones and metal.

Argy played tour guide as they walked, pointing out the saloon and town eateries, as well as where to find the market. The colourful houses were two or three storeys high and big on open space with covered walkways, balconies and awnings abounding. Jason's senses picked up that they all had magical amenities, while some hid more impressive magic. Like the disguised versions of constructs from his cloud flask, they were more than what they appeared.

As they made their way up a meandering hill, Shade emerged from Jason's shadow and handed over the cloud flask, having retrieved it after it completely absorbed the boat.

"Thank you," Jason said as the flask shrank small enough in his hands to be returned to the chain around his neck.

Reaching the house at the top, Jason's senses revealed it to not be one of the more magical ones. What he did sense was the gold rank core user behind it.

Although many looked down on those who rank up through monster cores, a gold-ranker who did so was impressive in their own way. The level of resources required to reach that stage was immense. On Jason's world, only a handful had managed it, even with whole nations dedicating themselves to the effort.

Argy didn't bother to knock or even approach the front door, directly leading the others around the outside. Moving behind the house to the garden, they found a woman crouched down, working in a vegetable garden with rich, dark soil. She had her back to them at their approach, which she didn't acknowledge. Argy stopped, gesturing the others to do the same and stood to wait patiently. Jason, Rufus and Farrah were smart enough to do the same.

It was another celestine, this one with sapphire blue hair tied back behind her head. It was an unusual colouration amongst the locals but one Jason had seen a couple of times before. The female gold-ranker in the anti-Builder taskforce had it, as did the princess, Zara Rimaros.

Eventually, the woman stood up, trowel in hand, before turning to look over the group. She has the youthful appearance of an essence user but Jason felt a profound age in those eyes. The way they looked at him reminded him of Dawn.

“Emmet boy,” she said, her elderly tone incongruous with her young face and voice. “What are you doing bringing adventurers into my yard?”

“They’re looking for a place to stay through the surge,” Argy told her. “Nice and quiet is what they said.”

“Step forward, then,” she said to Jason, Farrah and Rufus. “Let’s have a look at you.”

The trio formed a line in front of the woman. She started by looking over Farrah and giving her an approving nod. Then she looked at Rufus, her gaze settling on his face.

“You look a lot like your grandfather,” she told him.

“You know my grandfather?” Rufus asked.

“That old bastard has been running around longer than I have. Still, shouldn’t hold that against you. He teach you proper, boy?”

“I’ve done my best to learn from him, ma’am.”

“The name’s Pelli and I’ll thank you to use it,” she said sharply. “How did he take you being a magic swordsman, rather than a swordsman straight up?”

“My father already fought that battle, ma’am... Pelli,” Rufus said.

“I see. I heard he’d mellowed after he took over some little guild somewhere.”

“Vitesse.”

“Well, no accounting for taste.”

She turned her attention to Jason, looking him up and down. Her eyes lingered on where the large scar on his torso was hidden by his shirt.

“Aren’t you just the tough little nut,” she said. “You’ve seen some action, boy. Real action.”

She didn’t ask Jason anything so he decided to stay silent. She nodded.

“Are you going to bring trouble to my island, boy?”

“I’m looking for a place to leave trouble behind,” he told her.

“And why here?”

“I grew up in a little beach town,” he said. “Not as nice as yours, but I had the chance to go back for a while a couple of years ago. It was a nice few months, before life came calling again. It was the last bit of peace I’ve had in a while.”

“And what happened to your little town when less peaceful things came knocking at your door?”

"I saw it protected and left it behind before anything came looking for me. The town was fine when a lot of other places weren't so lucky."

Pelli nodded.

"That was your cloud flask boat down there?" she asked.

"It was."

"You won't be needing a house, then; just a patch. Won't be a problem if it's a little difficult, yes?"

"That'll be fine," Jason said.

"What's your name, boy?"

"Jason Asano."

She burst out laughing, surprising all present, even Argy.

"Oh, this'll be fun," she said. "Emmett, boy, take them up the clifftop. They can have the west side of the waterfall."

"Yes, Pelli," Argy said, throwing curious glances at Jason.

Argy led the others back down the hill, through the town and up onto the cliffs. Although there were roads, he took them down to the beach and then up through the forested cliff-face pathway and its impressive views of the lagoon.

"This is a gorgeous town you have here," Jason told Argy.

"We like it," Argy said. "How is it that Pelli knew your name, Jason?"

"Not sure," Jason said. "Until yesterday, I hadn't set foot on this side of the planet."

"You have no idea?" Rufus asked.

"I didn't say no idea," Jason told him. "I said not sure."

The cliff-side path led up to the neighbourhood that spread inland from the clifftop.

"This is the fancy part of town," Argy explained. The houses here were slightly bigger and Jason sensed more magic from them, but they didn't look substantially different from the others. "If you go back far enough you reach the royal estate. It's all walled off and you can only really get a glimpse of the grounds from the outside. You see them around town from time to time but mostly they keep to themselves."

"That's one of the side branches right?" Farrah asked.

"Wouldn't presume to say," Argy said. "Just watch your manners if you see anyone with blue hair."

"Like Pelli," Rufus said.

"Yeah," Argy said. "She's probably got some blood ties to the royal family but no one's brave or stupid enough to ask."

Argy led them to a path that followed the clifftop edge, accessible to all the houses running along it. The adventurers could sense some kind of magic at the very edge of the cliff.

“There's magic to keep people from falling off?” Farrah asked.

“Kids and booze exist,” Argy told her. “We find it's for the best.”

There weren't any fences between houses and yards ran one into another. There were plenty of people outside, including a lot of children playing with pets or each other. Most of the pets were a breed of dog that looked like short-haired golden retrievers, but there were also playful lizards, six-legged rabbits and what looked like large otters.

Argy exchanged waved greetings as they went until they arrived at an area of long grass beside the river that spilled over the cliff to the lagoon below.

The river was about twenty metres across and had children splashing about with their pets. They looked upstream to where the river came out of the higher hills to split the neighbourhood in two. The halves of the small residential district were connected by a bridge and, further along, they could see a house that spanned the river itself, the water running beneath it.

“I like that house,” Jason said.

“Mr Warnock's,” Argy said. “Adventurer, like you all, but gold-rank. Nice fella, though. Don't look down on people, you know? Your spot is on the other side of the river.”

Argy pointed across the water.

“Are you folks right to cross here or should we head to the bridge?”

“We're fine,” Rufus said. As silver-rankers, they could levitate themselves so long as they were able to concentrate without interruption. They floated over the river while Argy walked over the water using some manner of essence ability.

On the far side was another open patch of long grass, but most of it was occupied by a fenced-off area in the middle. The metal bars of the fence prevented children from falling into the large hole in the ground but Jason could sense the barrier was a magic item producing an unseen magical dome.

“Cave goes into the cliff and out behind the waterfall,” Argy explained. “Pelli had a magic barrier put in because the older kids were always daring each other to go down and getting themselves hurt. Broke my own leg, back in the day. Got me a kiss from Trudi Willix, so I'm going to say worth it.”

Jason walked to the edge of the cliff, Rufus and Farrah following. They looked out over the lagoon and out at the ocean beyond. Jason did something he hadn't done in a

long time and took a deep breath. He wasn't even sure how, given his body no longer had lungs, but the warm air mixed with cool ocean breeze was a balm to the soul.

"This will do just nicely."

Chapter 474

I Don't Need to Invent Ice Cream

The kids playing in the river spotted Farrah disabling the magical barrier around the hole in the ground and came ashore to watch her uproot the fence.

"You can fix that afterwards, right?" Rufus asked.

"Easily," Farrah said. "It's designed to be easy to maintain, so I'm not damaging it at all."

When she was done, Jason set down the cloud flask which started spilling out cloud-stuff to slowly form his new cloud house right over the hole.

The three adults watched as one of the bolder children, egged on by her friends, came up to touch the cloud stuff as it was taking shape. She giggled as the cloud stuff passed through her fingers and shortly after, the children were charging at the walls and springing off like it was a bouncy castle. They only stopped when the house was complete and solidified into a shape that matched the surrounding houses. This drew a chorus of boos from the children.

While the house was forming, the neighbours, keeping an eye on the kids, had come out to take stock of Jason and the others. The presence of Argy and Jason's friendliness quickly smoothed out any friction and they went away anticipating a neighbourhood barbecue.

"We only have so much time to make preparations," Rufus said. "It will only take a few days for the rising magical saturation to start triggering manifestations in earnest. As for the Builder's forces, who knows how or when they'll arrive?"

Farrah nodded.

"We need to gear up first," she said. "We've been making do with what items we could loot, make or trade but Greenstone was bad enough and Earth was worse. Now we can finally get some equipment befitting our rank."

"Alright," Jason said. "Let's take a little tour of the new homestead, grab some lunch at the market then portal back to Livaros."

They thanked Argy, who promised to spread the word about the barbecue.

"Tomorrow night, then," Argy said. "You are going to have enough food, right?"

"I was more thinking just some of the neighbours," Jason said to Rufus and Farrah as he waved at Argy walking off into the distance. "I get the feeling I should check out that market, maybe stock up the food supply a little more."

They went inside the cloud house, which was not disguised as a normal building on the inside and was overtly made from luxurious cloud stuff. Although still primarily cloud white, the supplemental colours had some differences to what Rufus was used to from Emir's cloud buildings.

"Yours doesn't have quite the same sunset colours," he said as they walked through the house. "There are darker areas and the colours are a lot like your new eyes."

"Emir told me that each cloud flask will become different over time," Jason said. "They're bonded to the owners, who also make their own supplemental changes. Plus, mine is a little more bonded than most."

During his time on Earth, Jason had looted a vast number of quintessence gems. This was especially true in the latter stages of his time there when the loot was higher rank and he had stopped supplying the Network. Much of that quintessence had been fed right into the cloud flask and he had yet to test the full breadth of its capabilities.

The idea of replicating a mirage chamber was especially appealing now that Jason has Rufus on hand. He was certain that Rufus could help him master the combat trance and a mirage chamber would be perfect. Adding a mirage chamber to the cloud flask's capabilities was not yet possible, however, and would have significant drawbacks once it was.

Emir had given Jason a thick notebook with all his knowledge and experience from owning a cloud flask, which had been of immense help. This was how Jason knew a mirage chamber function was possible, if troublesome. The cloud flask would need to be gold-rank before it could handle the level of sophisticated magic involved in the complex simulation programming a mirage chamber required. Jason likening it to the CPU needing an upgrade.

Even if it were viable, it would require a vast amount of rare and high-rank quintessence, along with numerous other rare and expensive materials. Beyond the upfront costs, replicating the mirage chamber effect was extremely energy-intensive.

Outside of low-magic zones, where mirage chambers were rare and privately held, it was more feasible to simply rent one. Even then, it still wasn't a good option. Emir spent a year in Greenstone, yet had not added a mirage chamber to his cloud flask's functionality. He had training rooms with cloud-dummy opponents that were good enough that it wasn't worth the extra effort and expense.

Jason's cloud flask was already different to Emir's, with even the usage over time impacting its development. Emir preferred grandiose displays of overt magic and his cloud

flask constructs were huge and eye-catching. Jason's, even in grand palace mode didn't match the size of Emir's.

At first, Jason had thought this was a function of rank, with his silver-rank flask not matching up to Emir's gold. As he forged a deeper bond with the flask, though, he came to realise that the way he used it was shaping it over time. Jason had almost always employed the camouflage variant and it had become increasingly flexible and responsive in matching both the local environment and Jason's desires. Each time he created a new vehicle or abode, now, it was like everything in it was exactly how he'd wanted it without consciously considering it.

This was true once again as Jason and his companions checked out the latest cloud construct that would be their home, at least for a while. There were a lot more bedrooms than they needed, which Farrah pointed out.

"Our teams are going to find us eventually," Jason explained, realising the cloud flask had responded to his desire for a reunion with his friends.

"Jory will most likely be with them," Rufus said. "I'm surprised you didn't set up an alchemy lab that only makes crystal wash."

"I don't think I've put in the right quintessence in for that," Jason said. "I still have a long way to go before catching up to Emir on that front. I managed to shovel a lot of stuff in but most of it was of low or mid-rank. Earth is only just coming into real magic. I did manage to dump in some higher-end stuff later on but it was fairly specific to where I picked it up."

"The second transformation zone?" Farrah asked.

"Yeah," Jason said. "Besides, I can't have Jory turn up and immediately put him to the grindstone. I went ahead and made other arrangements."

"Jason, what did you do?" Farrah asked.

"And when did you do it?" Rufus asked. "I was with you from the moment you left the Adventure Society building."

"Shade is as eloquent and distinguished an agent as a person could ask for," Jason said.

"Thank you, Mr Asano," Shade said from Jason's shadow.

"If anything," Jason said, "it's better sending him to get things done than going in person."

"Jason," Farrah said. "Remember the laying low plan?"

"It's fine," Jason assured her. "I've been careful. I remembered something Clive told me about a long time ago that would keep me from making a splash."

“Shade, I think he’s ruining you,” Farrah said.

“Don’t bother,” Rufus told her with a laugh. “There’s no coming between an adventurer and their familiar.”

Rufus was surprised at the dark expression that covered Jason and Farrah’s faces, not knowing they were thinking of Noreth. The ambiguous antagonist had once been a familiar that turned on his adventurer, setting in motion events that, centuries later, led to a death toll of millions.

"Let's move on," Farrah suggested and they explored the unique feature of the house that came from the environment. There was an elevating platform that descended into the cave at a slight angle. Rather than seal off the natural walls, the house had left them on full display and illuminating them with colourful lights.

The platform carried them down to a larger cavern that opened out behind the waterfall. The cloud house created a soft, level floor, and Jason could feel an invisible mist below the ceiling that wicked away any moisture that would otherwise drop into the room. The natural walls and ceiling were on full display and, like the cave shaft, lit up with multicoloured lights. The cavern had been made into a bar and dining lounge with cloud furniture, although Jason could reconfigure the room at will. The furniture was laid out to make the waterfall opening the focus of the room, the sunlight sparkling through the water like diamonds.

“I think we found the VIP room,” Jason said.

The island city of Livaros was rich in both magic and people. Like many such cities, it had several open squares set aside for teleportation and portal arrivals. While the arrival of a portal was not inherently dangerous, it was potentially disruptive and could lead to accidents. Using such means of travel to arrive in public spaces other than portal squares was prohibited.

When he had registered at the Adventure Society, Jason had been given an item that would give a visual indication at the Livaros portal squares before his portal opened there. The market district portal square lit up with bright silver light before Jason’s portal arch rose from the ground and he stepped out, followed by Farrah and Rufus. Rufus took a moment to shake off the disorientation of dimensional travel that neither Jason nor Farrah felt, being outworlders with a shared affinity for astral energy.

“So, shopping,” Jason said. “We can keep in contact with party chat and meet up before we head over to the jobs hall. If you don’t have anything to buy, Rufus, get an ice cream or something.”

“What’s an ice cream?” Rufus asked.

A look of panic crossed Farrah’s face.

“Jason, you have to invent ice cream. You do know how to make ice cream, right?”

“I don’t need to invent ice cream; this world has it already. I had something a lot like qulfi when I was in Jayapura. I have to imagine there are variants of ice cream all over.”

Her shoulders slumped with relief.

“Since when do you care so much about food?” Rufus asked her.

“You can eat spirit coins if you like,” Farrah told him. “I’ve lived in the land of refined sugar.”

Farrah's dimensional bags were laden with her share of the spirit coins they looted on Earth. She had fought far fewer monsters than Jason, having worked on the grid while he was clearing proto-spaces. She had also missed both transformation zones but Jason never bothered to count up and just gave her half.

As she roamed about the shops of Livaros catering specifically to adventurers, she had specific goals in mind.

Farrah and Humphrey filled the same role, that of brawler. High durability melee attackers, their purpose was to dish out damage while being able to take an amount of punishment in return. Their power sets had differences, with Farrah having a variety of mid to long-range attacks while Humphrey had higher mobility, but on any team, their position would be to both give and take heavy hits.

Once they started to supplement themselves with items, their differences in approaching the same role became increasingly apparent. Because items, unlike power, were purchased and could be changed, they had a level of flexibility and, with sufficient money, the wearer could even use multiple equipment sets to modify the way they filled their role.

This was an expensive endeavour, leading to most adventurers gearing up to enhance the direction their powers already lead. Belinda was a victim of this with her focus on adopting various roles. Not only did she need a lot of equipment but ideally, the equipment would be good enough to help compensate always being an imitation of the real thing.

Both Humphrey and Farrah combined durability with excellent attack power and the ability to operate at different ranges, either through mobility or ranged attacks. All of that came at the price of endurance, their mana and stamina unable to sustain them for long at full power.

The items they sought out highlighted their different responses to this shared weakness, shaped by their specific powers and circumstances. For Humphrey, his team offered both exceptional mana recovery and accelerated ability cooldowns. He leaned into this and equipped items that would accelerate his mana and stamina recovery. This allowed him to extend his impactful presence in battle and bring some much-needed reliability to the team.

Where Humphrey sought to mitigate the weakness, Farrah sought to enhance her strength. She had a handful of passive powers that amplified her basic attacks to levels that were acceptable, if not ideal. She generally used these to keep her true might in reserve for when it was needed most. In critical moments she would explode with power, unleashing overwhelming eruptions of damage.

She doubled-down on this by picking up items that either boosted ordinary attacks or offered significant but short-lived power amplification. Her mana and stamina items were powerful and immediate, at the cost of less sustained recovery.

Farrah's approach was the best fit for her powers and a good match for how adventurers operated in Rimaros. The local adventurers valued those who excelled in highly specific roles, even if that specificity came at a cost.

Rufus did buy himself some upgraded equipment. Having spent most of the last few years in Greenstone he had neither the opportunity nor the need for quality silver-rank equipment. Rimaros during a monster surge was a very different story. He had less to buy than Farrah or Jason, though, and took the time to casually wander the market. At a nearby stall, he overheard another variation of the conversation he'd heard a half-dozen times already.

"No, I wanted a whole case."

"I don't have a whole case; I have six bottles. That's the price for six bottles."

"Yesterday, that was the price for a whole case."

"Yesterday I had a whole case."

"You told me that you had a barrel of the stuff."

"Yesterday I did. I'm not responsible for your lack of decisiveness."

"Who bought a whole barrel?"

"I don't know. Some lord brokered it through the Alchemy Association, and it wasn't just me. If you want a crate's worth, I suggest you grab what people have on shelf right now. It'll be lean pickings until people get their next batches from the vats. Don't expect it

any cheaper than here, though. I'm only offering you this because you married my ex-wife."

"Can I get a discount if I give her back?"

"Do that and I charge you double."

"You're already charging me double."

"Yeah, well it'll be double-double."

"Do you mean quadruple?"

"Shut your smart mouth!"

"You know, this is why Ella left you..."

Rufus shook his head and moved on.

Chapter 475

Remaining Unremarkable

While Farrah could easily slip into the role of a specialist, Jason could not do so as easily. No amount of items would turn him into the plague cannon the locals wanted in their affliction specialists, able to blanket groups or burn down individuals with equal ease, usually at range from behind the safety of allies, summons or both.

One of the reasons Jason had seen so few affliction specialists was that Greenstone was primarily a human city and few humans pursued that path. Their aptitude for special attacks meant that an affliction specialist would often end up forced into melee.

Jason wasn't even human and was familiar with that challenge. Elves and Runic were the most common affliction wielders, as their predilection for spells made a ranged power set much more likely. If Jason tried to be an affliction specialist in the Rimaros style, from behind a wall of allies, he would only justify his second-rate status by leaving most of his abilities unused.

When gearing himself up, Jason didn't even try to pander to local sensibilities. He believed in the way that Rufus, Farrah and Gary had trained him and he wasn't going to turn away from that to play half-cooked adventurer.

With his plethora of conjured and growth items, Jason had little use for more permanent items to enhance his general combat style. The only item he desired was the sword Rufus told him Gary had already reforged. Items Jason had enjoyed in the past, like the boots that enhanced his jumping, had been made largely unnecessary by his silver-rank attributes and abilities. As such, his item purchases were very much based on the idea of conditional use.

For Jason, battle was about adaptation. Rather than going for fixed items, he stocked up on consumables that he could match to his needs in any given moment. First amongst these was a healthy collection of silver-rank throwing darts with various single-use effects. While not as cost-effective as the lower-rank variants that Jason could make himself, those were no longer good enough at his current rank. Buying from a capable artificer gave him a more powerful, varied and reliable selection.

Jason made more purchases along the same lines, from magical explosives to an array of potions that could potentially come in handy. Jason was confident in any circumstance for which his powers were suited, so he focused on contingencies for circumstances that weren't.

Standing in an alchemy stall with a bag of potions in hand, Jason's mind was drawn back to his first proper fight with a silver-ranker. He and his team had fought the Purity Archbishop, Nicolas Hendren, who had carried on him a similar bag full of silver-rank potions. It had been an incredibly difficult battle, the silver-ranker seeming almost immortal in the face of Jason's bronze-rank team. It reminded Jason that the essence users of this world were so much more dangerous than those of Earth and he resolved again not to underestimate any opponents he might face.

Jason's consumable expenditure was rather excessive, made possible by his significant wealth and the dimensional storage his inventory offered, but he always wore a potion belt to keep critical potions in easy reach. He bought a new silver-rank potion belt to protect potions he wore from incidental damage.

"That colour matches your conjured robes very well, sir," the shop attendant told him.

"My only concern is function," Jason insisted. "I only conjured my robes to test the fit."

"Of course, sir."

"Show me the black one again."

The potion belt was not the only permanent item he purchased, but the others all fell under his doctrine of conditional use. Being in the Sea of Storms, he splurged on several powerful items designed to aid fighting underwater or in heavy storm conditions. This was hardly an uncommon choice, so there were plenty of such items available, although the prices were high and quickly rising. Jason was far from the only outside adventurer looking to tool up for local conditions.

Once he was done with his equipment, Jason moved on to more important matters. Leaving the market, Shade guided him to a nearby and very busy warehousing district. It serviced both the craftsman quarter and the marketing district he had just left behind.

There was a bustle of activity as wagons and carts, magical and heidel-drawn, carried about large quantities of goods. Some wagons were even floating through the air, although they always remained over the streets. Jason assumed this was due to some manner of air traffic regulation.

Arriving at a small warehouse, Jason waited out of the way, hidden in shadow until a magically driven carriage arrived and stopped in the yard outside the large freight doors of the warehouse. A man with a bronze-rank aura and finely tailored but unostentatious clothes stepped down from the carriage and Jason emerged from the shadows to meet him, Shade at his side.

“Good day to you again, Mr Shade,” the man said with a short bow. “Mr Asano, I presume.”

“Indeed I am,” Jason said.

“Mr Asano, my name is Mr Broyles. I am employed by Lord Casowich to manage and verify his acquisitions. I come to you with his compliments.”

“Thank you, sir. Perhaps we should step inside?”

“By all means,” the butler said and opened a normal-sized door next to the large freight doors of the warehouse with a rune-engraved key. It led into a small private office.

“It’s all in there?” Jason asked, nodding in the direction of the main warehouse.

“It certainly is,” Broyles said. “My Lord is very satisfied with the item, so long as its providence can be confirmed. Once it has, I am directed to grant you access to the goods.”

“Excellent,” Jason said.

Broyles plucked a crystal from his personal dimensional space. He used it to test Jason, the crystal shining with a strong silver colour as Jason gripped it. Four markings appeared on the crystal at the same time.

“Silver rank confirmed,” Broyles said happily. “And you’ve reached the fourth threshold with all attributes, which I believe is known in adventuring circles as the wall. Congratulations, Mr Asano.”

“Thank you, Mr Broyles.”

Broyles took out another magical device, this one looking like a set of scales, with one of the two weight plates softly padded with cloth. The central stand holding the scale upright was topped with a clear crystal.

Broyles set the scale on a table and took out a small box. Opening it revealed a padded interior and a single object: what looked like a diamond in the shape of a coin. Within the coin, like ink spilled into water, was the image of a man giving a thumbs up. Broyles pulled on a pair of white gloves, took the coin and held it up, comparing it to Jason. Jason gave Broyles a thumbs up, matching the image on the coin. With a slight smile, Broyles nodded and placed the coin onto the padded weight of the scale.

“Mr Asano, if you would please place your palm on the device.”

Jason placed his hand on the unpadded plate. The crystal on the scale immediately lit up green.

“Perfect,” Broyles said, returning the coin to the small box and the box to his dimensional spaces, followed by the scale device.

“That’s everything?” Jason asked.

“That is sufficient confirmation that the diamond-rank coin was looted by a silver-rank essence user.”

“I was actually bronze at the time, but I suppose you can’t check that.”

“Sadly no,” Broyles said. “The church of Knowledge has been reluctant to hire out its clergy for the purpose of authenticating valuables. Lord Casowich has already exhausted the local temple’s indulgence on that matter. Even so, a unique coin design, a diamond-rank coin produced by even a silver-rank essence user is quite exceptional.”

Broyles frowned.

“My lord felt ethically bound to have me inform you, on confirmation of the item’s providence, that the goods you have asked for are most certainly not equal to the value of that which you have provided to him.”

Jason smiled.

“Mr Broyles, I hold that you cannot put a price on discretion and the chance to acquaint oneself with people of character and substance.”

Broyles returned the smile.

“Very good, Mr Asano.”

“I do have one question, Mr Broyles.”

“And what is that, Mr Asano.”

“The other gentleman in the room. I assume he is here to safeguard the coin and the goods, should my intentions be nefarious?”

Jason took an argy fruit from his inventory and tossed it casually over his shoulder. A man dressed in black and grey appeared and caught it.

“Fresh from the Arnote market,” Jason said. “They’re very good.”

“Mr Asano,” Broyles said, “I believe you’ve just embarrassed Mr Visk.”

Broyles moved to the door leading into the main warehouse and unlocked it with his key. Visk, keeping an eye on Jason, sat the fruit down on the desk. Jason picked it up and bit into it.

“Everything inside is yours, Mr Asano,” Broyles said. “You require no further transport for the goods?”

“I do not, Mr Broyles.”

“And you wish for us to dispose of the barrels afterwards?”

“That would be appreciated.”

“Of course, Mr Asano. If there is nothing else, then Mr Visk and I will leave you to your business. Any of the doors will open from the inside, so if you would close them behind you on your way out, that would be appreciated.”

“I’ll be sure to do so, Mr Broyles.”

Jason waited until Broyles and Visk had entered the carriage and driven off. He couldn’t sense any other observers, either auras or the magic of spying devices, although that did not mean they weren’t present. In Lord Casowich’s position, Jason would have arranged a well-hidden observer to be found and an exceptionally well-hidden observer to not be.

Jason had only revealed Visk to make a point, however, and felt no need to hide his objective. He had no doubt that Casowich had the resources to make a thorough investigation before Broyles arrived at the warehouse. He tugged the cloud flask from his neck chain and pulled a funnel from his inventory.

“Let’s get started, shall we, Shade?”

A flying manta ray swam through the air over Arnote. The creature’s skin glistened like sapphires in the sun while the air in front of it shimmered in a wedge as the creature’s magic cut through the sky. On the manta’s back was a woman whose hair was an almost exact match for the creature’s sapphire skin.

The manta hovered over the yard of a hilltop house and the rider disembarked as another woman emerged from the building. The two women had a strong resemblance, with caramel skin and vibrant blue hair.

“Vesper,” Pelli greeted.

“Ancestor,” Vesper said with a respectful bow.

“Oh, now stop with that nonsense,” Pelli said, waving her hands at Vesper. “You call me Aunt Pelli, like when you were a girl. I’m just an old core user.”

“Wisdom and experience are both deserving of respect, Aunt Pelli. You have an abundance of both.”

“So, you’re calling me old?”

“Of course not, Aunt Pelli.”

“Oh, you’re calling me very old,” Pelli said, turning and shaking her head as she started wandering away. “Abundance of experience, dear gods...”

Vesper smiled to herself as she followed Pelli around the side of the house. Being teased by the old woman brought back fond memories of days spent in Arnote as a child. Pelli led them to the front yard where they could look out over the town spread out below them and across the lagoon to the cliffs.

“That house, next to the waterfall,” Pelli pointed. Vesper’s silver-rank vision had no trouble making it out, seeing it looked much like the houses around it.

“Isn’t that where the waterfall cave shaft is?”

“Yes,” Pelli said. “I allowed some outside adventurers to set up a cloud house there while they’re staying for the monster surge.”

“You know, Zara missed out on winning a cloud flask a few years ago. It went to some fool boy who got himself killed and it was lost.”

“You didn’t think much of him, then?”

“It was a rigged contest. He only won it because he’s a friend of Emir Bahadir. Also, the boy was absurd.”

“Perhaps he’s matured.”

“He’s dead.”

“He didn’t strike me as the sort to let that stop him.”

Vesper narrowed her eyes and looked at the distant house again.

“Are you saying...?” she asked.

“That house was most likely made by the very same cloud flask you just mentioned.”

Vesper ran a hand over her face.

“That’s inconvenient. This is why you called me here.”

“I knew it was potentially delicate. Given that you’re close to Zara and met the boy yourself, I thought it was best to see how you want to handle it. The things Zara has been saying, they are lies, right?”

“Of course they are; she met the boy twice.”

“That’s good at least.”

“Is he here for her? Does he think the branch of the family here on Arnote is his way in?”

“I don’t think so,” Pelli said. “Of course, I’ve been wrong before. But my instincts tell me that he has larger concerns than our little princess.”

“You don’t know?”

“I couldn’t see through his aura.”

“What rank is he?”

“Silver, but his aura is quite remarkable. Death is not the only trial the boy has faced.”

Vesper rubbed her forehead as she frowned.

“We kill him,” she said. “So long as he’s dead or very far away, it doesn’t matter what Zara has been saying.”

“You should never have let her do it in the first place.”

“You think I wanted to? You try getting that girl to do anything you tell her.”

“Tone, Vesper.”

"Sorry, Aunt Pelli," Vesper said, lowering her head.

"Killing the boy is not a good idea. He has Roland Remore's favourite grandson living with him, so a more diplomatic approach might be best."

Vesper groaned.

"This is going to be a mess," she said. "Perhaps we can politely suggest he go away and never come back. Do you know if he's registered locally for the monster surge?"

"I believe they came here fresh from having done so."

"That's unfortunate. We could get him travel dispensation but not without people wondering why. If House Irios gets wind of this, things could get ugly."

"My dear," Pelli said, "I'm afraid you may need to deal with this one head-on."

"Gods damn that girl."

Pelli chuckled.

"You know, I remember another wilful young girl running around this island."

"I grew up," Vesper said.

"And into a fine young woman, might I say," Pelli told her.

"Aunt Pelli, I'm sixty-seven."

"Exactly," Pelli said. "You've got your whole life ahead of you. Do you expect to reach gold rank during the surge?"

"I hope so, but nothing is certain. This will not be a normal surge, Aunt Pelli. Even more so than people think. Have you been told?"

"Oh, I'm just an old woman on a hill. Who would tell me the important matters of state?"

Vesper gave her ancestor a wry smile, then looked back across the lagoon to Jason's cloud house.

"If he didn't come for Zara, does he even know?"

"I doubt it," Pelli said. "I think he would be conducting himself a little differently if he did."

"Then perhaps it's time he did," Vesper said. "If I can't kill him or get rid of him, I can only try and convince him to quietly ride out the surge and leave. He's just one of countless silver-rankers, after all."

"A sensible approach," Pelli said, "but one should not wager everything on hope. Some people are simply ill-suited to remaining unremarkable."

"Of course, Aunt Pelli. I would welcome your counsel on this."

"Of course, dear. We should start with deciding what to tell Zara. You can never be entirely sure what that girl is going to do..."

Chapter 476

A Damn Fine Way to Start Off a War

The Vitesse branch of the Adventure Society was bustling with activity. Miles Cotezee walked down a hallway towards one of the large briefing rooms with an unusual adventurer at his side. The man was an elf with reddish skin, stark white hair and golden eyes. His sand-coloured leather outfit had many tribal marking stitches into it forming beautiful patterns matched by the tattoos on his skin. The buckle of his belt depicted purple flames in the shape of a flower, the symbol of the Burning Violet guild.

He was lean and muscular, walking with an easy, languid grace. Nonetheless, Miles got the impression from him of a spring ready to launch. There was a quiet intensity to the man that reminded Miles of the man's father.

They entered the briefing room, which was set up like a lecture hall with a stage at the front and rows of chairs rising up a staggered floor. Humphrey Geller and his team were already waiting, Humphrey himself standing alert and watchful as they came in. Clive was fiddling with a recording crystal projector while Sophie, Belinda, Neil and Gary were sat around a table and chairs Belinda had made with her power to create simple objects. The cards they were playing with were not made by her power, following a number of wager-related incidents.

There was one member of the group absent, Jory, who had been summoned away by the church of the Healer. While Miles had been able to get travel dispensation to reunite Humphrey and Gary's teams, Jory was not a member of either. While neither he nor Belinda was happy about being separated again, especially in such uncertain times, they each had their own responsibilities.

Relationships amongst adventurers always had challenges. With travel frequent, those not in the same team could expect long periods of separation. For those that were on the same team, the logistics were easier but the dangers were far greater. Emotions overruling judgement could put the team in danger, while an acrimonious split could break teams apart.

Everyone looked up as Miles and the adventurer entered, looking over the stranger. Only Gary recognised him, the elf and the leonid exchanging a nod of greeting. Belinda started packing up the cards and dismissing her conjured furniture.

"I know that having an outsider made leader of your team, even temporarily, is not a situation anyone wants," Miles said. "Now that you've all been inducted into the Burning Violet, I was able to make sure it was someone from your guild."

"Hey, Ken," Gary said. "You've been keeping busy, I see."

"The hunt goes well," the elf said. "I was sorry to hear your path was darkened when the light of your companion was cast from it."

"There've been some dark days," Gary said, "but the ones ahead are looking brighter. Farrah's back."

Ken stood up a little straighter.

"The lady of stone and fire has returned to the path? How did this come to be?"

"Not sure how, exactly. I've got this friend whose disregard for the rules apparently extends to the laws of life and death. I'd say it'd get him into trouble but, from what I hear, he's running out of kinds of trouble to get into."

"I think you might be underestimating him," Neil said.

"It's some secretive whatever but I don't care," Gary said. "So long as my friends are alive and I can go find them, the hows and whys don't matter."

"I am glad that your path has brightened, Gareth."

"Ken, I told you to call me Gary."

"Yet you persist in calling my aunt Sweet Buns," Ken said.

"But she makes those really delicious sweet buns," Gary said. "I'm not being lascivious."

"Your words do not tell the same story as the tone in which you use them, Gareth."

"You did sound a little creepy," Belinda told Gary.

"Lindy..." Gary whined.

"How about we all introduce ourselves?" Miles interjected. "Well, not me and Gary. We already know everyone."

The elf nodded.

"I am Kenneth, son of Brian," he said.

"As in, Brian, son of Kevin?" Sophie asked.

"It is so," Ken said. "You know my father?"

"No, but I've heard stories of his power and skill," Sophie said. "And yours. You beat Rufus Remore."

Gary burst out laughing.

"Yeah," he said. "I wish I'd gotten to see that, but I didn't know Rufus back then. Apparently, he was a one-man gang of assholes before Ken knocked the excess pride out."

"Rufus was a Thadwick?" Clive asked.

"You shouldn't speak ill of the dead," Humphrey said.

“Why not?” Sophie asked. “That guy sold out his family, his world and his soul in that order. Now some monster is out there somewhere, using his body as a meat suit. There’s only ill to speak.”

“Then perhaps we should consider our team member who was once his companion and say nothing at all,” Humphrey said.

Sophie winced, turning to look at Neil.

“It’s fine,” Neil lied.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly.

“Sorry, Neil,” Clive said.

The team introduced themselves. They’d been worried about whom they’d be saddled with, but if at least Gary knew him, they were willing to at least give him a chance. Not long after, more teams came shuffling into the room and sitting down. There was another team of silver-rankers and six teams of bronze-rankers. Once they had all arrived, the room was quite full.

The team, plus Ken and Gary followed Humphrey’s lead in sitting down in the front row, the bronze attendees knowing to leave it for the silvers. Miles stood in front of the assemblage to make an address.

“I’m going to start with some background so that everyone is in the same place in regards to the operation you will be conducting,” he began. “Some of what I have to say you should all already know, while some of you will be learning for the first time.”

He paused, making sure he had everyone’s attention.

“Roughly three and a half years ago, we first discovered the presence of the Builder cult and their intentions. Their goal was to tear strips off of our world with no regard for the death and destruction doing so would bring about. The cultists started taking people and torturing their souls until they opened those souls up to be implanted with star seeds that controlled them and turned them into slaves.”

Miles paused, letting everyone dwell on the topic. Everyone in the room knew someone who had been affected by star seed implantation.

“What we thought was a distraction proved to be something far more insidious. As a world, we turned to our gods for help against this invader from beyond our world, and the gods answered. How could we know that one of them was a traitor? Purity stepped up to help purge the star seeds from the victims of the cult. This put them in a crucial position in the widespread response to the cult. It was only later that we realised that this was all part of a plan for the Purity church to serve as infiltrators, handing the cult our plans and secrets.”

Miles' eyes fell on Clive.

"All around the world," he continued, "good people fought. Sacrificed. They uncovered the cult's secrets. One of those secrets is the reason we are here today."

Taking a moment, Miles panned his gaze around the room.

"Many of you have taken the fight to the Builder, but over the last couple of years, the Builder's activities have reduced. The Ecumenical Council had declared the church of Purity a fallen church. The gods have declared Purity as a fallen god. The church has been banished from every place where civilisation flourishes and once its remnants are but dried, dead leaves on the wind, the god itself will be sanctioned by the other gods."

Miles shook his head.

"You may be wondering what 'sanctioned' means and why the church must go before the gods can act. To be honest, so am I. I'm just a small man and know not the ways of the gods. But those who do tell me that we need to eliminate the church, so that's what we're doing. Of course, most of the Purity church had no idea of what was happening in the dark corners of their faith and turned from their fallen on finding out. They suffered perhaps the greatest betrayal of all as their so-called god of Purity handed our world to a being that would taint our very souls."

For a man claiming to not know the ways of gods, the anger boiling up in Miles was making him sound rather like a preacher. He was tapping into the rage all of them felt, a rage born of ruined lands and fallen friends.

"But there are those who did not forsake their foul deity," Miles continued. "Even losing most, the number that remains loyal to their dark deity is great. We have been hunting them down, the Adventure Society, the Magic Society and the churches. Many of you have joined that very task, as you do again in joining this operation. Unexpectedly, we have had the greatest success in dealing with their gold-rankers. Their numbers were lower and every gold-ranker is a known quantity. With the churches and the Adventure Society working together, we have captured or eliminated many of them. Clive, if you would?"

Clive got up and moved to the recording crystal projector, getting ready to use it.

"The church of Purity as much as abandoned their iron-rankers," Miles said. "Over the last several years, though, the bulk of their bronze and silver-rank loyalists have managed to avoid the forces seeking them out. Like the Builder cult, their activities have diminished over time. Partly this has been from their infrastructure being systematically eradicated and their resources taken or destroyed."

A projection appeared behind Miles, showing footage of smoke rising from the gutted ruins of a once-beautiful temple.

“I know that many have hoped that the reduced activity from the cult and the church reflects an end to their activities, especially with a historic monster surge upon us. Unfortunately, this surge is what they have been waiting for and it will be more historic than most of you are aware. The highest levels of the Adventure Society have access to a source with information that this monster surge will come with an invasion from the Builder’s forces. This will not be more cultists, although have no doubt that the existing cultists will join in. These are forces from beyond our world, with power and numbers we don’t yet know. We do know that it will be bad.”

The image switched from the ruined church to a vast city island, sitting in the ocean. Then a sky city, floating in the clouds. Another was a mountain carved into a fortress city that descended from the air, crushing a forest underneath it as it settled on the ground.

“These appear to be staging platforms for the invasion,” Miles said. “They’re appearing around the world but, for now, are showing limited activity. Their scouts are attacking anything that comes close but otherwise remain passive. Our high-rankers are assessing the threat.”

At this point, there was a lot of consternation in the room. Miles waited for it to die down before continuing.

“At this stage, we are not asking you to engage the Builder invasion. Your role, in this mission, is to eliminate a potential threat before it emerges to strike our backs when we need it least. Mr Clive Standish will be filling you in on the specifics.”

Miles took Clive’s seat.

“The missing forces of the church of Purity are our concern for this operation,” Clive explained. “We believe that the church is hiding these forces in a series of magically hidden strongholds, awaiting the monster surge and the invasion. The reason we believe this is because we found one.”

Clive tapped the projector and the image changed to an idyllic valley, shrouded in mist.

“This,” Clive said, “Is beautiful and remote. It is also a lie. What you are looking at is an illusion on a grand scale, perpetuated by an illusion array so large they’d have had to invent new kinds of rituals to make it work. Which is exactly what they did.”

He tapped the projector and it showed an image of a river.

“Those of you versed in rudimentary magic theory will know that one of the ways in which ambient magic is most active is in the flow of water. Waterways, especially large ones, carry large amounts of ambient magic.”

The projection became a vast dam.

“At the head of the valley I just showed you is a dam. That dam is collecting the ambient magic, converting it and feeding it into the grand illusion and masking the expansive population of Purity clergy that have been hiding there. What we have determined is that the illusion is incapable of masking anything stronger than a silver-rank aura, so we believe this is where at least a portion of their missing bronze and silver adherents are. As best we can tell, no gold-rankers are amongst them, to avoid the expansive search methods the Magic Society has been employing. Their primary defence is secrecy.”

“Then how did we find them?” Someone called out.

“Several years ago, the Magic Society cracked the portal network that the cult and the church had been using,” Clive said. “Eventually they figured out that we could track them through it, which we believe to be one of several reasons for their reduction in activity. Someone in the Adventure Society has been studying use patterns over the time we were tracking their activity and noted a number of anomalies. Some were nothing, but one turned out to be something.”

Clive turned off the projector.

“You will be one wing of a series of groups forming a strike force that will hit the Purity stronghold and hit it hard. Mr Cotezee has marshalling instructions for your team leaders; to prevent information leaks, we leave in the morning.”

When the teams had all shuffled out, Miles, Ken, Gary, and Jason’s team were all that was left in the room.

“A few more of these briefings and there’s no way the Purity church or the cult doesn’t hear about it,” Miles said. “You’re a devious woman, Belinda Callahan.”

“Well,” she said. “You have all these bronze and silver-rankers sitting around before the fight with the Builder starts. Why not take the time to see which ones are playing for the other side?”

“They’re hardly sitting around, Miss Callahan,” Miles said. “Unless you forgot, there’s a monster surge going on.”

“How certain are you that no one will discover the trackers you placed on the chairs?” Humphrey asked.

“Almost completely,” Belinda said.

"It's quite brilliant," Clive said. "Belinda has a knack for using magic outside of its original purpose; this kind of tracking is normally used on pets and children, rather than enemies. The magic is faint, so as not to be obtrusive in a city full of essence users, but quite easily noticed by anyone with magic senses. At least, this is normally the case."

"The thing is," Belinda said, picking up the explanation, "there's a monster surge happening. The magic of the trackers will blend right into the abnormalities in all the ambient magic right now. Unless they know exactly what to look for and how, even a gold-ranker would almost certainly fail to notice it. It's just a substance we left on the chairs, not any kind of device they would find on themselves. The only way they would find it is if they had some tracking-protection powers."

"Which I filtered out when selecting teams for this," Miles said.

"Any anti-tracking items are already being confiscated on entering the building as part of the new security measures," Humphrey realised.

"What if they change pants?" Neil asked. "Won't they leave the tracking stuff behind?"

"That's one of the reasons we're setting a tight timeline," Miles said. "We want them acting in a hurry, surrendering caution for speed as any traitors rush to warn the church of the threat."

"It's not perfect," Belinda said, "but chasing perfect is how you miss out on the good."

"It's only to give our gold-rank investigators a hand," Miles said. "Our Builder-response team only has a few of them and we don't have more gold-rankers to spare for this operation. We need to save them for the end."

"Clive, Belinda," Humphrey said. "You've both done very well."

"Of course I did," Belinda said.

"Just because it's not a surprise," Humphrey said, "that doesn't mean your work is not appreciated."

"The hard part," Miles said, "was getting enough of the higher-ups to approve this without letting the others know the true purpose. Getting them to go along with this and involve so many teams was tricky."

"But worth it, right?" Sophie asked.

"Absolutely," Miles said. "If we can wipe out this stronghold and root out a bushel of traitors, that's a damn fine way to start off a war."

"Does this meant there won't truly be a battle?" Ken asked. "Why did no one speak to me of the stratagem before I bought so many extra spears?"

"Because you're the new guy," Sophie said.

"Be nice," Belinda chided. "You were the new guy, once."

Chapter 477

It Will Not Be Fine

Liara Rimaros made her way back to the royal sky island, half-asleep in the back of a flying carriage. She'd been working without rest as the city was overrun with adventurers that had to be filtered through for potential Builder cultists and was finally going home to sleep.

The carriage was forced to stop on a floating platform close to the sky island for security inspection. No chances were being taken of an attack on the palace. Royal guards carefully inspected the driver and the carriage itself before opening the door. Liara herself stepped out and both she and the carriage interior were swept with inspection devices.

"I'm sorry for the trouble, Lady Liara."

"That's fine, Jhalid," Liara said. "I completely understand."

"Thank you, milady."

"How's that boy of yours, Jhalid?"

"A bit too much like his father, milady. Always learning the hard way."

"You turned out alright. I'm sure he'll grow into a fine young man."

"Thank you, milady."

Liara was from one of the more remote branches of the royal family. She was not close enough to the main branch to be called a princess, although she was entitled to a home on the royal sky island and to participate in the contests for the throne in her youth. She had known she would not be a match for the advantages the Storm Prince's upbringing had given him and had instead set her sight on adventuring.

That Storm Prince had predictably become the Storm King and Liara had never regretted her own choices. After adventuring her way up to gold-rank in less than two decades, the Adventure Society had recruited her for special operations. After years hunting down people with restricted essences, she had been moved to the Builder response team.

After completing the inspection, Liara was allowed back into the carriage and it completed its journey to the royal sky island. The carriage flew towards one of the rings that allowed passage through the island's defences and set down in a carriage yard.

The royal island was ostensibly a palace but was, in and of itself, a small city in the sky. In addition to the royal family, it held embassies from nations around the world and many of the oldest noble families kept townhouses on the island. By custom, the younger

members of the high aristocracy were raised there, allowing for diplomatic training and fostering potential future alliances by marriage.

Liara was no different. In her youth, she had been married to a local lordling to secure royal influence in that family's affairs. Although she and her husband lived largely separate lives, especially now their children were grown, it was a cordial union. They were more friends and occasional lovers than true companions but they were happy.

Rather than find transport, Liara used her gold-rank speed to flit through the streets, unnoticed by everyone but island security. She arrived at her townhouse to find her husband, Baseph, just leaving. He met her with a smile as she arrived.

"Hello Lee," he said. "I left you a note inside. Uncle wants me out managing the mines for the duration of the surge. I'm told that cousin Gibbie is having some problems and can't go."

Liara frowned.

"I think the problem might be your uncle telling Gibbie things he shouldn't. Gibbie's fruit basket was always missing a pair of firm plums but I can't blame him this time. I don't think you should go either."

"I'll be safe. You know how fortified that place is. Most of the fortress is completely under the sea bed."

"Alright, but don't take unnecessary chances. If you see anything that isn't just monsters, you contact the Adventure Society. Immediately."

"You mean like a fish?"

"Baseph, look at my face."

"Yes, dear."

"How well do you think charm is going to work on me right now?"

"Sorry, dear. It won't be that bad, will it? I've heard they're expecting activity from the Builder but they're saying it'll be fine."

"Of course they're telling people that," Liara said. "They don't want to cause a panic. I can't tell you specifics, Bas, but it will not be fine."

"Alright, Lee. I still have the signal stone you gave me, even if everything else fails."

"If everything else fails, you'll be stuck in a hole at the bottom of the sea. I love that you think I'll somehow be able to save you from that but we all have limits. I'm serious, Baseph. Anything strange, you send word to the Adventure Society. Even if you're almost sure it's nothing."

"Alright," he said with a smile. "I'm lucky to have a wife that cares about me so much." He caught her up in an embrace.

“Oh, and Vesper’s inside.”

“What’s she doing here?” Liara wondered.

“Since when did Ves need a reason to come see you?” Baseph asked. “Did something happen?”

“Yes. There’s a monster surge on.”

“Dear, this is your sixth surge. I’ve never seen you like this.”

“This isn’t just another monster surge,” she said.

“The Builder cult has been running around for years.”

“Not like this,” she said. “Promise me you’ll be careful.”

“I’m pretty sure I just did.”

“Bas, you have to promise me.”

“Alright,” he said. “I promise.”

Liara found Vesper in the parlour, plundering the drinks cabinet.

“Hello, Lee. It’s been a little while. Want one?”

“Sure,” Liara said as she flopped onto a couch. “Things have been rather busy, which makes me wonder what you’re doing here. Not that you aren’t welcome at any time.”

Vesper walked over from the cabinet, handed Liara a glass and sat down next to her.

“You do look exhausted,” Vesper said. “Did you see Bas on the way out?”

Liara nodded as she sipped at her drink. It made her eyes shoot wide open.

“Yes, I’m not looking to get *that* relaxed. Can you even drink this at silver-rank without it killing you?”

“Sorry,” Vesper said. “Poison resistance, you know? It has to be the hard stuff.”

“That’s not hard; that’s boat cleaner. Why are you here, Ves? I need sleep.”

“I need your help with something delicate. It’s about the family and it needs to stay as quiet as possible.”

“What are you after?”

“I want you to pull the records of an Adventure Society member without anyone knowing about it.”

“I can’t do that if it’s anyone sensitive. What’s the name?”

“Jason Asano.”

Liara blinked.

“I knew I recognised that name,” she said. “Where do I know it from? It’s been bothering me.”

“You know about Asano?”

“He was assessed for potential cult affiliation,” Liara said. “Where did I hear that name from?”

“Zara,” Vesper said with a grimace.

“Zara? When would...?”

Liara took a folder from the dimensional pouch at her waist, set aside a picture of Jason from the folder and started flicking through papers inside. Vesper picked up the picture which showed Jason with an idiotic grin, holding up a sandwich.

“Why are you carrying Asano’s file around with you?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Is that the only picture you have?”

“It was the one the Magic Society had on file,” Liara said, still flicking through pages. “His abilities make him hard to track or record images of. You and Zara went off to the far side of nowhere and met Emir Bahadir. Was that place called Greenstone?”

“Yes,” Vesper confirmed.

“And then Zara came back and...”

“Yes.”

“And it was Asano?”

“Yes.”

“Did they really...?”

“No.”

“And now he’s alive again.”

“Which is why I’m here.”

“Well,” Liara said. “That’s a mess.”

She took another sip of boat cleaner.

“Is Asano making trouble?” she asked.

“Not yet. I only knew he was here because Aunt Pelli contacted me. He’s set up in a house on Arnote. The cloud house Zara failed to win because Bahadir rigged the contest.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Liara said, snapping the folder shut. “The more you dig into our Mr Asano, the more interesting nuggets fall out.”

“Can I see that?” Vesper asked, reaching for the folder.

“No,” Liara said. “The Builder response unit has access to Builder-related files that don’t appear in general Magic Society and Adventure Society records.”

“Lee, it’s me. And it’s about the family.”

“Being royalty means we should be more fastidious about the rules, Vesper, not less. We have to be examples.”

Vesper groaned.

“Lee, did you put the fun essence on the restricted list?”

“There’s no such thing as a fun essence.”

“Clearly. Maybe I should kill him after all. If anyone finds out, it would buy us another couple of years with a second period of formal mourning. I just need to make sure it looks like an accident. Or a monster. There is a monster surge happening. One more death won’t be suspicious.”

“Like your apparent desire to kill this man off, what Zara did is a violation of decency,” Liara said. “You can’t just pretend you secretly agreed to marry someone who is now conveniently dead to dodge a political marriage. Also, killing him would be a bad idea.”

“I know. He’s running around with Roland Remore’s grandson. It’s why I’ll have to be careful.”

“Please stop talking about murdering people.”

“I’m not going to murder anyone,” Vesper said. “I’ll have him murdered. We have people for that, right? What about the Order of the Reaper? They’re back, now.”

“You stay away from them.”

“You know something I don’t?”

“I know a lot of things you don’t, Vesper. Including morals, apparently. You shouldn’t try killing Asano anyway. He probably won’t stay dead.”

“You know how he came back?”

“No, but I saw his certification from the church of Death and it said he’s died four times. So far. It actually said so far on the certification. I’ve never seen that before.”

“Four? You should ask the church of Death what’s going on there.”

“They never reveal details of resurrection, believe me. Especially since they announced that it would be harder a few years ago.”

“Wasn’t that right about the time Asano died?”

“He didn’t have anything to do with that. He might have his secrets but he’s hardly worth the gods changing the rules of magic over.”

“Did you ask Asano how he came back?”

“All he would say is that coming back from the dead is kind of his thing. Once I saw his certification, that turned out to be not quite as facetious as I first thought.”

“Zara’s formal mourning period is almost up,” Vesper said. “The timing of his arrival is suspicious.”

“As I said: the boy has secrets,” Liara conceded.

“Which are?”

"I don't know, Vesper. That's what makes them secret."

"Lee, this matters. This is not the time to provoke House Irios or to give them any more leverage than they already have. Zara's little lie could turn into big politics. We need to know Asano's intentions before we decide what to do with him."

"Then I recommend you talk to Aunt Zila. She is here for the surge, yes?"

"I've heard yes, although I haven't seen her."

"Then I suggest you change that and hope she's willing to listen."

Jason looked happily at the row of barbecues set up in front of his cloud house.

"I think you might need some more," Argy said, standing next to him.

"Argy, how many people did you invite?"

"About this many grills again should do it."

Jason looked at Argy, then back to the barbecues.

"I'm going to need more food."

An hour later, Jason was unloading more tables, more barbecues and a couple of spit roasters from his storage space, with Argy helping him set up. Farrah and Rufus came out of the cloud house to look everything over.

"Is this a barbecue or a festival?" Rufus asked.

"Good thing there's a lot of nice, open grass," Jason said. "Views are nice, too. This is going to be great."

"Yep," Farrah agreed. "Everybody is going to Wang Chung tonight."

Rufus turned from Farrah to Jason.

"What does your world do to people?"

"Rufus, you need to get over it," Jason said. "Farrah has joined the church of Airwolf and there's nothing you can do about it."

"Just to be clear," Farrah said, "I have absolutely not joined the church of Airwolf."

"It was the fourth season, wasn't it? The reused footage wasn't that bad."

"It was not the reused footage."

"You're more of a Greatest American Hero girl. I can get behind that."

"I am, actually, yeah."

"I hope the others find us soon," Rufus said. "I can't take being outnumbered like this."

"Oh, did you get in touch with your parents?" Jason asked Farrah.

"No," Farrah said. "The water link chambers are booked solid. The Adventure Society said they'd be notified along with our teams."

“That’s good,” Jason said. “We need to get you to them as soon as we’re done in Rimaros.”

“You should try the church of Death again,” Rufus said. “I was so caught up in seeing you that day that I didn’t think while you were there. They won’t be as busy as the Adventure Society. They may be willing to pass along word of your resurrection without it getting lost in the monster surge shuffle.”

“That’s a great idea,” Jason said.

“Tomorrow,” Farrah said. “Tonight we’re having a barbie.”

“I am not liking how alike you two are starting to sound,” Rufus said.

“We know, Rufus,” Jason said. “You’ve mentioned.”

“It’s time to add a new rule to the drinking game,” Farrah said. “I can’t wait to tell Gary.”

She called out to Argy, still moving picnic tables.

“Hey, Argy. Did you know Rufus’ family runs a school?”

“Yeah,” Argy called back. “He mentioned it to me yesterday.”

Jason and Farrah erupted with laughter.

Chapter 478

A Story of War

Jason's barbecue was in full swing, with people crowded along the cliff top and kids splashing in the river, letting it carry them into the magic barrier that stopped them from going over the waterfall and bounced them back. Jason had a steak sandwich in one hand and a drink in a hollowed-out coconut in the other.

"This is nice," Rufus said as he, Jason and Farrah wandered about, meeting the locals. "Tomorrow is the Adventure Society and work, so it's good to relax and go in fresh. It's a monster surge, so things are going to be hectic."

Jason and Farrah, who had been through proto-spaces and monster waves, shared a look. Compared to those, a monster surge was relaxing. The surge was on a much grander scale than the localised events the pair had been through but the individual experience was much less intense.

"I have to say," Jason said, "silver-rank senses are great for cooking. Having enhanced taste really helps get a handle on new ingredients. Speaking of which..."

He waved at a local and wandered over, a woman of around thirty with no magic in her aura.

"Gwendi, you are an absolute princess," Jason said. "That sauce recipe... I have no words."

"Which is quite something, believe me," Rufus added.

"It's always been a favourite," Gwendi said. "Did Mitras and Gelli say hello?"

"I got a wave as they ran for the river," Jason said with a chuckle and Gwendi shook her head.

"No manners, those two. Oh, Jasil and Mr Walsh were looking for you as well."

"I'm sure I'll bump into them," Jason said.

Rufus contemplated Jason as they continued to circulate.

"How do you know so many of these people already?" he asked.

"All this didn't just happen, you know," Jason said, waved his arm broadly at the picnic tables, grills, chairs, kegs of booze and everything else. "You think I had time to do this much cooking? Look at that salad table. Little communities like this; they're great at coming together. Nicest people you'll ever meet."

The afternoon turned to evening with a glorious sunset descending past the western hills. Rather than put out glow stones, Jason conjured his cloak which looked a bit silly over his floral shirt and shorts, even with the hood pushed back. Motes of starlight

emerged from his cloak and drifted over the area, adding to the starlight from the sky overhead.

"Show off," Rufus accused him.

"Every time," Jason told him with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Somewhere along the way, I forgot that magic wasn't all misery, danger and death. It's good to be home."

Jason dodged off to say hello to yet more locals, plastering on a smile as he waved at them. Rufus watched him go with concern.

"How bad was it really?" he asked Farrah softly.

"He wanted to bring his family with him," she said. "They didn't come because they were scared of him."

"Because of the way his abilities are?"

"No. Just make sure Gary doesn't make any jokes about evil powers, alright?"

Jason immediately got along with the local gold-ranker, Warwick Warnock. Despite having the name of a mid-tier supervillain he was friendly and humble, heavily dialling down his aura so as to not make anyone uncomfortable.

While everyone with an aura followed the etiquette of keeping it restrained, there were different ways of going about it. There were ways of holding back power while still making sure people knew it was there. Warnock, kept his locked away tight, just as Jason had since his efforts at an aura disguise went awry with the Adventure Society official they had met on Jason's yacht.

Jason sensed three more gold-rank auras approaching, one of which belonged to Pelli, the mayor. He quietly vanished into the shadows, leaving his sparkling lights behind and met them before they reached the gathering.

Pelli was walking up the path from town with two more celestines. They both had emerald hair and matching eyes, neither with monster cores evident in their auras. Looking at them, especially the man, Jason noticed a number of incongruities. There was something odd about the way they carried themselves and how their auras were a little too perfect, even for gold rank. It reminded him of Dawn when she was stuck below her actual diamond rank.

His suspicions were all but confirmed when he sensed the slightest whiff of the woman's aura brushing over his own before vanishing from his senses again. It did not reveal a diamond-rank power but he was certain they were reading his aura all but unnoticed, despite his power and control. Jason knew he could not shut out a sufficiently

determined and powerful gold-ranker but he doubted that even the strongest could plumb the depths of his aura unnoticed. That would take a diamond-ranker.

Shade emerged from Jason's shadow, with three hands each holding out a drink for the new visitors.

"Shadow of the Reaper?" the man asked as he took the offered drink.

"Indeed, sir. My name is Shade."

"Are you attached to the Order of the Reaper?"

"Previously, sir. I am satisfied that my service to that organisation has been sufficient and I have quite vehemently moved on."

"They left him in a hole under a lake for half a millennium," Jason said. "As you're no doubt aware, the more politically ambitious faction threw the rest under the bus. Oh, a bus is—"

"I know what a bus is, Mr Asano," the man said. "I should have been more fastidious with my aura and body language, I see."

"I know that story," Jason said. "You have me at a disadvantage, sir, which I can see becoming an unfortunate theme."

Jason then turned to Pelli.

"You do realise that this was meant to be a low-key gathering, Ms Rimaros? Or is it Mrs Rimaros?"

"It is Pelli, thank you, young man. This is Zila and—"

"Soramir," the man said.

"Oh," Jason said, looking at Soramir. One of the things Jason discovered in the last few days was that in the local culture, palindromic first and last names were assigned in adulthood rather than at birth and denoted important members of a given family. It was most common in small families where it might be a prominent adventurer or high-ranking civic official. The more prominent the family, the less common the practice.

"Are you sure you should have told him that?" Pelli asked.

"We've already been careless," Soramir told her, "which has made our intentions and our rudeness plain. We should at least refrain from compounding our discourtesy."

"Mate," Jason said, "the last diamond-ranker I met killed me, so my standards of courtesy operate on bit of a different curve. Also, I've been known to be a bit rude myself, from time to time, so no worries. It's lovely to meet you both. Let's all go take a sausage in the mouth."

In the dark of night, everyone had gone home. Shade was picking up rubbish while Jason was cleaning the barbecues. Rufus and Farrah had offered to help but Jason told them not to, knowing that he needed to be alone. One of Shade's bodies was holding up a dirty hotplate while Jason applied an alchemical cleanser and started scrubbing.

"Why," he asked the empty air. "I'm just some guy."

"We both know that isn't true," Soramir said, suddenly next to Jason. "I sensed your arrival in this world several days ago. I've seen the things lurking inside you and even I don't know what all of them are. Your familiars alone are terrifying."

Still scrubbing a hotplate, Jason looked sideways at Soramir. The emerald hair and eyes the man had shown at the party had returned to their natural blue.

"I'm no threat to you," Jason said. "I'm no threat to your family. What do you care about me?"

"You're angry."

"OH, YOU THINK?"

Jason snatched the hotplate from Shade and flung it off the cliff. It struck the invisible barrier and bounced back, landing on the grass as Jason wheeled on the diamond-ranker.

"I was meant to be done with high-rankers," he snarled. "You have enough of your own to play with here. Why bother me?"

"My family has done you a disservice, Mr Asano. Brought you into something you neither asked for nor deserve. Because of that, you are a threat to us. Not a grave one, perhaps, but potentially an embarrassing one."

Jason closed his eyes, getting himself under control. For all his rage, his aura hadn't so much as twitched. After it had inadvertently spooked his family, Jason had resolved to never let it out of his control again, whatever his emotional state. Soramir was one of the few that could see right through him, however, seeing the pain and rage burning his insides like a furnace.

"I assume this is something to do with Zara," Jason asked in a calm, soft voice.

"Yes. I would not normally involve myself in the affairs of the family like this but one of our descendants came to us because the family needed to take your measure. This is not such an easy thing to do."

"Take my measure. You mean pry out my secrets."

"I do. I was curious when the person my family wished to investigate was the same one who arrived in this world in such spectacular fashion. You were lucky to land in that storm or I wouldn't have been the only one to take notice."

"That doesn't seem to matter anymore, does it?"

"I suppose not. You were meant to think we were just another pair of gold rankers."

"Just another pair of gold rankers," Jason said in a muttered echo, running a hand over his exasperated face before meeting Soramir's eyes again. "I'm a silver-ranker. Gold rankers shouldn't know my name, let alone you. How long until one of you kills me in a way that sticks?"

"You're still here. That says something."

"I've got something else to say too, but I won't. It wouldn't be diplomatic."

Jason gestured at Shade, who had retrieved the hotplate, and started cleaning off the dirt it picked up after being thrown.

"I've been dead and gone and you aren't slapping me around," Jason said, calm once more. "That means whatever problems you're having aren't from something I did. What did Zara do, and how bad is this for me?"

"Are you familiar with the practice of political marriage?"

"The basic concept, sure."

"Zara was matched with a formidable young man from a very powerful and important family. Their union would have created political stability leading into the monster surge which we now face."

"Made all the worse by the Builder using it to jump in."

"You jumped in as well."

"All I'm invading is the local crystal wash supply. I'm not that hard to deal with."

"Your soul says otherwise, Mr Asano. It tells a story of war."

Jason washed off the hotplate and set it back onto the barbecue while Shade pulled out the next one.

"So," Jason said. "What did she do to mess up this marriage arrangement? More importantly, what does that have to do with me?"

"In our culture, it is common to enter a two-year period of formal mourning after the loss of a spouse. Or prospective spouse."

Jason's hand stopped scrubbing.

"She didn't."

"I'm afraid she did. Too publicly for the family to stop or rescind without making the political mess she made even worse. Which, of course, was her intention."

"That is not an acceptable thing to do," Jason said and went back to scrubbing.

"No," Soramir agreed. "It is not."

"A little flirting and a plate of gem berry milk nut squares do not constitute a proposal."

"I've seen cultures where that could be argued, but I take your point."

Jason let out a laugh that sounded like a sob as it trailed off and he hung his head.

"It wasn't meant to be like this," he muttered.

"This is an issue that needs to be resolved," Soramir said. "If we had realised what had happened before you registered with the Adventure Society here, we could have sent you away quietly without anything coming of it."

"You can still do that," Jason said. "You have the power to get me out of here, Adventure Society be damned."

"Your absence is no longer enough. Even gone, it will only be a matter of time before your resurrection is noticed. Trying to cover it up now would only draw attention to it."

"Too many fingers in the Adventure Society pie?"

"Just so."

"What, then?"

"For now, continue as you have been. Be an overlooked adventurer. There is a grace period before you will be discovered by others in which the family will formulate a response. Pelli and Liara Rimaros will be your contact points going forward. The family will likely need your cooperation for whatever comes after."

"And what do I get for my cooperation?"

"I'm certain they can compensate you to your satisfaction."

"I'm not."

"I'm not here to negotiate, Mr Asano."

"Neither am I. I'm here to clean barbecues, so pitch in or sod off."

"This is not going well, is it?"

"I used to be better at hiding my emotions," Jason said. "I guess they used to be smaller. Not that there's any hiding from you."

"What do you want, Mr Asano?"

"You won't send me away?"

"It's too late for that."

"Then bring my team to me. They're in Vitesse. Rufus and Farrah's teammate, too. And Farrah's parents."

"That is manageable, although it will have to be after everything has come out. If you get special treatment before then, your anonymity will not hold. What else?"

"All I want is to meet my friends and be left alone. I don't want anything else from you or your family."

Chapter 479

Any Help They Can Get

Farrah looked at Jason with concern as they sat around a table with Rufus, eating the breakfast Jason had just cooked. After leaving his own world, Jason had immediately undergone a shift in temperament. The dark clouds that had accumulated over the past few years had finally parted, only for their late-night visitor to summon them back. Jason was sitting sullenly, idly poking at a fried sausage with his fork.

"I never met this Hurricane Princess," Farrah muttered, "but I might just have to slap her into the goddamned ocean."

"Jason, you just need to play along and ride this out," Rufus said. "From what you told us last night, they aren't trying to put you in a tough spot. If anything, they want you extricated from the situation as quickly as possible. You should let them do that."

"Maybe," Jason said. "I don't like putting my trust in powerful people whose objectives aren't the same as mine."

"But they are," Rufus told him. "You both want you out of this situation."

Jason tossed his fork down on the table and turned on Rufus.

"No, Rufus, that isn't what they want. They want to resolve the political mess their princess has stirred up by doing whatever gets them the most and costs them the least. Yes, that might mean getting me out of town as quickly and quietly as possible but it looks like that ship has sailed. Even if it hasn't, what if the best way to get me out of town is to kill me, burn me and sprinkle my ashes across the ocean? What if they decide to lean in and marry me off to their damn princess? Captain Diamond Pants took a rummage through my soul and seemed to like what he saw, so I'm not ruling that out!"

Jason was half out of his seat as he ran out of steam and fell back into the chair, his shoulders slumping. He ran both hands over his tired face.

"I'm sorry, Rufus," he said. "You didn't deserve that."

Jason got up and left the room.

"See?" Farrah said to Rufus as she got up to follow Jason out. She found him on the upper balcony of the cloud house, dangling his legs over the side as his head rested on the railing. She sat down and joined him but didn't say anything, waiting for him to talk. It took a while.

"My first instinct was to do something a little drastic," Jason said finally. "To resolve this my own way, on my own terms. But every time I do that, the solution has always caused more problems and it's never me that ends up paying the price."

“What kind of solution were you thinking of?”

“Writing a song called ‘I’m Jason Asano and I love Prostitutes,’ getting blind drunk and then painting the lyrics on the market boulevard in giant letters until someone arrests me.”

She laughed.

“Disgrace yourself out of eligibility?” she asked. “I’m afraid you’re underestimating the degeneracy of the aristocratic class. That’s the kind of thing they brush under the rug all the time. They have their own rules for what is and isn’t acceptable and there aren’t many that you’re qualified to break.”

“I don’t have a noble lineage to disgrace?”

“Exactly. There’s an expectation that adventurers, even ones raised to the nobility, will have a certain lack of decorum. There’s only two real ways for someone like you to become truly untouchable. One is to be a pathetic adventurer.”

“Aren’t I already a dirty generalist?”

“That’s a prejudice of fools. If you want to write yourself off, you need to tank some missions, badly and very visibly. Which you aren’t going to do.”

“No,” Jason said. “I’m not going to get out from under the bus by throwing the people I’m meant to be protecting under it. That diamond-ranker knew what a bus was, by the way. I’m pretty sure that he’s done some dimensional travel.”

“Your world?”

“I doubt it. Mine isn’t the most advanced one out there and I doubt we were the only ones to invent the bus. Shade based most of his vehicle forms on some other world with better tech.”

“You think the diamond-ranker knows about Dawn?”

“Maybe. We didn’t have a lot of time to discuss exactly what she’d be doing here.”

“At least she didn’t tell people about your role in... probably shouldn’t say. Who knows if a diamond-ranker is listening?”

“It should be fine,” Jason said. “Unless they’re just *listening* listening, rather than using some kind of observation power. The balcony is still part of my spirit domain and I’m not sure if even gods can peek at us here.”

“Really?”

“Can’t be sure, but maybe.”

“Maybe is a big enough deal as it is. Wouldn’t that make this house a throbbing great dead spot in the senses of those diamond-rankers?”

“Yep.”

“There was no real chance of dodging their attention, was there?”

“Nope. I was hoping they just wouldn’t care because I’m a silver-ranker. Then Princess Pain-in-the-Arse buggered that right up. You said there was something else I could do to turn myself into Mr Wrong?”

“Act above your station. This one is more in your area and you’re already bumping into royalty.”

“No,” Jason said. “If I do that, then whatever inclination the royal family have to shield me from this evaporates and I still have no sense of the players and agendas involved. What happens when the family of whoever Zara was supposed to marry decides that I’m an intolerable stain on the reputation of their house? What if the jilted fiancé decides the best way to hurt me is to send a couple of gold-rank uncles looking for you? They won’t be stupid enough to touch Rufus, but it’ll be open season on you and me.”

“Then what’s our move?”

“What Rufus said. We play the game, for now. We need to learn more and keep an eye out for opportunities to get some control. It’s boldness to act in the right moment and recklessness to act in the wrong one. I need to stop being the latter and aim for the former.”

“I’m sorry we ended up waist-deep all over again.”

Jason flashed her a tired but genuine grin.

“At least it’s not neck-deep. No one’s asked me to save the world yet.”

He pulled his legs in from the railing and hopped lightly to his feet.

“As much of a pain as all this is,” he said, “it’s just noise and nonsense. I say we let the politicians play politics while we just go be adventurers. At least for now.”

Farrah also got to her feet.

“I hate that they’re making you run around alone,” she said. “You should be with us.”

“You’re happy with the guild they’ve attached you to?”

“It’s a sister guild to our own. They help us when our members are in this part of the world and we do the same when they’re in ours. They’ll be good to us. It’s you I’m worried about.”

“You don’t need to worry,” Jason assured her. “It’s me. What could possibly go wrong?”

“You’re really going to tempt fate like that?”

“Fate tempted me first. If I can fight the Builder, I can bloody well fight her.”

“You realise there’s no actual god of fate, right? It’s just a metaphor.”

“Good, because I’m pretty sure I couldn’t actually fight her.”

Jason's portal arch opened in the teleportation square of the Adventure Society campus, which was still thronging with people. Jason, Farrah and Rufus made their way to the jobs hall that had as many people swarming it as had surrounded the administration building a couple of days before.

"Maybe we shouldn't have taken those days to relax before coming here," Rufus said. "I'm not feeling very relaxed all of a sudden."

"I don't think there was any dodging this particular bullet," Jason said.

"What's a bullet?" Rufus asked.

"It's like an arrow but you don't need magic to make it not crap," Jason said.

"Let's just get in there," Farrah said. "The longer we put it off, the more people wind up in front of us."

Once they got far enough into the crowd to join actual queues, Jason was separated from Rufus and Farrah. They got into the fast-moving line of guild members and associates while Jason was lumped in with the general populace. He at least got to skip ahead of the bronze and iron-rankers, so the wait was frustrating but not interminable.

There was a lot of bravado on display, from peacocking auras to pride erupting into childish scuffles. The overworked Adventure Society officials were herding the adventurers like overworked school teachers, only stepping in when the scraps got out of hand. There seemed to be an unofficial rule that so long as no one pulled out powers, they'd be left to settle their differences.

Unsurprisingly, the jobs hall was much larger than the one in Greenstone, spread out over four five-storey buildings. Each one had a large leaderboard set up showing the top hundred contributors by action quota. Inside, the normal contract posting boards had been removed and replaced with tables where officials were sat, handing out contracts and sending people off as quickly as they could. Each table had a thick book of contracts that was magically linked to a central archive, marking off which adventurer was assigned which task.

Jason was sent to the fourth floor of the second building, where he found himself sitting before a harried-looking official who looked more exhausted than Jason had ever seen another essence user. He'd seen people come out of monster waves looking fresher.

"Papers," the man said and Jason handed them over. The man checked them against his records, and then looked up at Jason.

"You've been demarcated for resource and supply delivery contracts."

“That’s my understanding,” Jason confirmed.

“You confident going out alone?”

“It’s the monster surge. We do the job and we don’t get picky about it.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised. You’ll only be assigned low-priority contracts because you’re only a one star.”

“That’s fine,” Jason said. “I imagine those people are tired of being overlooked and would welcome any help they can get.”

“Just remember that that help means delivering supplies, not killing monsters. Even if you try it and don’t die, they won’t count towards your action quota or leaderboard status. Speaking of which, normal rewards are suspended and will instead be handed out weekly, based on the aforementioned leaderboard status. Is that understood?”

“Seems clear enough,” Jason said. “How many contracts can I take at once?”

“You looking to clear your weekly quota in a couple of days?”

“I figured it would be easier if I could do some kind of circuit rather than soak up time coming back here over and over. I don’t much care about the quota.”

“Uh-huh. I don’t care if you’re leaderboard-chasing or whatever. Just don’t get yourself killed or half-ass the jobs chasing points.”

“I’ll do my best.”

The official went through his book and eventually assigned Jason four contracts. He did this by scrawling Jason’s name on a page and then plucking it from the book, where it was magically reconstituted. He laid the pages out in front of Jason.

“You should be able to do these at a run,” he said. “Do them in the order I’ve laid out for the best efficiency. You’ll need to pick up the supplies here in the city first; it’ll mostly be from the supply depots that have been set up. Addresses are on the contracts. Use your membership badge to confirm that you’ve accepted.”

Jason took out his silver badge with its single star and touched it to the first contract.

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- **Point of interest:** [Livaros Supply Depot #3] has been added to [Tactical Map].
 - **Point of interest:** [Mecilados Fortress Town] has been added to [Tactical Map].
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“Alright,” Jason said. “I can work with this.”

The Storm Kingdom held within its territories the coastal regions of the continents that bordered the Sea of Storms. One of the kingdom's most outlying fortress towns was located in the northeast corner of the southern mainland.

The coastal fort was caught up in a magical storm sweeping in from the sea, battering against the magical dome that capped the high walls of the fort. Normally the barrier was invisible but the magically-infused wind and rain made it plain to see, even as anything beyond it was obscured.

As the storm raged, monsters emerged from the sea. Storm shabs were large abominations with shark bodies and crab legs, all covered in hard shell. More dangerous than the weaker shab variants, these silver-rank monsters fired arcs of lightning from protrusions on their shells.

The typical approach of these monsters was to begin with electricity attacks, paralysing or killing their victims outright before them devouring them, alive or dead. With all their potential victims behind secure walls, however, the monsters had to do things differently.

More intelligent than lower-rank shabs, the monsters had waited for all of their number to emerge from the ocean before approaching the fort. Dozens of the shabs approached at the fort's weakest point, which was the main gates, then began their siege together. Rather than the weak but quick blasts of electricity they used on their victims, they took the time to build up their magic. When they had gathered as much as they could, they unleashed it in powerful bolts of lightning that blasted the magically reinforced gates. Despite all that power, the gates held.

The fort town was far from defenceless. Ritual circles became visible on the walls, sending out large bolts of fire and conjured force spears in retaliation, while essence users fired spells and ranged special attacks from the battlements, safe behind the barrier dome. Many of the essence users without ranged attacks fed their mana into turrets that were essentially oversized magic wands, blasting out magic from giant crystal tips.

No essence users went out to face the enemies. These were not adventurers and would not survive diving into a sea of monsters. While the adventurers of the Sea of Storms might be powerful, these were craftspeople, merchants and minor nobility. Raised on monster cores, they were no more capable in battle than the aristocracy of Greenstone.

The fort's problem was not one of defences but resources as the protections incorporated into the walls consumed a lot of magic. While portions of that could be provided by essence users feeding in their own mana, not all of it could. Spirit coins and other sources of magic power were consumed not just to repel the attacks but to shield the fortress town from the power of the storm.

The town had been promised additional mana accumulators that could concentrate ambient magic, along with new storm accumulators to harness the power of the storms. The outlying fort had been a low priority in a busy time, so those supplies had yet to arrive.

This group of shabs weren't an existential threat to the fort, which would be able to hold them off. The danger was that killing the resilient monsters was consuming more and more of the fort's dwindling resources. These monsters would not breach the fortress town but their attack meant that the next group just might.

The commander of the fort was Merrick Harlowe, a minor local lord and silver-rank core user. He watched unhappily from the walls while the defenders cheered as the town's defences took down the first shab. All he saw in the dead monster was the expenditure it had taken to kill it.

Harlowe's head came up as he saw a flash of golden light, distinct from the electric arcs thrown out by the monsters. It was hard to see through the storm slapping against the dome barrier but he saw something moving out amongst the monsters. There were more flashes of gold and pain was added to the high-pitched shrieks of the monsters, loud enough to be heard over the storm.

The attacks against the fort slowed and then stopped as the monsters started shooting lightning at something in their midst. The storm was picking up and the defenders lost sight of the monsters altogether, seeing only the flashes of the lightning and the bursts of gold light amongst them.

The lord ordered the defences to be stilled, preserving their resources. Even if whatever was out there didn't kill the monsters, there was a good chance it would drive them off. He also didn't want to harm whoever or whatever had come to their aid, given that it was almost certainly an adventurer. Over time, the lightning amidst the monsters diminished and the screams of the monsters fell away. The gold flashes stopped and only the sound of the storm remained.

A woman came close enough to the gates to be seen through the driving rain. She was a human with dark skin, her white hair and white clothes drenched in monster blood and rainwater. She looked exhausted, a bloody but beautiful white sword dangling from one hand.

"What are you waiting for?" the lord bellowed. "Open the gates."

Chapter 480

Supplies

Supply depot number three was in the same warehouse district where Jason had carried out his big trade, not far from the main markets of Livaros. He portalled to the destination square in the market and made his way on a black horse with glowing white mane and hooves.

There were plenty of different means of transport in the city, from floating platforms to flying carriages to adventurers riding familiars, like Jason. One of the things Jason had learned was that permits were required for air travel in the city, so he stayed on the ground.

Riding past the warehouse belonging to Lord Casowich, Jason thought back to his expensive deal. He had no idea how much attention it had garnered but he now had the royal family looking squarely at him. He hoped the diamond-rank coin and all the crystal wash drew attention from the other materials he acquired as part of the deal. Now more than when he conceived it on the journey between worlds, his personal project could prove important should he need to flee the Storm Kingdom.

The supply depot was a city block worth of warehouses commandeered as a distribution centre for critical resources. Carts and wagons were rolling in or out the gates or taking to the air and flying away. It looked like everything was going to crash together any moment but Jason knew there was some pattern to the chaos as everyone and everything managed to careen around each other with no more incident than some angry shouts.

Jason had Shade dissolve his horse form, the familiar vanishing back into Jason's shadow as Jason observed the activity. Standing out of the way, outside the depot yards, he closed his eyes and used his other senses to track the comings of the depot. He felt there was something to learn from the seemingly chaotic yet somehow organised tumult of activity and entered an almost meditative state as he studied it for several minutes.

"You lost, friend?"

One of the depot workers had noticed Jason and come to see if he was alright. Jason's eyes snapped open and he gave the man a friendly smile.

"No, I'm fine, thank you."

Jason set off into the depot. Especially after having studied the patterns by which the place operated, Jason found his aura manipulation skills extremely handy for navigating. The same skills he could use to blend into a crowd let him subconsciously alert rushing

depot workers to his presence, while their focus allowed him to read their intentions from their auras. Despite moving at a measured pace as people rushed around him, Jason was always where the workers weren't in any given moment, despite neither himself nor the people around him needing to move from each other's way. Like a languid fish swimming beneath a boat, he passed through the depot unnoticed and unremarked.

Making his way into a warehouse, he saw essence users employing their powers to load supplies to or from wagons and carts. He saw telekinesis, superhuman strength and even someone teleporting crates. In a corner of the warehouse, someone summoned a golem and directed it to start loading goods.

Jason's goal was a cluster of silver-rank auras with enough magical items on their persons that they had to be adventurers, although there were also core users amongst them. Most of them were smothering the magic items with their auras, a typical habit of stealth-focused adventurers, but that wasn't an obstacle to Jason's powerful senses.

Guild elites were too valuable to turn into delivery workers, so these were most likely disregarded adventurers like Jason. He wasn't sure about the core users, as they seemed more like ordinary people mixed in with actual adventurers, based on their mediocre aura control and lack of magic items.

Jason went through the warehouse to a small distribution area where the adventurers were gathered in several queues. They were waiting to be handed off goods for transport and it quickly became evident that they all had dimensional storage spaces. Jason joined the end of the shortest queue.

The adventurer in front of him was an elf with tawny, lightly-freckled skin. Her hair was cut short and practical, showing off a mix of autumn leaf colours. Like Jason, the beautification of silver rank had been immensely flattering without turning her into a Rufus or Sophie, who were absurdly attractive even at lower rank. There was a cute green frog with big eyes sitting on her shoulder.

She turned to give Jason an assessing glance as he approached.

"G'day," Jason said. "Is this where we pick up goods for transport contracts?"

"That's right," she said.

"Jason Asano," he said, offering his hand and she shook it.

"Autumn Leal," she introduced herself. Jason's eyes flicked back to her hair but he didn't say anything about it.

"Is everyone here a portal user?" he asked instead.

"Don't I wish," she said. "If you can portal, these contracts are worth way more contribution points. Most portal users are on rapid-response duty, so most of us just have

storage spaces and are here to be walking cargo holds. Some of us aren't even adventurers and do storage space transport for a living."

"I was wondering about the core users. You're an adventurer, though, with that gear."

Autumn had the typical load-out of a spellcaster. Her clothes were magically reinforced cloth, loose enough to be unrestrictive but not so much as Jason's preferred combat robes. The colours were brown and green; not exactly camouflage but they would blend well into the local wilderness areas. She had wands strapped to each thigh and he could sense enchanted amulets, bracelets and anklets hidden under her clothes. Her boots were magical and practical. Around her waist was the magically shielded potion belt that was the most obvious giveaway for adventurers. Many wealthy citizens carried them as well, but they usually chose ones that were lower in capacity and higher in fashion.

"What about you?" she asked, looking Jason up and down. He was wearing tan shorts, a floral shirt, sandals and a straw hat.

"What?" Jason asked. "Don't I look ready to spring into action?"

"If by action you mean a pitcher of ice tea, then sure."

"Oh, that's a good idea."

Jason plucked a coconut shell cup out of the air, fruit leaves and a straw sticking out from the top. He took a long sip, letting out a happy moan.

"Oh, that's the good stuff. You don't know where a bloke can get little paper umbrellas, do you?"

"You're one of those people that never takes things seriously, aren't you?"

"Things take me seriously," Jason said with a smile not quite as light-hearted as he intended. "I try not to encourage them."

He put his drink away and pointed at the front of the line they'd been inching closer to as they talked.

"I think you're about to be up."

She turned her head to glance at the person in front of her. He was casually tossing crates into a black void on the floor as depot workers brought them to him and a supervisor checked them off a list.

"You know," Autumn said, turning back to Jason, "you'll never catch the attention of a guild like this."

"I'm going to join a guild some friends are already in. It operates a long way from here, so I'm just looking to ride out the monster surge without getting killed or marrying a princess before I skip town."

"Marrying a princess."

“Yep.”

“You see that as a particular danger?”

“Admittedly, I’ve only done one of those things before, but you can never be too careful.”

“There is some easygoing charm happening here but I’m not sure it’s enough to lure any princesses in.”

“Fingers crossed,” Jason said, pointing to the front of the line once more. The man in front had just left and the supervisor was looking at her. The frog hopped off her shoulder, growing to the size of a Saint Bernard as it dropped to the ground. It opened its mouth and Autumn took out the contract manifest, which she handed to the supervisor. Despite having been inside a frog, the papers were dry and unwrinkled.

The supervisor went over the documents quickly before giving directions to his depot worker subordinates. Shortly after, pallets of supplies were arriving and the frog started whipping out its tongue to take them into its body.

“That’s an interesting familiar you’ve got there,” Jason said.

“Dimension frog,” Autumn said. “I may not have the rarest essences in the world but I was lucky enough to find this guy and that’s enough for me.”

She patted the frog affectionately on the back.

“You’re a good boy, aren’t you Neil?”

“That,” Jason said with a grin, “is a superb choice of name.”

The first depot was only Jason’s first stop before he was ready to leave the city. He had three more stops to pick up additional goods before he’d be ready to head out. The next stop was a second distribution centre, followed by a dock where he had to wait for the goods to be unloaded from a ship. The last pickup point was a temple.

Jason had heard things about the temples of Fertility, although he’d never seen one himself. Despite being a major deity, Fertility’s temples were always tucked away in the far reaches of any temple district. The reason for this was that their decorations leaned heavily on murals depicting the process of fertility in action.

The design of the temple was quite plain, fronted by a flat wall containing the main doors. Side walls moved back at forty-five-degree angles, allowing three walls of murals to be seen from the street. As Jason approached the temple he spotted a priest running off a trio of gawking teenage boys.

“Save it for the church of Lust you sweaty little mongrels!” he snarled after them as they fled, laughing loudly. Jason walked up to the priest, approaching with a casual wave.

“Uh, g’day?”

The priest turned to Jason with a smile, his anger evaporating like mist.

“Good day, sir. How can Fertility help you? Is it problems with your little man? We have pills that can solve that problem. For a modest donation, of course.”

“Hey, my eyes are up here, cobber,” Jason said as the priest stared at Jason’s shorts. “Why is that the first thing you assume?”

“It’s what most men come here for.”

“It’s not what I came for.”

“Don’t be so hasty, friend. If you’d like to add a little pep to your—”

“My little man’s pep is entirely adequate, thank you very much.”

The priest gave Jason a sympathetic look.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it? We can help with that you too. For a modest donation, of course. Naturally, you’ll be absolved of all parental responsibilities. And rights, of course. Our clergy have to come from somewhere.”

“You have prostitutes breeding little priests?”

“We’ll need to run you through some tests first, obviously. You don’t seem to be human, despite appearances...”

Jason held up his hands.

“Okay, mate, just stop. I’m an adventurer, here to pick up supplies for a delivery contract.”

“Well, why didn’t you say so?”

“Because you wouldn’t stop talking about my little man!”

“So, you do want the pills? There is a modest donation, of course...”

“There’s nothing wrong with my little man!”

Confines were tight in the fortress town of Carazela, with space at a premium both in the building and on the streets to accommodate all the people taking shelter. A woman emerged from the stone communal shower building into a narrow street. The blood and rain had been washed from her white hair and dark skin. She was wearing fresh clothes from her dimensional bag; simple pants, shirt and shoes. It was all made of high-quality white fabric with gold trim.

Merrick Harlowe had been waiting for her to come out. Merrick was only minor nobility from an outlying region, with less prestige than even a wealthy commoner in Rimaros but he was neither ignorant nor a fool. The woman might not have any markings on her outfit

but he had seen her sword and armour and he saw her clothes now. He knew the garb of Purity's faithful when it was right in front of him.

This left him in a difficult position. He should, by all accounts, press her on it. If she was a former member of the faith who had discarded the symbols but not the valuable clothes and tools, that was one thing. If her faith remained true, then she was an enemy.

Merrick could not afford to look at her that way. Not only had she come to their aid in a moment of need but she was unquestionably strong. The fort had men that could match her silver rank but they were not the equal of this demonstrably powerful woman. The fort's silver rankers were both core users; a mason and a farmer who rarely ever used their abilities for combat. Now that she was inside the walls, she could take the fort apart single-handed.

"My presence makes you uneasy," she said, her voice calm and strong. "I'll leave."

"No," Merrick said, holding up his hands. "Please. The storm still rages and you gave us desperately needed assistance. Without your timely intervention, our circumstances would have become far more dire."

"You exaggerate. Your walls are strong and high."

"But our supplies are low. Our mana and storm accumulators are burning out. Our spirit coin supply dwindles and our food is running short. Many people are sheltering here and we're running on a ragged edge. Your arrival could not have come at a more fortuitous time."

As he spoke, Merrick realised that he wasn't just spinning a tale. He didn't care what god she worshipped if it meant keeping his people safe.

"Please," he said. "We don't have much in the way of hospitality to offer, but allow me to show you what gratitude I can. My name is Merrick Harlowe, the local lord and commander of the militia here."

She gave him a smile that was like the sun coming out from behind a cloud.

"My name is Melody Jain. It's very nice to meet you, Merrick Harlowe."

Chapter 481

Enemies Even I Would Fear

Jason left through the main doors of the temple of Fertility, his storage space freshly loaded with supplies. He was motivated, having discovered how critical the temple's delivery was during the monster surge. Fortress towns were of paramount importance during a surge, sheltering the evacuated populace of the surrounding villages and towns. Most of those people were normal citizens who could not live on spirit coins the way an essence user could, making the food supply a significant logistical problem.

The temple of Fertility maintained a series of secure stations in the outlying areas where regular supplies runs weren't viable during a surge. These stations were much like fortress towns except that instead of people they contained the infrastructure to rapidly grow large amounts of food in a short time and relatively small area.

These fortified farms were critical to preventing starvation in the more remote fortresses while being just as subject to monster attack. This meant that they not only required the resources to maintain their defences but also their ability to grow food. While the supplies could be at least somewhat intermittent, going too long without fresh magical provisions meant that whole crops would be lost. That, in turn, consigned people in the forts to a slow, hungry death.

Leaving the temple, Jason had a renewed sense of purpose. It was a job well worth doing and, for once, he was the appropriate person to do it. The Builder and his interdimensional circus was the job of the people with the power to actually do something about it, at least until Jason was inevitably dragged back into it all.

The royal palace was an opulent paradise the size of a large town, with marble buildings set amongst gardens landscaped to the level of art. The grounds were vast enough to have districts, from walking trails meandering through a rainforest to a sea of flowers. A painstakingly sculpted and maintained hedge maze formed a massive disorientation ritual. Ordinary mazes posed little challenge to those with potent magic senses.

It wasn't just the look of the palace that made it feel like a slice of heaven. The invisible protective dome over the sky island also filtered the sunlight to fall on the palace exactly the way the designers intended, varying from district to district. Soft light fell on courtyards of people taking tea while bright rays lit up the gardens. Fresh aromas from the

rainforest and the sweet scent of flowers wafted through the grounds on a meandering, magically cultivated breeze.

While the palace seemed open and inviting, it was the most heavily defended area of the most heavily defended sky island in Rimaros. Only a small handful of people knew the full scope of the defences it could call upon at need.

In Pallimustus, there was always tension in any powerful group between its members and the people who protected them. When power meant being a high-rank essence user, usually an adventurer, did such people truly need protection? If so, who would do the protecting? If the people protecting them were more powerful, then why were they not the ones in power? Historically, more than a few coups had been born from this very question.

In many places, the role of guard had become ceremonial, more akin to servants than being required to repel attacks. In Rimaros, the solution came in the form of a guild. The Sapphire Crown was one of the most powerful guilds in Rimaros due to the support it received from the royal family, many of whom were amongst its most capable members. In return for the excellent support they received, all non-royal guild members were required to periodically serve within the royal guard.

Membership in the Sapphire Crown was incredibly stringent, with most members coming from guild families. Loyalty was paramount and all members were put through rigorous examinations to shield against compromise. All members underwent examination quarterly but while serving in the guard, this increased to anywhere from monthly to weekly, depending on specific duties.

Trenchant Moore stood out in the guild for being a human. Rimaros was one of the few cities where celestines were in the majority and humans were an even smaller minority in the royal guard than in the population at large.

Amongst people that mixed darker skin tones with hair of metallic and gemstone colour, Trenchant stood out with his pale skin and dark hair. He was lean and angular, his features as sharp as the gaze of his icy blue eyes. If not for his gold rank, his white skin would have long ago tanned under the tropical sun.

Trenchant was not currently serving in the guard, so was curious as to why he'd been summoned to the palace. The guilds had huge activity quotas to fill during the monster surge and the royal family did not shield the Sapphire Crown from those requirements. As a gold-ranker, Trenchant was responsible for meeting a good portion of that quota.

Not being on duty, Trenchant had a rare chance to appreciate the beauty of the grounds instead of being on alert for potential threats. Even so, he couldn't break the habit of sweeping his senses over the places where aesthetics had been chosen over security.

Moving along an open walkway, he was headed for a building that was only small by palatial standards. It was a place where royal family members and upper-tier officials conducted high-level but generally unimportant business, usually related to administration.

The choice of location, combining high security with low-key affairs, drew Trenchant's attention. Having served as a guard on and off for decades, he knew that while such places were mostly used for mundane affairs, they were also the ideal place to hold significant meetings without drawing significant attention.

He went in through the main doors to the security station where he was checked with several magical devices by the guards on duty. He knew them well but in their stoic professionalism, they treated him as a stranger.

"You're not on duty," one of the guards said. "You'll need to leave your sword."

Trenchant's hand instinctively moved to the hilt of the sword at his hip, the reaction of a sword specialist when told to relinquish his blade. The guards moved their hands to their own weapons.

"Sorry," Trenchant said, unbuckling his sword belt.

"He can keep it," a female voice said through the door. Trenchant recognised it as that of Vesper Rimaros.

"With respect, your highness," Trenchant called back, "the protocol is the protocol. I shall hand over my weapon."

"Keep it and come in," a male voice said, seemingly from all around him. He didn't recognise the voice but it carried an overpowering authority that left his instincts screaming to obey. He looked at the guards, themselves looking shaken. They shared a nod and Trenchant rebuckled his belt as a guard opened the door for him to move deeper into the building.

Inside was a conference room containing two members of the royal family and several guards. The royals were Vesper and Liara Rimaros; there was no sign of the man whose voice had ushered him in.

"The rest of you can leave," Vesper said, to the displeasure of the guards.

"Your highness, security protocols—"

"Out," Liara barked.

The guard looked unhappy but nodded his head as he waved his people out.

"My lady."

In the royal hierarchy, Vesper was the higher of the two princesses, but birthright was only part of the equation. Vesper was only silver-rank to Liara's gold, and while Vesper was a capable adventurer, Liara was a figure of accomplishment and respect in the

Sapphire Crown, the Adventure Society and amongst adventurers in general. Power, not legacy, was ever the ultimate authority.

“Seal the room please, Trench,” Liara said. “Then take a seat.”

Trenchant activated the privacy enchantments on the room and then sat opposite the princesses at the conference table.

“You are no doubt wondering why you’ve been called in here,” Liara told him.

“Yes, my lady.”

“There are sky pirates who have been spotted moving around in the outskirts of the kingdom,” Vesper said. “It’s a known group. We believe that they intend to prey on airships and lone adventurers doing supply runs to the fortress towns.”

“Scum,” Trenchant said. “Taking from those who are in most desperate need.”

“Yes,” Liara said. “Normally, those supply runs have only silvers, maybe a low-value gold-ranker on board. These pirates, however, while a bunch of core-using trash, have two gold-rankers. With the demands on the time of gold-rank adventurers during the surge, the outer reaches of our territory aren’t as defended as they normally would be. Add in a regular schedule of heavily supplied airships and the pirates have grown bold.”

“You’re dedicating some adventurers to the supply ships to catch them out? Bait ships?”

“The Adventure Society is, yes,” Liara said.

“But that isn’t why I’m here,” Trenchant said. “Not all of it, anyway. You don’t have secret meetings just over trapping some pirates.”

“We’re going to place you on a ship,” Vesper said. “Unlike the other vessels, where the gold-ranker will be supported by silvers, yours will be a normal crew complement.”

“If I end up fighting pirates... I can handle a couple of core-using bottom feeders, even if they are gold, but not while protecting the rest of the crew from whatever silver-rankers the pirates have. You know they don’t exactly send the best adventurers on those runs. It’s all utility powers and second-raters. A lot of them won’t be adventurers at all.”

“Use your discretion,” Liara said. “Don’t risk the airship and the people aboard if you feel they aren’t up to the task. Run, if that is the best course. We will stand by whatever judgement you make.”

“Then what is any of this in aid of?” Trenchant asked.

“There will be an adventurer on that ship. Silver-rank. We want your assessment of how he conducts himself. You are not to mention this aspect of your assignment, how it was assigned or by whom to anyone outside of this room. You are not to discuss it, even with us, outside of a secure environment.”

“On the understanding that I can only agree so long as no one with more authority asks me to break those terms,” Trenchant said.

“They won’t,” Vesper said. Liara nodded.

“By what criteria do you want me to assess this man?” Trenchant asked.

“Any and all you feel warrant mention,” Liara said.

“Should I protect him?”

“Yes,” Liara said.

“No,” the male voice countermanded her. Trenchant still could not place where it was coming from. His gold-rank senses detected no one else in the room and no one should be able to listen in or communicate from outside it. The implications of that were not lost on him.

Vesper and Liara shared a look.

“However foolish the man and his choices may seem,” the voice continued, “let them play out to their conclusion.”

“Don’t let him know that you’re anything but an ordinary gold-ranker protecting the airship,” Vesper told Trenchant.

“He will know,” the voice said. “Guard, your aura has the sharpness of a blade. You cannot hide it from him, even in a scabbard. If you do run into trouble and he wishes to work with you, accept it.”

Trenchant looked to the two princesses. They nodded confirmation with troubled expressions.

“Who is this man you want me to look at?” he asked.

“Jason Asano,” Vesper said. “Outworlder. Go to the jobs hall and you’ll be given the assignment.”

“If there are no more questions,” Liara said, her tone certain that there were not, “then you may go.”

Trenchant stood up, giving Vesper a short bow and Liara a slightly shallower one.

“Your highness. My lady.”

Trenchant deactivated the privacy magic and left, after which Liara got up and turned it back on as Vesper stood up and paced. Soramir was suddenly in the room and took a seat, both women bowing to him.

“Ancestral majesty,” they greeted in unison.

“Do sit down, girls,” he said, waving them into chairs.

“Ancestral majesty,” Vesper said. “May I ask why we’re putting Asano into danger?”

"We're not," Soramir said. "We're giving him the chance to put himself into danger. I'm curious what he'll do."

"And if what he does is die?" Vesper asked.

"Then problem solved," Soramir said. "Little Zara mourned a dead man and a dead man he will be."

"Then why not kill him ourselves?" Vesper asked.

"This again?" Liara asked. "Vesper, we don't kill innocent people when what makes them inconvenient is something we did."

"Actually, we do," Soramir said, "but other outcomes are generally preferable."

"Why are we playing games?" Liara asked. "Why are you testing him?"

"Liara, you have at least some sense of the boy's secrets," Soramir said. "It's why you sent Vesper here to go find little Zila, is it not? To dig them out?"

Both Vesper and Liara paled at their revered diamond-rank ancestor being called 'little Zila.' Soramir laughed as the princesses shared a look.

"You have dug out his secrets, then?" Liara asked.

"I've seen the touch of allies and enemies on him that are not to be taken lightly. Enough to know that killing him ourselves would be unwise without learning more."

"There are things about him that would be very useful to—"

Liara was cut off by Soramir shifting his eyes onto her, the words dying in her throat.

"It is uncouth to share the secrets of others," he told her. "If it must be done then it must be done, but I've already done more than enough. Poking through the soul of a junior was already crass, especially when I was careless enough to let him notice. If you can't tease out his secrets yourself, Liara then they aren't yours to know."

"Majestic ancestor," Vesper said. "You are so far above him that there is no etiquette you owe him."

"This, Vesper, is your flaw. You assume knowledge before seeking it out. Jason Asano is already half a step into my world, to his suffering and regret."

"What does that mean?" Liara asked. "Half a step into your world?"

"It means he has faced enemies even I would fear."

"If he had enemies like that," Liara said, "there's no way he could survive."

"He didn't," Soramir said. "That's how little Zara got us into this mess."

"Ancestor, if I may ask," Liara said. "Why are you involving yourself? Family politics are below you and I was surprised that Ancestor Zila intervened, let alone, you. Is it because of Asano?"

“Yes. I suspect him to be a remarkable young man, which is why I want to put him to the test. I believe him to be the kind who finds himself in the centre of things over and over. A pawn of fate. A common destiny for outworlders, although the boy does seem to especially excel in this regard.”

“What are your intentions for him?” Liara asked.

“Marrying him into the family could potentially prove a very good idea. Or a very bad one. I think it best we find out.”

“You intend to bless the match with Zara?” Liara asked.

“Even if the family was willing to go for that,” Vesper said, “he wouldn't be. She pulled him into a mess with people more powerful than him, which sounds like a pattern he's been in before, if what the ancestor says is true. He will not be grateful for Zara adding to his troubles.”

Soramir gave Vesper an approving smile.

“You're thinking of marrying him off to someone else in the family,” Vesper guessed.

“If he's worth it,” Soramir said. “We'll watch him and see how he does. How he thinks. He could be a powerful asset or a dangerous threat, simply by his presence.”

“I still don't see how he could be either,” Vesper said. “He's just some silver-ranker. Zara pulled his name out of a hat because he conveniently died on the other side of the world with just enough accomplishments to be plausible.”

“And in ten years?” Soramir asked. “A hundred? A thousand? That boy is going to go all the way or die trying. In fact, he's done so already and it hasn't stopped him yet.”

“It won't be easy,” Vesper said. “It sounds like he's going to be hostile after what we've done.”

“Perhaps he will blame Zara,” Liara said.

“Zara didn't set a pair of diamond rankers on his path to pry out his secrets,” Vesper said. “That was you and I.”

“He doesn't know that.”

“If he can't figure out that more than Zara is moving, we definitely don't want him marrying in,” Vesper said. “I only briefly met him but he struck me as a fool, not an idiot.”

“He is angry at us,” Soramir confirmed. “He's trying to put it aside because he knows that acting on it is not in his best interest but we took something from him. Something he's been looking forward to for a long time, only for us to snatch it away the moment he found it.”

“If you're serious about potentially tying him to the family, ancestor,” Liara said, “we cannot treat him as a tool.”

“We're all tools, Liara,” Vesper said. “This is why you make a better adventurer than politician.”

“Vesper is correct in this,” Soramir said. “My attention must be on the greater threats we face, so I shall leave this affair in your hands and check-in as I feel the need. The two of you make a good pair. Vesper has a grasp of the political realities while you, Liara, have thoroughness and caution. And ethics.”

Chapter 482

True Elites

On the island of Livaros, the sky port was the busiest part of the skyline. Looming towers had skyships docked up and down their exteriors while more ships drifted in and out of the port air space. It was busy enough that Jason wondered how air traffic control was managed.

The ships came in a startling array of designs. Some looked like ordinary ships, complete with sails, although Jason doubted they were propelled by anything so mundane as ordinary wind. Others were almost spaceship-like with sleek hulls of dark metal, but most fell somewhere in-between the sailing ship and UFO designs. The most common type of skyship looked like an ordinary sailing vessel but, instead of sails, had glowing crystals suspended from scaffolding outside of the hull. The crystals were the size of a small car and each ship using them had as few as three or as many as eight, depending on the size of the vessel.

Jason happily gawped like a tourist as he wandered through the port at ground level. He was also dressed like a tourist, once again in shorts and a very pink floral shirt. He relied on his magical senses to avoid bumping into anyone as he craned his neck around, watching all the activity above. Unsurprisingly, even the low-altitude air traffic present in the rest of the city was heavily restricted here. The only flying vehicles, aside from the skyships themselves, were magical wagons moving up and down the outsides of the towers to load the airships.

Dimensional storage was expensive, and people with personal storage spaces even more so. This was why some didn't even bother with adventuring and became professional porters. Most airships still used both, however, filling their holds with dimensional storage crates.

Jason arrived at the tower he was looking for, a circular edifice of steel and glass that was the closest Jason had seen to contemporary architecture from his own world. The main difference was the massive freight doors through which wagonloads of goods were being hauled in and out. Not all of the wagons moving goods could fly and the interior of the building, as Jason discovered going in, was an array of large elevating platforms ringing the interior of the tower.

In the centre of the busy room was a series of reception desks, all rushing through the queues assembled in front of them as quickly as they could. Jason spotted Autumn, the elf he had met the other day, in one of the queues as he joined. She was a few spaces

ahead of him but after she was done, stopped to wait. Jason reached the desk, showed his delivery contracts and was given a boarding document. He then went over to talk to Autumn. Her frog, Neil, was sitting on her shoulder again.

“I thought you had a portal power,” she said.

“I’m a new boy,” Jason said. “Unless they want me to portal around town, I need to do some travelling, first. I’m only shipping out, though. I’m getting dropped in the outer reaches and making my way alone from there. It’s all very scary.”

“You’re a stealth specialist?”

“A friend of mine told me that the powers you awaken reflect who you are.”

“I’ve heard that. It’s a common theory.”

“Well, it’s cowardice all the way for me, so, stealth powers.”

“Just be careful and I’m sure you’ll be fine. They wouldn’t send you out if they thought you’d die.”

“Don’t worry; I have special skills. Did you know there’s a high-pitched shriek you can make that tricks monsters into thinking you’re a mewling infant and many of them leave you alone?”

She gave him a sceptical look.

“It’s not even a power,” he continued. “It’s just something I discovered by accident.”

“We’re probably on the same ship since we picked up our supplies together,” she said, ignoring his ongoing nonsense. “Which ship do they have you on?”

“It’s called, hang on...”

Jason checked his boarding paper and then frowned, his expression thoughtful.

“...*Zila’s Promise*. Hmm.”

“Same here,” Autumn said. “Is something wrong?”

“It’s nothing,” Jason said, looking around and then pointing. “Elevating platform six, that’s us.”

They went over to the platform and waited for it to come back down, all the platforms being in heavy use. They rode up, crowded in with wagons and carts. These were all magically propelled, even if they didn’t fly. From what Jason had seen, animal-drawn vehicles were a minority in Rimaros. In Arnote, around the town market, he’d seen wagons drawn by heidels. He still didn’t care for the creepy, two-headed lizard-horses.

In Livaros, animal-drawn vehicles seemed to be a point of prestige and he’d occasionally spotted wealthy carriages, flying or otherwise, drawn by exotic animals or magical beasts. The rich seemed to share Jason’s aversion to heidels, but probably because poor people used them.

"You're not human, are you?" Autumn asked him as the platform ascended through the inside of the tower. They were close to the glass and got a good view of the city. The platform made regular stops for wagons, carts and people to unload onto the airships docked to the exterior of the tower.

"No," Jason said, pulling out a sandwich. "Want one?"

"I brought my own snacks," she said, tapping Neil on the back. The frog opened his mouth and a bag larger than the frog himself emerged. Jason smiled as the bag warped to its full size. Watching larger items come out of small storage spaces was almost cartoon-like in how the object seemed so pliable only to spring into its normal shape and size, wholly unaffected by the process.

"What?" she asked him, then popped a glazed nut from the bag into her mouth.

"You don't want to know what I was thinking."

"Now I really want to know."

"I was just wondering about tying a giant firework to a cart so I could ride it and chase down a flightless bird."

Autumn blinked, nonplussed.

"That's really what you were thinking?"

"It probably wouldn't work. I'd fly off the edge of a desert gorge, hover in the air briefly with a put-upon expression and then fall, kicking up a dirt cloud as I hit the ground."

"A desert?"

"Yep."

"In the famously wet and humid sea of storms."

"I don't make the rules."

"Is this some kind of ruse to make people underestimate you?"

"You asked."

"What about your eyes? Is that something to do with not being human?"

"No, that's just the side effect of a power."

"A perception power?"

"Partly. It helps me sense dimensional anomalies. Astral space apertures, that kind of thing."

"Why do I get the impression that you're never quite telling the truth, even when you aren't lying?"

"Because I'm clearly a man of mystery. I lead a life of danger, excitement and baked goods."

"I can tell by the way you're dressed."

“How good is this shirt? I found it in one of the smaller market districts near supply depot seven.”

“Is it designed to repel any princesses that try to marry you?”

“You don’t think they’d like it?”

“It doesn’t exactly scream ‘man of action.’ Don’t princesses normally go for the manly, heroic type?”

Jason immediately thought of Humphrey. He also vaguely recalled hearing something about Rufus and a princess.

“You may be right; let’s call that a bonus on top of getting to look so snazzy.”

He jabbed his half-eaten sandwich emphatically.

“I am not going to marry any princesses,” he insisted. “That’s how you end up slaying dragons and I’ve got nothing against dragons. One of my friends is a dragon.”

“One of your friends is a dragon?”

“Yeah, he’s a real little scamp. Loves biscuits. Proper biscuits, not scones. Ooh, I should make some savoury scones. I’m just getting back into cooking. Maybe I shouldn’t. I think that’s where the princess problem started in the first place.”

Autumn was swiftly learning that, with Jason, it was tricky to stay focused as he hijacked conversations with nonsense.

“If you’re not human,” she asked, “what are you?”

“Rakishly handsome?”

“You’re silver-rank. Everyone’s good-looking.”

“Ah, but it’s not what you’ve got; it’s how you use it. Wait until you see me at the prow of the ship, wind tousling my hair. You won’t even be wondering where the sheep got that spatula from.”

“The sheep?” she couldn’t stop herself from asking.

Jason flashed her an impish grin then turned his gaze upward, as if having noticed something.

“You’ve done delivery runs like this in the past, right?” he asked.

“Not during a monster surge, but yes. It’s not monster-hunting money but it’s a way to make some relatively safe money if you have a storage power.”

“Do you know if these trips normally have a gold-ranker on them?” he asked.

“Sometimes,” Autumn said. “No one guild level, if it’s a gold. I don’t want to say dregs but they aren’t the best. I even saw one almost crash a ship because he got turned down for... anyway, he got angry and lost control of his aura. Distracted the port pilot while he

was bringing the ship into port and scraped the whole side of the ship against a docking tower.”

“That’s not ideal.”

“I prefer not to have a gold-ranker because then you get high-end silvers instead. I’ll take a team of guild silvers over a garbage gold-ranker any time, even if they do look down on the rest of us. At least they’re professional when the monsters show up. Flying monsters are frequently attracted to skyships, so it’s all but guaranteed we’ll see them now.”

“What about sky pirates? I’d love to see some sky pirates.”

“Because you’re a man of mystery and danger?”

“Exactly.”

“I’ll be happy to avoid them, thank you very much. Story pirates might be all about romance and swashbuckling but real pirates are all about murder and avoiding soap.”

Jason laughed.

“You’re probably right,” he agreed.

What Autumn said about the gold-rankers assigned to such missions didn’t match what he sensed from the ships above them. There were multiple ships with rigidly-controlled gold-rank auras, far from the dregs that Autumn described. They were accompanied by similarly elite silver-rank auras.

Given that he was sensing elites on multiple ships, was it a matter of increased security for the monster surge? That didn’t track with Jason’s understanding that the delivery missions were lower priority. Perhaps the ships in question weren’t supply ships. What drew Jason’s attention the most was a ship that had a single gold-ranker and no other auras of note.

This aura put even the other gold-rankers to shame. Even compared to gold-rankers, Jason had never felt that his aura control fell short, but this man’s control was on a whole other level. It felt less like observing an aura than it did like observing a sword. Jason kept hearing about the level of true elites, but now he understood what that looked like. The only gold-rankers he’d seen that might come close were Rufus’ father, Gabriel, and Gabriel’s teammate Callum. He couldn’t be sure, though, as he’d last sensed their auras when he was an iron-ranker with feeble aura senses.

“I think we’re here,” Autumn said as the platform stopped once more. It was on the level of the ship containing the remarkable gold-ranker, which didn’t surprise Jason at all.

“Every bloody time,” he muttered.

“What’s that?” Autumn asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” Jason said. He ate the last of his sandwich and pulled out a fruit drink in his coconut cup.

“I don’t suppose you found a line on those tiny umbrellas?”

“Sorry.”

“Did you even check?”

“I did not, no.”

Doors in the side of the building opened and the people on foot moved through while the wagons jostled for position. Unlike non-magical variants, they were better able to rotate in place, but it was still awkward.

Through the doors was a metal walkway connecting the building to the ship, ending in a cradle in which the ship was resting. The walkway led directly on deck where the first mate quickly checked their papers and ushered them out of the way. They headed for the gold-rank aura near the stern of the ship.

Trenchant Moore stood at the stern of the *Zila’s Promise*, taking in the surroundings with his aura senses. There were gold-rankers accompanied by silver-rank guild teams aboard the other ships, ready to eliminate the pirates if they showed themselves. It was an operation that needed to be wrapped up quickly with the demand for capable gold-rankers rising every day.

Adventurers and other essence users assigned to delivery contracts were boarding the ship. The adventurers with society-issued contracts sensed Trenchant’s aura and approached. He confirmed their details and warned them to stay out of the crew’s way. A couple tried to make more social approaches, guessing he was a guild member from his aura. Monster surges were a prime recruiting period for guilds and those hoping to score a membership would always be looking for opportunities. Trenchant rebuffed the smart ones with a standoffish attitude and the stupid ones with a burst of aura suppression.

Trenchant’s senses detected an unusual aura moving up through the tower on an elevating platform. It was silver-rank but with a strength rivalling that of a gold-ranker and the precise control to match. He was unable to see through the aura at all without pushing out his senses aggressively, which he would hardly do in the heavily crowded dock. If he distracted some port pilot in a critical moment it could lead to a crash. There had been a near-miss for that exact reason a couple of years ago, incurring expensive repairs and even more expensive port delays.

It was the second-strongest silver-rank aura he’d ever seen but had no trace of the overlap that marked a fourfold aura. This was a singular aura power with formidable

strength in and of itself. It was exactly the kind of aura it would take to arrest the attention of whatever Rimaros ancestor was behind Trenchant's current task. As to which ancestor, Trenchant could only guess. As far as he had known, the only diamond-ranker in the city was the namesake of the ship he was on.

As expected, the aura's owner boarded the *Zila's Promise*, approaching with a more ordinary adventurer. From the emotions in her aura, they were casual acquaintances, although she seemed to harbour a strong curiosity about her companion. Even up close, Asano's emotions were completely hidden; his aura's control every bit the equal of its strength.

At most, Trenchant could see that Asano was hiding his true strength and level of control, passing himself off as one of the less capable adventurers that otherwise occupied the ship. No one short of a gold-ranker would be able to see through it, and some of those would need to be up close. This image was reinforced by the man's outfit, from the garish shirt to the open-toed sandals to the ridiculous beverage with fruit sticking out of it.

The pair introduced themselves respectfully, confirming Trenchant's assumption of Asano's identity. He looked over the contracts from the two, seeing that Asano was to leave the ship mid-journey to make a solo trek through the outer reaches. During a monster surge, especially this one, it was a task that demanded guild-level skills. If Asano had been lacking in that regard, though, he wouldn't be worth paying attention to.

"There is a potential threat of pirates," Trenchant told Asano. "Security on the vessels delivering supplies to the outer reaches has been increased. What do you feel would be the appropriate action should the airship be attacked?"

This drew the attention of the other adventurers, especially the ambitious ones that had failed to draw any kind of positive response from the gold-ranker.

"The same thing you do in every situation," Asano said. "Assess the circumstances and use your best judgement. There's no point deciding what to do now, out of context."

Trenchant nodded but gave no further response, turning around to look out of the stern at the city spread out below.

Chapter 483

Diligent and Considerate

The *Zila's Promise* departed Rimaros airspace, heading west. It ascended to an altitude where only the most exotic or dedicated monsters would encounter them. Trenchant Moore ordered the adventurers to stay out of the way of the crew and most stuck close to where the gold ranker stood at the stern of the vessel.

Jason had a happy grin as he watched the city fall away and the Sea of Storms spread out below them. Once they moved into the clouds, he joined some of the other adventurers in sitting cross-legged on the deck, using the travel time to meditate.

The more ambitious adventurers stayed close to Trenchant, trying to engage him with very little success. Some of them threw looks at Jason, wondering why he had warranted extra attention from the gold-ranker. Most of the other passengers were experienced professional porters, either part-time adventurers or not adventurers at all. Autumn was counted in that number and joined them in heading below decks where they played card and dice games.

Several hours into the trip Jason opened his eyes and turned to look at Trenchant, who was already looking at him. Jason raised his eyebrows inquiringly and Trenchant gave a short nod. Jason got to his feet, walked to the side of the skyship and casually dropped himself over the side. No one noticed one of Shade's bodies move from Jason's shadow into one of those on the ship.

Jason threw his arms out, revelling in the sensation as he plunged through the air. Black mist shrouded his body, looking like a dark comet as he continued to drop. The mist dissipated quickly to reveal Jason in his conjured blood robe and starlight cloak. A pair of nebulous spheres that looked much like his own eyes orbited around his body.

Being a conjured item, Jason's robes were an adaptable item able to accommodate his newly purchased gear. Most prominent were the throwing darts sheathed diagonally across his chest.

Rising from below was a flock of flying dinosaur fish, more than two dozen in number. Something between a swordfish and a pterodactyl, the beaks of the silver-rank monsters were long, narrow spikes. Their wings were huge and leathery with an array of bony spines running along their forward edge.

The monsters were rising toward the airship at an angle with powerful flaps of their large wings, propelling them rapidly upward. Jason's cloak flared out around him as he descended on the reverse angle, rushing down to meet them. As he drew close, a storm of

spines rushed ahead of the monsters, shot from their wings to pepper Jason. These were no ordinary projectiles and the monsters were able to redirect them as they moved through the air.

Jason's cloak wrapped around him, shielding him from the small but numerous attacks. By the time he passed through the squall of spines unharmed, he was almost upon the monsters.

Jason didn't avoid a direct confrontation, diving straight at the monsters. He aimed right for the vanguard creature but was startled by its long head shooting forward on a tether of flexible tendons, its beak stabbing out like a spear. It missed Jason entirely. The sharp beak shot past him, to the monster's confusion, before the tether snapped back like a bungee cord and the monster's head returned to its body.

For adventurers and monsters both, higher rank meant an increasing reliance on supernatural senses. In the disorienting chaos of combat, even magically enhanced eyes and ears had their limits and could be deceived. Avoiding attacks that couldn't be seen and noticing enemies that couldn't be heard became increasingly important as enemies gained more exotic powers with each increasing rank.

Aura was critical in fooling supernatural senses, requiring far more finesse than a silence ability or invisibility power. An expert using their aura to feint created a dissonance between the ordinary and supernatural senses but, even amongst high-rankers, few could execute such refined manipulation in the chaos of combat. It was rarely considered worth the effort for a technique that was occasionally useful but never completely reliable. Only combined with the right ability did that change.

Ability: [Cloak of Night] (Dark)

- **Conjuration (darkness, light, dimension).**
- **Base cost: Moderate mana.**
- **Cooldown: None.**

- **Current rank: Silver 4 (03%).**

- **Effect (iron):** Conjures a magical cloak that offers limited physical protection. Can generate light over an area or absorb light to blend into shadows. Cloak can reduce the weight of the wearer, allowing reduced falling speed and water walking. Cannot be given or taken away, but the effect can be extended to others in close proximity, with an ongoing mana cost rising exponentially with each affected person.

- **Effect (bronze):** Cloak reflexively intercepts projectiles. Highly effective against rapid, weaker attacks, but less effective against powerful, singular attacks. Cloak allows gliding.

- **Effect (silver):** Cloak passively manipulates physical space, slightly shifting the trajectory of incoming attacks. Manipulation can be actively managed for more directed effect or to allow passage through spaces normally too small to physically traverse. Cloak allows flight for a low ongoing mana cost, increasing to a moderate ongoing mana cost while in direct sunlight.
-

Prior to reaching silver rank, Jason had long anticipated the personal flight promised by his cloak power. In practice, it was actually of limited use. Far more often, Jason used some combination of leaping with weight reduction, gliding or Shade's travel forms.

The second aspect of the power allowed Jason to manipulate the space around himself. He could shift the trajectory of attacks without actually affecting the attack by magically manipulating the space between them to constitute a greater distance. The power could, in theory, allow him to dodge without dodging.

While the power was ostensibly strong, the effect proved quite minimal, making it extremely difficult to use. It had taken months of fighting through astral spaces and transformation zones, along with significant self-healing from failed feints and dodges before Jason learned to unlock the power's potential.

The result of combining his exhaustively practised skills, vision-obscuring and space manipulating cloak and his aura manipulation formed a formidably deceptive defence. Even so, the technique lacked the reliability of an essence power that just did a thing and worked. It was Jason's most skill-intensive technique, where he matched his proficiency against the perception and skills of his enemies. While it was working more and more, only in the still-inconsistent combat trance state had Jason truly felt like the technique was mastered.

Even so, Jason continued to practise, fight after fight. Rufus had taught him to push himself to the limits and Jason had enough self-healing that his limits were pretty far. So, when faced with his first batch of monsters since returning to Pallimustus, Jason continued to push.

In this instance, the technique worked and the strange springing neck attack passed by Jason as he plunged into the flock. He reached out with a shadow arm, grabbing the creature that attacked him and pulled himself heavily into a standing position of its back. The monster went into a frenzy, thrashing in the air and shooting out more wing spines that twisted in the air to turn on Jason. He ignored the projectiles as his cloak intercepted them and he conjured his dagger into his second shadow hand while casting a spell.

"Bleed for me."

Blood started seeping from the eyes of the monster, which only made its frenzied thrashing worse and it stopped climbing in altitude. Maintaining his grip using one shadow

hand, he used his dagger in the other to leave a pair of shallow cuts on the monster's back. As he did, he cast a second spell.

“Carry the mark of your transgressions.”

A brand was marked in the monster's flesh by a wisp of transcendent damage. The creature's flailing was no longer allowing it to maintain flight and it started to drop. The other monsters arrested their ascent, swooping around to assist their stricken flock-mate. They all fired their wing spines, which danced around Jason like a living cloud. They still failed to penetrate Jason's cloak as it swirled around him, the attacks revealing that the article of clothing it appeared to be was a lie. It shrouded him in the magical darkness that was its true nature.

The other monsters continued to wheel around Jason and his unwilling mount, angling for a shot at Jason with their strange head-projectiles. As they jostled for position, Jason blasted out his aura at full strength. The raw power of it spooked the monsters, causing them to falter in their flight. They recovered immediately but were left in disarray.

On the skyship, some of the adventurers had noticed Jason's casual departure and were wondering amongst themselves why he'd jumped off the ship. Some of them asked Trenchant but he just told them to keep their attentions to their own affairs. They went back to muttering amongst themselves until every essence user on the ship felt an aura explode below them like a bomb.

Jason launched himself from the back of the stricken bird while casting another spell.

“Your fate is to suffer.”

As he did, one of the eye spheres around Jason left his orbit and sank into the wounded monster. At the same time, Shade's bodies swarmed out of Jason's cloak to float amongst the birds in their disarray. The familiar was unaffected by the spines still flying around as they passed through his insubstantial bodies.

Jason fell into one of Shade's bodies and emerged from another, on the far side of the flock. Again he used a shadow arm to grab a creature and pull himself onto its back. With his shadow arms as a tether, he stood astride the creature even as it bucked under him, surveying the state of his new mount's companions. They were starting to panic as radiant butterflies spread amongst them, bestowing their deathly payload and multiplying. It wouldn't be long until he was ready to take the extermination to the next stage; he just needed time for the afflictions to propagate and do their work.

There was a Shade body near each of the monsters and shadow arms burst out from all of them, entangling the wings of the monsters. The arms lacked the strength to bind the monsters entirely but could at least impede their ability to fly as they wished.

Ability: [Hand of the Reaper] (Dark)

- Conjunction (disease, magic, unholy).
 - Cost: Low mana-per-second.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Silver 4 (02%).

 - Effect (iron): Conjure a highly flexible, semi-substantial shadow-arm that can extend or shrink. Conjured items can be conjured into the shadow hand. Can be used to make melee special attacks. Special attacks made using the arm inflict [Creeping Death] in addition to other effects.

 - Effect (bronze): You can conjure a second arm. Special attacks made using the arms inflict [Rigor Mortis] in addition to other effects.

 - Effect (silver): Special attacks made using the arms inflict [Weakness of the Flesh] in addition to other effects. Numerous additional arms can be conjured from nearby shadows but only arms directly connected to the conjurer can bestow afflictions and use melee special attacks. The rank of conjured arms not connected to the conjurer is one rank below that of the conjurer. Up to two arms may be directly connected to the conjurer.

 - [Creeping Death] (damage-over-time, disease, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until the disease is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

 - [Rigor Mortis] (affliction, unholy, stacking): Penalty to the [Speed] and [Recovery] attributes. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Each time a new instance is inflicted, deals necrotic damage for each existing instance.

 - [Weakness of the Flesh] (affliction, magic): Negates immunities to disease and necrotic damage. This includes intrinsic immunities, such as from not having a biology or corporeal form. Cannot be cleansed while any disease affliction is in effect.
-

The frantic monsters were no longer controlling the spikes that had been flying through the air, which had fallen away as the monsters tried to flee. The shadow arms gripping their wings meant they struggled to remain aloft, let alone control their flight. They kept getting in each other's way as they struggled to free themselves from the annoyance. Shade made sure to position his bodies to obscure the creatures' vision, exacerbating the

problem. All the while, Jason's afflictions were marking their flesh with patches of dead flesh pustules seeping dark blood.

The damage was progressing faster than was normal for silver-rank monsters. They had sealed their fate from the outset by levying hundreds of attacks against Jason with their spines.

Ability: [Hegemony] (Sin)

- Aura (holy, unholy).
- Base cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Silver 4 (03%).

- Effect (iron): Allies within the aura have increased resistance to afflictions, while enemies within the aura have their resistance to afflictions reduced. Enemy resistances are further reduced for each instance of [Sin] they are suffering from.

- Effect (bronze): Inflicts an instance of [Sin] on enemies that make physical or magical attacks against allies within the aura. Instances applied in this way cannot be resisted.

- Effect (silver): Aura can be extended over a larger area before aura strength becomes compromised. Transcendent damage dealt by enemies within the aura is downgraded to either resonating-force or disruptive-force damage, depending on the source.

- [Sin] (affliction, curse, stacking): All necrotic damage taken is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

All the monsters that attacked Jason were drenched in sin as the price of their transgression against him. As a result, Jason's other afflictions desiccated their life force with necrotic power as their bodies died for no more reason than Jason wanted them to. The afflictions continued to multiply with every passing moment, the damage rising at an exponential rate.

Jason didn't want them to scatter too far but their suffering gave them powerful motivation to break away. The monster under him rolled and thrashed as Jason held on with his shadow arm and he let it go, his cloak taking the shape of dark wings, speckled with starlight. He cast another spell.

"Feed me your sins."

The red glow of life force shone from each of the monsters, but every light was filled with black and purple taint. The taint drained away in streams to converge on Jason who absorbed it all. As the taint rushed out of the monsters, shining blue, silver and gold light

was left its place. The glow of life force returned to the bodies of the monsters, taking the bright light into their bodies with it.

Ability: [Feast of Absolution] (Sin)

- Spell (recovery, cleanse, holy).
 - Base cost: Low mana.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Silver 4 (02%).

 - Effect (iron): Cleanse all curses, diseases, poisons and unholy afflictions from a single target. Additionally, cleanse all holy afflictions if the target is an ally. Recover stamina and mana for each affliction cleansed. This ability ignores any effect that prevents cleansing. Cannot target self.

 - Effect (bronze): Enemies suffer an instance each of [Penance] and [Legacy of Sin] for each condition cleansed from them.

 - Effect (silver): Increase cost to moderate to affect all afflicted enemies and allies in a wide area.

 - [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.

 - [Legacy of Sin] (affliction, holy, stacking): Target is considered more damaged for the purpose of execute ability damage scaling. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

Transcendent damage started burning the monsters from the inside out and they began falling from the sky, screaming. Even before they died, rainbow smoke trailed behind them as they fell. None of them struck the water, burned into nothingness before reaching the sea below.

- You have defeated [Skyhunter Marlin].

 - [Skyhunter Marlin] has been wholly annihilated. It has been looted automatically.

 - [Monster Core (Silver)] has been added to your inventory.
 - [Skyhunter Needle] has been added to your inventory.
 - 10 [Silver Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 100 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 1000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

As loot piled into Jason's inventory, Shade's bodies gathered around Jason and started vanishing into his shadow cloak.

"Mr Asano," Shade said. "I will take the liberty of masking your enhanced mana and life force, since the adventurers on the ship may be able to sense them."

"Thank you, Shade. Diligent and considerate as ever."

Jason's mana had already skyrocketed from draining the afflictions of the monsters. His life force was quickly climbing due to the passive power that worked alongside his Feast of Absolution ability.

Ability: [Sin Eater] (Sin)

- Special ability (recovery, holy).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Silver 4 (02%).

- Effect (iron): Increased resistance to afflictions. Gain an instance of [Resistant] each time you resist an affliction or cleanse an affliction using essence abilities.

- Effect (bronze): Gain an instance of [Integrity] for each affliction you resist or remove using essence abilities.

- Effect (silver): Health, mana and stamina gained through your own essence abilities of the drain and recovery type can exceed the normal maximum. Excess health, stamina and mana deplete over time until the normal maximum is reached.

- [Resistant] (boon, holy, stacking): Resistance to afflictions is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Consumed to negate instances of [Vulnerable] on a 1:1 basis.

- [Integrity] (heal-over-time, mana-over-time, stamina-over-time, holy, stacking): Periodically recover a small amount of health, stamina and mana. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

Sin Eater transformed the vast number of afflictions on the monsters into a healing effect on Jason. He hadn't been injured, but the same power meant that Jason could exceed what would otherwise be his maximal life force, taking him from the range of an essence user into that of a large monster. The extra life force would allow Jason's body to completely resist injury until the extra life force was consumed or drained away over time. For the moment, though, it was unnecessary. The monsters had failed to injure Jason at all.

Healers often awakened perception powers that let them sense life force, as did assassins and others with powers not unlike Jason's. As for his excess mana, anyone with sharp enough magic senses would notice the massive excess Jason currently possessed. Shade's ability to mask against various forms of detection would yet again prove invaluable.

Jason reflected, far from the first time, how precious his familiars were. Their companionship as they nestled within his soul even more so than their powers. Jason had spent some of his darkest days alone but for the three lovable death machines he carried inside him.

Jason sensed the last monster die out, its magic transformed into spirit coins and a monster core, deposited into Jason's storage space. Jason vanished, leaving behind a shadow cloak drifting in the sky that soon dissipated into nothing.

Chapter 484

That Doesn't Make the Pebble Important

The Geller residence was high in one of the famous garden towers of Vitesse. During monster surges, the residence welcomed many guests, from the team members of family members to various allies. Humphrey Geller's team, along with Gary, were no exception and were housed in a small suite, befitting their status as silver-rankers. The bronze-rankers were in what amounted to dormitories on the lower floors.

The suite was not large for a half-dozen people, at least by the normal kind of luxury that silver-rankers were used to. The residence was crowded, even with its expansive size, but no one complained. The Gellers didn't make friends with adventurers unwilling to rough it and the breakfast buffet being communal wasn't that rough.

The suite seemed even smaller since Clive had filled it with blackboard stands, currently covered in complex notes and diagrams. He had been working on them non-stop, Belinda resuming her old role as assistant. Her originally patchwork understanding of magical theory had been thoroughly shored-up since becoming an adventurer and the pair sounded like they were speaking another language to the rest of the team.

Even those with basic training in ritual magic, like Humphrey, Neil and Gary, were unable to follow the discussion the pair were having as they scribbled away on blackboards. The rest of the team prepared for the upcoming mission by going over maps and notes about the dam and what they knew of its defences.

Humphrey was growing increasingly anxious at the close quarters. His problem wasn't being stuck with his friends but the inability to snatch a private moment. He didn't like airing his private, personal business in front of people, even if they kept sticking their heads in. That being said, he knew that circumstances wouldn't be changing any time soon.

Humphrey stood up from the couch he was sitting on, putting down the notebook he was reviewing of his own observations made while scouting out the target site. He looked at Sophie, sitting at a table and going over sketches of the dam while absently sharing a sandwich with the puppy sitting in her lap. Humphrey walked over to her.

"Can we take a walk?" he asked quietly.

The rest of the team pretended not to be listening in. Sophie looked up, her eyes flicking to Belinda, who gave her an urging nod.

"Alright," she said. She sat the remains of her sandwich on the table and got up. Puppy Stash pounced at the sandwich, bouncing off the magical bubble that suddenly appeared around it.

"Boo!" the puppy jeered at the laughing Neil, who had used one of his shield powers on the snack. Sophie and Humphrey left the room as Stash turned into a brightly kaleidoscopic tropical bird, flapping across the room to attack Neil.

The halls of the Geller residence were busy and there was no shortage of people looking to greet Humphrey. He walked next to Sophie, neither of them talking to the other.

"Roof garden?" she suggested finally breaking the silence as they searched for a private spot.

"It's been reserved for gold-rankers," he said.

In the end, they found a balcony that was just as crowded as everywhere else and jumped off. They both had flight permits from when they had been operating out of Vitesse with Clive. Humphrey called out his dragon wings while Sophie floated on the wind and they glided down to a nearby public park. They were not hard to find in the City of Flowers. Contrary to the Geller residence, the park was mostly empty; monster surges weren't a popular time for family fun days.

The pair found a park bench and sat next to each other in awkward silence. This was their first time truly alone since learning of Jason's resurrection.

"You wanted to say something?" Sophie finally asked.

Humphrey nodded.

"This isn't easy," he said. "So many things could go wrong if I mess this up."

"You don't have to—"

"No!" he almost yelled, cutting her off. He then deflated like a balloon. "I just... for a long time, it was you, me and Clive, and Clive, well, you know."

"He'll probably marry a research paper on the benefits of a stable domestic life."

Humphrey laughed.

"Something like that. What I'm saying is that for a lot of the last couple of years, it's really been you and me."

"That's changing," Sophie said. "In a big way."

"And I'm glad the team is coming back together," Humphrey said. "A lot of teams don't survive losing a member and we haven't worked together since Jason died. His being back is the best thing I could ask for."

"But?"

“Everything is a mess right now. The team coming together and Jason coming back while a monster surge and an invasion is going on? Things aren’t going to calm down once we find Jason, either.”

“He’s not exactly the calm things down type,” Sophie agreed. “It’s bad enough when it’s just him, but now there’s Dawn and you just know he’ll be up to his neck in the Builder invasion.”

“Exactly,” Humphrey said. “I don’t see a lot of time for just you and me in all this.”

Sophie’s face fell.

“You’re saying…”

“That I’m not willing to give that up,” Humphrey said, determination shining through the nervousness on his face. “I’m not ready for there not to be any time for just you and me. I’m not giving it up. Not for the monster surge, not for the team and not… not for Jason. The only person who can make me give up on you and me is you. So, if you don’t want—”

Sophie cut him off with a kiss, gently cupping his face in her hand. She felt him go tense, then his whole body relaxed as he slipped his large arm around her.

On a skyship flying high over the Sea of Storms, a crew member was fetching supplies from one of the lower decks. After the aura blast they all felt, the captain ordered the ship made ready for a monster attack. The gold-rank adventurer had assured the captain it was fine but she took no chances and ordered her crew to make ready.

The crewman spotted movement in a dark corner. Shifting the crate he was holding to one arm, he rested a hand on the hilt of his knife and peered into the shadows. A man in a bright pink shirt, shorts and sandals emerged, holding a sandwich.

“G’day, cobber.”

The crewman relaxed.

“You’re one of the adventurers,” he said.

“That’s me. Dashing heroics at reasonable prices. Well, semi-reasonable. Can I give you a hand?”

“If you want to carry one of these crates, I won’t say no.”

“No worries, mate.”

It wasn’t hard with Jason’s silver-rank strength and he followed the crewman to the top deck with a crate tucked under his arm as he ate his sandwich. The adventurers were all at the ready, aside from Trenchant Moore. The gold-ranker didn’t seem to have moved

from where he stood when Jason had left the ship, standing at the stern with his hands clasped behind his back.

The rest of the adventurers were lining the sides of the ship, their auras agitated and fearful. Jason helped the crewman with the crate, which contained mana storage batteries for the ship's deck turrets. Normally the turrets were retracted into the ship but the captain had the ship on alert. After dropping off the crate, he moved over to the closest adventurer.

"Everyone seems a bit excitable," Jason said. "What's going on?"

"Did you not feel that blast of aura?"

"Oh, that, yeah. Almost dropped my sandwich. Still, it's just some adventurer, right?"

"How was that an adventurer? Only silver-rank, but that strong? And the way it felt; merciless, tyrannical."

"That's a little harsh," Jason muttered. "I don't think it was that bad. Slightly domineering, maybe."

"Slightly? That was the aura of something without pity or compassion, as if it were tired of the things it met still being alive."

"Now you're definitely exaggerating."

"It felt like a hand grabbing you and just squeezing until you ooze out between its fingers."

"This is starting to get hurtful."

"What?"

"Nothing."

Jason wandered over to where Autumn was standing next to her frog, currently ballooned up to be taller than Autumn herself. She felt Jason's aura approach and turned around.

"Jason! They said you went over the side."

"Dropped my lunch," he said, waving the sandwich in his hand. "Got it back, then took a look around the boat. It's my first airship, so I'm pretty excited."

She looked at him suspiciously.

"You're alright then?"

"Surprisingly," he said. "I'm usually in some kind of trouble."

His eyes flickered to Trenchant standing impassively at the rear of the ship.

"Make that always."

Someone called out, having spotted the trails of rainbow smoke below and behind the ship. Trenchant looked put upon as the adventurers, Autumn included, swamped the stern. He wandered over to Jason who was leaning on the ship's railing, letting the air wash over

him. Trenchant stood next to him, also looking out. He tapped a brooch on his chest and Jason felt a subtle magic surround them.

“Privacy magic?” he asked.

“You lack subtlety, Mr Asano.”

“It’s a personal failing, I’ll admit. In my defence, this was my first chance to cut loose since getting back.”

“You’ve been to our kingdom before?”

“I’ve been to your world before. First time visiting the Sea of Storms.”

Trenchant turned to look at Jason, about to ask more when they both felt attention on them from the stern of the ship. The more ambitious adventurers had been paying close attention to Trenchant and the distraction of the rainbow smoke only lasted so long before they spotted him with Jason once again. Trenchant tapped his brooch, dissolving the screen shielding their words from eavesdropping.

“Do try to keep a hold of your sandwich next time, Mr Asano.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Fascinated by the flying ship, Jason started befriending the crew, assisted by some barbecued meat. It was leftover from his barbecue, kept hot and fresh in his inventory. He was listening to a sailor explain the operation of the skyship’s weapons on the gun deck when the first mate called the crewman away.

“Thanks,” Jason said as the crewman departed. Then he stood with a sad smile on his face.

“I’m worried that if you keep staring at the back of my head like that, you’ll burn a hole in it,” Jason said. “The problem with magic is that’s a valid concern.”

He turned around to where Autumn was leaning against a bulkhead, Neil the frog perched on her shoulder.

“You’re not one of us, are you?” she asked.

“Us?”

“There’s only a handful of adventurers on this ship and we’re all ordinary except for the Siege Sword. And for you.”

“The Siege Sword?”

“Trenchant Moore.”

“You’ve heard of him, then.”

“He’s a famous adventurer. Which leaves me wondering what he’s doing watching over a bunch of no-name people on a nothing run.”

"It's not a nothing run," Jason said. "People need what we're bringing them. Desperately, from what I'm told."

"Sure," Autumn said. "That doesn't make it important to the royal family, though. Which makes me wonder what such a powerful member of the Sapphire Crown is doing here."

"Is that a guild?"

"It's the guild the royal guard belong to. Are you going to play ignorant about every little thing?"

"I'm not local. Really, really not local. I come by my ignorance honestly."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't owe you answers, Autumn."

"But I don't think you want me looking for them anywhere else, do you? That's why you're pretending to be some no-name adventurer."

"I'm not pretending to be on a mission. I'm on one. And don't go looking for answers elsewhere. It would be an annoyance to me but a danger to you."

"Is that a threat?"

"No," Jason said, his voice weary. "It's a warning."

"Why should I believe anything you've said to me. You've been lying since we met."

Jason slumped against the wall, looking tired. It wasn't from the fight.

"You asked me what I am," he told her. "I'm an outworlder. Heard of them?"

"No."

"It means I don't come from Pallimustus."

"What does that even mean?"

"That I'm from a place so far away that just coming here changes you forever."

"Is that why Moore is on this boat? Because you're from some strange place?"

"I doubt it. My kind may be rare but we aren't unique. I've heard there are astral magic specialists who like to study us but fresh astral magic has been easy to come by, lately. I doubt I'm worth the effort."

"Then why is he here?"

"I don't know. I'd never even heard of him until I met him. While standing next to you."

"But he's here for you."

"Probably."

"Is he protecting you?"

"Testing me, I think. I doubt he even knows why. I think the person who sent him is deciding whether or not to kill me."

“Why would someone want to kill you?”

“People always come up with something. In this case, it’ll be political expediency.”

“If you warrant Trenchant Moore following you around, why are you running around pretending to be unimportant?”

“If a prince stumbles on a pebble, that doesn’t make the pebble important.”

“You said that someone sent the Siege Sword on this mission.”

“You’re better off not knowing.”

“There aren’t many people who can send him anywhere. Is this something to do with princesses?”

“Don’t go putting stock in the things I’ve told you now. I’ve been lying since we met, remember?”

“I think you’re right. I am better off not knowing.”

He nodded.

“You’re wiser than I ever was. If you can’t afford trouble, you shouldn’t borrow it. If you don’t trust anything else I have to say, trust me on that.”

“I’m not looking for trouble. Just the opposite. I don’t want to be caught under the feet of giants.”

“I’m not a giant, Autumn.”

“No?”

“No,” Jason said. “I’m the one caught underfoot.”

Chapter 485

They Don't Send Their Best People

On an island off the coast of Vitesse, there was an Adventure Society way station where various magical vehicles were stored. In Greenstone, with its weak ambient magic, only people with the right power could operate magical vehicles. In high-magic zones, magic vehicles were available to all, but the most powerful still required the appropriate power.

Gary and Jason's team, minus the absent Jason, were in an open marshalling area, waiting for a pair of high-powered ground skimmers to be delivered. Clive and Belinda both possessed appropriate powers to pilot them. With them was an Adventure Society supervisor, Miles Cotezee, and their temporary team leader, Kenneth, son of Brian. The pair were discussing the mission with Clive and Humphrey.

"How many of the people from the briefings were found to be infiltrators?" Kenneth asked Miles.

"No one in the briefing teams turned out to be Purity or Builder agents," Miles said. "Their families and lovers were a different story and we dug out nine people working for one or the other. As planned, the speed and magnitude of the attack was too critical for them not to report immediately and they took risks that let us catch them out."

"That's not to say we got all of them," Clive said.

"I know," Miles agreed. "But we plugged a few holes and we have some people to interrogate. Hopefully, we'll learn something about their methods that will help us root out more infiltrators."

Gary and Neil were discussing their own matters of import.

"And it's a string on the end of a stick?" Neil asked.

"Kind of," Gary said. "It's not actual string, and it's usually a specially designed stick. It has a spool to hold all the special string. It needs to be quite long."

"Specially designed how?" Neil asked.

"Uh, it's a bit wobbly."

"Oh, it's a wobbly stick."

"There's also a hook on the end of the string. You put something on it that the fish will want to eat."

"This sounds like a lot of trouble. Fish aren't that hard to kill."

"It's not about killing fish."

"It's not?"

“Sometimes you let the fish go.”

“You let it go?”

“Only sometimes.”

“Isn’t catching it the entire point of the exercise?”

“Exactly. You can keep the fish if you want to eat it but, as you said, the purpose of the activity is the catching. If you let it go, it can make more fish or someone else can catch it again later.”

“This entire process sounds utterly pointless.”

Sophie and Belinda were having their own conversation, under a privacy screen provided by one of Belinda’s magic items.

“So, you didn’t...?” Belinda asked.

“We don’t have a lot of private space right now. Where would we?”

“As I recall, you’ve been quite adventurous on that front in the past.”

“I don’t think Humphrey is quite ready for all that quite yet.”

“I don’t know,” Belinda said. “You get the pants off some of those rigid, straight-laced guys and you find they’re into some crazy stuff.”

“Humphrey is not rigid.”

“Oh, come on, Soph. He’s a placard of rules some god brought to life to fight evil.”

“You be nice,” Sophie admonished. “Look, I have no objection to it. It’s been a loong time, but where would we go? It won’t be in the suite with a bunch of adventurers waiting outside the door with silver-rank perception.”

“You can do it anywhere you like. Have you seen the two of you? We could charge tickets.”

Sophie slapped her friend on the arm.

“Fine,” Belinda said. “Just record it so we can make some money selling it after.”

“Absolutely not!” Sophie said, then showed a wavering expression. “I mean, probably not. I’m definitely not going to show anyone.”

“Except me, right?”

“No!”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’m not showing anyone!”

Late in the night, Jason was on the open deck of the skyship, looking up at the stars. There were crew on watch but the passengers were below deck, sleeping or socialising. His map ability showed that they were rapidly approaching his first destination and his time

aboard the ship was coming to an end. Trenchant Moore came onto the deck, his aura masked so as to not be bothered by eager adventurers. He moved to stand next to Jason at the bow of the ship, activating his privacy screen to contain their words.

“Your people have brought me trouble I neither asked for nor deserve,” Jason said. “I can’t even make a friend without being afraid to draw them into my mess. Which is really your mess. Or the mess of the people who sent you, anyway. Autumn was scared of me and she wasn’t wrong to be.”

“What was that you were saying to Miss Leal about princesses?”

“So, they didn’t even tell you why you’re here,” Jason said. “Was it to protect me or test me? Or a bit of both.”

Trenchant looked at Jason for a long moment before answering.

“The instruction was to let you kill yourself, if that’s what you ran off and did. I’m not here to shield you from your own mistakes.”

“Makes sense. Too bad you can’t shield me from everyone else’s, but I suppose they don’t care about that so much.”

“Would you have fought if we ran into the pirates?”

“There really are sky pirates floating around?”

“Yes.”

“And they’re out here preying on people who need help the most? That’s a fight I wouldn’t feel bad about. I’m not going to and get myself killed over it, though.”

“They wouldn’t be foolish enough to attack a fort town. They’ll be going for the transports.”

“Thus all the high-end protection on those ships back at port.”

“The Adventure Society will not abandon the people caught far from the cities. Neither will the royal family. The elite adventurers will be needed soon, so they’re being sent now before... things escalate.”

“I know all about the invasion,” Jason said. “No need to tease it out of me; your bosses already know. I’ve had some run-ins with the Builder before and I’m going to have some more before we’re done kicking his little peons back to where they came from.”

“Who are you, Jason Asano?”

“A person who’s tired of dealing with people more powerful than himself. I’m just a guy looking to be an ordinary adventurer of his own damn rank. I want to take some contracts, help some people. Dashing heroics and witty banter; maybe a monologuing villain or two. I have no political ambitions and I do not appreciate being dragged into someone else’s.”

“They don’t send someone like me after ordinary adventurers,” Trenchant said. “They send me after people who make trouble.”

“I don’t make trouble,” Jason said. “Trouble made me. You tell those people that sent you that this particular puppet likes to strangle the puppet master with his strings.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“You don’t have puppets? Oh, they’re probably magic and don’t have strings, bloody hell... Look, just tell Soramir Rimaros that I’m willing to dance to his tune as long as he doesn’t make a spectacle of it.”

Trenchant’s aura showed no reaction to the name that Jason could sense but he didn’t mask his body language quite as well.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “That’s the depth of the brown stuff into which you’ve been dropped. That thing you’re feeling right now, where you’re just realising the magnitude of what you’ve been dragged into? That’s where I live. You want to know who I am? That’s who I am. Go back and tell them that.”

Jason vaulted over the side and dropped into the darkness, vanishing from Trenchant’s senses.

Clive and Belinda each took one of the provided skimmers into their storage spaces. Neil then used his Bolster power, which enhanced the next subsequently used ability, on Humphrey. Belinda copied the spell with her Mirror Magic power and used it on Clive. As a result of the boosts, Humphrey’s teleport and Clive’s portal power could transport four silver-rankers each over longer than normal distances. This allowed them to move the group, minus the Adventure Society official, to a spot a dozen kilometres from their destination.

They arrived in a clearing within the foothills of a heavily forested mountain range. Sophie and Kenneth moved swiftly to scout as Clive and Belinda pulled out the skimmers and triple-checked they were in working order. Neil, Gary and Humphrey went on alert, Neil and Gary’s frivolous attitudes vanishing as soon as they arrived in the field.

There were several reasons they were using a pair of skimmers instead of a single, larger vehicle. The skimmers were already pushing the size limit for objects that could be placed into magical storage and the approach to the dam was through a forest where large vehicles would be hard to navigate anyway.

The main issue was that they planned to split the group and approach the dam from both ends, working their way into the middle. Dividing the group was a danger but they needed to complete their objectives before the defenders had time to call in

reinforcements. If the Purity loyalists realised what the team was up to, even the attack on the valley would be a secondary priority.

The team regrouped around the skimmers, ready to set out. Kenneth took out his watch and checked the time.

“The decoy attack on the valley has been going on for the last hour,” he said. “While the hope is that this will have drawn away some of the dam’s defenders, there are no guarantees. None of the attack teams know they are making a feint but that does not mean the enemy will fail to grasp our intent.”

“Especially since the team supposed to be in charge of the attack didn’t turn up,” Belinda said.

“The teams didn’t learn about that until the last minute,” Humphrey said. “Even so, Belinda’s concern is valid.”

“It is,” Kenneth agreed. “There is a chance we may be facing even more defenders than anticipated. Even if everything went as planned and the people protecting the dam have been moved away, it won’t be all of them. At the very least, those who remain will be on alert.”

The team split up into two groups. Belinda and Clive were each necessary for a team, both to drive one of the skimmers and to provide ritual magic on site. Humphrey and Sophie went with Clive. The trio had worked together for the last couple of years and their teamwork was polished. Neil and Belinda had worked together extensively, but Gary and Kenneth were not team members. They didn’t have the rapport the team built up spending six months embedded in a monster-filled astral space or any experience working together since.

The two teams split up, the skimmers shooting off into the forest at different angles.

The fortress town of Arcazitlan was hard to access, having been dug into the wall of a rocky gorge. This was why deliveries were made by adventurers rather than airships that could easily be crushed against a wall by the regular gusts sweeping the gorge. The inaccessibility was worth the extra trouble since the defensible position put less strain on the resources powering the fort’s defences.

While some monsters might seek easier prey than the hard to reach fort, the same was not true of all. Arcazitlan was being attacked by bone feasters, emaciated humanoid monsters with dark purple flesh. Their bodies were narrow and withered; their bald heads had no eyes, nose or ears. All they had was a mouth that took up the entirety of what should have their face.

The monsters had the power to rapidly grow bone to create exoskeletal armour, razor-sharp weapons or even utility tools. Hand and foot spikes strong enough to dig into rock allowed the monsters to clamber the steep, rugged incline of the gorge.

No bigger than a person, the monsters weren't strong or tough by silver-rank monster standards. What they were was very fast and dishearteningly numerous, swarming up the wall of the gorge. To Jason, watching from atop the other side of the gorge, they looked like ants massing on the corpse of a dead animal.

He watched the fort's defences, which seemed to largely consist of force blasts that knocked away any monsters that reached the walls, slamming them into the opposite wall and then letting them drop to the ground below. Jason guessed it to be a relatively efficient defensive measure in terms of the energy consumed. The force wave itself wouldn't cost much and he also sensed the magic imbued into the opposite wall of the gorge. They weren't powerful effects; just enough to enhance impact a little and get through any resistance to non-magical damage.

This would be effective against many monsters. Large monsters would find their own weight became an enemy, while the wall impact could easily damage the relatively fragile wings of flying creatures.

The bone feasters were a dangerous foe for the fort, however. They were small, light and agile enough that their silver-rank fortitude could easily endure the fall. They also healed quickly, overcoming what damage they did suffer before climbing up again.

As Jason continued to watch, the defenders realised that their force wave defence wasn't going to eliminate the monsters. Runes on the fortress wall lit up and wind blades started shooting out, twisting in the air as they swerved out from the wall before turning in and slicing into the flesh of the monsters. A direct hit would kill one of them outright. Any impact, be it on a monster or the wall, caused the blades to explode in a ring of cutting force to lacerate the surrounding bone feasters.

Unfortunately, the monsters adapted quickly. While they had been climbing the wall unadorned, they started shielding themselves in bone armour that slowed them down but protected their withered bodies. The blades still had a large impact but no longer killed the monsters outright, while the secondary effects were even more reduced. The monsters were slowed by the armour and the need to heal up at the bottom of the gorge before they resumed climbing. Even so, the attack continued.

The commander of the fort, Mordant Kerr, stood on the battlement at the top, under an overhang of rock. In front of him was the magical wall plugging the gap between the

overhang and the battlement. It would be easier for a monster to dig through the rock than the protective wall if not for the fact that the stone around the fort had been magically reinforced.

Kerr's logistics officer, Luis, approached the commander.

"Sir, if we're going to use the scourging wind, it has to be soon. If we keep the blade runes running much longer, we won't have enough charge left in the mana accumulators to activate it."

"And if we do use it?"

Kerr was not a local, having come down from north of the Sea of Storms. That had been decades ago, yet his signature drawl was as strong as ever.

"It'll be everything we have, sir. Even the force wall won't last long. It'll be hand to hand with however many of them survive."

Kerr's eyes never left the figure standing on the other side of the gorge and the logistics officer followed his gaze.

"Is that another monster, sir?"

It was hard to see, a person-sized patch of darkness, speckled with points of light.

"No," Kerr said. "It's an adventurer. Most likely the one with our fresh supplies."

"If we use the wind, then, they can resupply us."

"They'll have fresh mana accumulators but they'll be empty," Kerr said. "Ours might be on the verge of burning out but they still have charge, which is what matters until these monsters are dealt with."

"Do you think he'll help us, sir? Is it even a he?"

"I can't rightly tell my own self," Kerr drawled. "Man or woman, though, they ain't likely to chip in. They'll be waitin' for us to clear the monsters out."

"The Adventure Society don't much care about us out here," Luis said. "They don't send their best people on delivery runs."

"Which is why they tell 'em to leave the defendin' to the defenders," Kerr said. "Can't see their aura to tell if they seem worth a damn. They always send stealthers on these missions."

"So, what do we do, sir? You need to decide about the scourging wind or time will choose for us."

"I think we'll have to risk using it," Kerr said. "Stop the blade runes and get the militia ready to..."

The commander trailed off as a shadowy figure descended from above the overhang. Then the adventurer across the gorge vanished, emerging from the figure, the light-

speckled shadow wrapped around it unfurling into wings of darkness and starlight. The adventurer hovered in the air, the slow undulating of the wings holding it aloft. The now-revealed adventurer was wearing a loose combat robe the colour of dried blood. Within a shadowy hood, two strange eyes met Kerr's gaze. Even right in front of him, Kerr couldn't sense any aura, which was why the monsters hadn't paid any attention yet.

"Stop the blades," the adventurer said. The voice was male, cold and unafraid of what was probably a hundred monsters clambering up the wall below him. "Just keep knocking them down and I'll handle the rest."

Kerr and Luis looked at the man, then shared a glance.

"He doesn't look like just a delivery man," Luis said.

"No, he does not," Kerr agreed. "I suspect, Luis, that you might owe the Adventure Society an apology in regard to the quality of personnel they dispatch in our direction."

Kerr met the adventurer's gaze again.

"Alright, stranger; we'll shut off the blades. Just don't get us all killed, you hear?"

The wings folded in, wrapping the adventurer in darkness and he dropped out of sight. Then they felt a powerful aura sweep out that made Kerr feel like a trespasser in his own fort.

"Sir, are you sure that wasn't a monster?"

"I don't care if it's the goddess of Pain's firstborn daughter. Anyone who kills monsters and carries supplies will get a warm welcome from me. And from you. That's an order."

"I thought Pain was a god, sir."

"Y'all think so here," Kerr said. "Where I come from, they know that Pain is a woman."

Chapter 486

An Old Friend That He Had No Time For

The bottom of the gorge had a small river running through it, with a wide road running alongside it. The road was stone-paved and well maintained, its purpose being for bringing people into the fort from the surrounding towns and villages, along with their provisions and whatever herds the fort could manage to squeeze in. The bottom of the deep gorge was filled with shadow, which would make it a playground for Jason's shadow jumping.

Descending through the air, Jason absently wondered how all the people and their belongings were brought into the fortress buried high into the gorge wall. It was a question to be put off for later as he landed amongst the monsters swarming over the ground below.

The bone feasters were thin monsters with dark purple flesh and toothy mouths for faces. Their signature power was to rapidly grow hard and sharp bones from their bodies in all manner of shapes. Currently, they were all but encased in bone armour to shield them from the wind blades being fired from the fortress above, although the blades had, at Jason's request, been stopped. He didn't want them chasing after him as he descended.

Jason had completely restrained his aura as he dropped, so as to avoid the attention of the monsters. They had neither eyes nor ears, so he knew their supernatural senses would be preternaturally sharp. He let gravity carry him down rapidly until his cloak slowed his fall as he neared the ground. A pair of Gordon's eye spheres manifested and started orbiting around him.

As Jason alighted on the road, the horde of monsters all turned on him. Jason conjured his dagger as he unleashed his aura, taking the bone feasters aback. In the brief moment they paused, he sprang into action, his blade quickly finding a gap in the heavy bone armour of the closest monster.

A dagger worked well against the monsters and their bone armour, compared to a spear or sword. So long as he was willing to move close to the monsters, the short blade was ideal for finding the small gaps in the armour. Unless the monsters wanted to render themselves immobile, that exposure around the joints was a necessary vulnerability.

Jason wasn't inflicting major wounds, but that had never been his style. As much as he might like to land powerful, fight-defining blows, he had always been the tortoise and not the hare. He chanted quick spells even as his special attacks bit in, leaving behind a monster suffering little damage but marked for doom.

There was no shortage of additional targets as the monsters moved in on Jason like the rising tide. He sent an orb at the first bone feaster he had dosed with afflictions, only

for it to be stopped dead by the armour. Apparently the bones the monsters grew had significant magical properties to go with the physical resilience, which wasn't especially surprising. The monsters weren't physically powerful for silver-rank, making up for it with numbers and the quality of their abilities.

He tried directing the orb to a gap in the monster's armour, but it was clearly aware of the threat. Bone filled in the joints as the orb sought a way in, rendering the monster safe, if immobile. The orb foiled, Jason brought it back to his side. As an exposed island with a hurricane of monsters bearing down, he had little time for experimentation.

The numbers weren't an immediate problem for Jason because of the armour the monsters were encased in. Their only surpassing physical attribute was speed, which the heavy shells forced them to give up. Jason didn't let himself be pinned down and the shadowy gorge allowed him to teleport essentially at will. He popped up in one spot then another, laying on afflictions and leaving before getting swamped.

He tried another approach as he was attacking another monster. He called out Gordon, who reclaimed his orbs from Jason as he manifested in the air over Jason's head, bringing four more orbs with him.

"Drill a hole," Jason directed.

Orange beams blasted from all six orbs. The resonating-force of the beams was a specific form of damage, especially effective against rigid objects. It was prized for its ability to break through armour and the beams swiftly burrowed through the bone shell of one of the monsters. Gordon immediately slipped an orb through the rent in the armour before the monster had a chance to seal it off.

While Gordon was digging through monster armour, the monsters started throwing ranged attacks his way, all made from bone. Darts, needle clusters and arrows shot from compound bows with purple sinewy strings all came his way. Despite Gordon's intangible nature, the magical bone projectiles were able to harm his ephemeral body.

As soon as he had shoved an orb through one monster's armour, Gordon turned the remaining five spheres into shields against the hailstorm of attacks. Much like the monsters and their bone shells, he took a turtling approach.

Affliction-spreading butterflies spread out from the affected monster, triggering a wave of change in the behaviour of the bone feasters. Sensing the threat, they started casting off their heavy shells, leaving behind partial armour that was not as protective but freed up their movement. It would expose them to the butterflies but they didn't give the conjured blue and orange creatures the chance to reach them. Their speed restored, the

monster backed away from their afflicted fellow, firing out needle clusters and heavy spears.

The needles struck down the butterflies before they could reach any more of the bone feasters. That triggered explosions as the butterflies were destroyed, but the disruptive-force damage was most effective against magical protections and did little to the monsters. As for the spears, they slammed into the bone harvester spreading butterflies. It had cast off its armour and stood still, accepting the attacks. They had turned on one of their own to shut off the production of butterflies, with the monster making no attempt to avoid the spears that left it riddled and dead.

Jason guessed that the bone feasters' ability to sense magic was their strongest sense, clearly identifying that Gordon and his powers were the biggest threat to their numerical superiority. They were also smart, decisive and committed to the welfare of the group as a whole, the afflicted monster accepting its demise without hesitation.

Jason saw that the monsters would be too wary to allow the butterflies to be effective. He could serve as a distraction, but with so many of the monsters, distracting some of them wasn't enough to risk subjecting Gordon to a storm of attacks.

Jason could have made another attempt at using the butterflies but he had other options. He wasn't averse to doing things the long way, which had been his lot ever since iron-rank. He started by spraying leeches like a fire hose, scattering them over the monsters. Colin had no trouble crawling past the armour to find flesh to bite into now that their armour was less comprehensive.

The monsters plucked leeches off themselves and crushed them but Colin used the life force he was draining from them to self-replicate. At silver-rank, the leech swarm familiar could replenish himself as fast as the bone feasters could destroy individual leeches, using the monster's own vitality as the fuel. In addition, for every leech they crushed, they suffered an instance of the sin affliction from Jason's aura. This made the necrotic poison Colin inflicted all the worse.

The battle entered a new phase as Jason was pushed harder by the monsters. Their less comprehensive armour coverage made landing hits on the move easier but they were no longer awkward and sluggish. Where he had been dancing around them with near-impunity, they were now faster and more dangerous. They reacted to his attacks not just with evasion but retaliation, quickly growing weapons made of bone and purple sinew. They had all manner of weapons, from swords, spears and axes to brutal bladed whips. Ranged weapons were of little use when Jason was always surrounded.

Jason's attributes were into the mid-range of silver-rank. That made him stronger than the monsters, whose physical power was at the bottom of what could be expected from a silver-rank monster. This was not unusual for monsters that spawned in such large numbers. Their reflexes, however, were a match for Jason's or better. Their skills were mundane and lacking technique, but those reflexes and overwhelming numbers quickly put Jason under pressure. If not for his ability to teleport around the shadowy gorge, he would have been swiftly ploughed under.

The battle continued at length, Jason a fleeting shadow, dancing through the monsters as he drizzled afflictions amongst them. Colin continued to crawl through the bone feasters, moving from one to the next. They kept futilely yanking off leeches to little effect, although their numbers were so great that it was little help to Jason in terms of a distraction.

While Jason was swift, unpredictable and evasive, the fight was anything but one-sided. For all his powers and skills made him devilishly elusive, avoiding every attack in a sea of monsters was trying to swim without getting wet. The sheer number of monsters carpeting the gorge was an inescapable reality.

The entire battle took place with an eerie quiet. For all that their entire face was a mouth, the bone feasters let out no cries of rage or pain. Neither did Jason, silent as the darkness in which he shrouded himself, even as he suffered wound after wound. The only sounds were the dull scrape of metal sliding on bone as Jason slid his dagger into a gap or the magical hum as Gordon's shields intercepted a bone weapon.

The bone feasters had stopped climbing the wall, leaving the fort for after they had dealt with the shadowy interloper. Even using two of Gordon's orbs as shields, he was struck by weapons from all sides. Slashed by swords and stabbed by spears, the humanoid monsters and their weapons brought Jason's martial prowess heavily into play.

As it had in the past when fighting monsters in massive groups, Jason was eventually able to fall into a combat trance. It was not an unconscious or unthinking condition but a state of profound focus that drew out every scrap of his power, training and experience. He avoided strikes by a hair's breadth with deft and subtle movement. Acrobatic leaps made the most of his superhuman agility and strength, creating space and time to act as one acrobatic kick led into another, treating the monsters themselves as if they were solid ground.

Even at the peak of his prowess, however, it could only take him so far. For all his capabilities, not every blow could be dodged and not every weapon deflected. Blades still

cut his body and spears still pierced his limbs. Pain was an old friend that he had no time for, plucking weapons from his flesh without so much as a pause.

One of the bone whips managed to catch him out, wrapping around a leg still extended from kicking away a monster. It dug into the limb, grinding flesh and arresting his movement, exposing him to further attack. The two orbs switched from shields to beam attacks, severing the bone whip and freeing Jason, although at a cost. Even being momentarily stuck in place, especially without the shields, opened him up to attack. He was quickly on the move again, but with a bevy of fresh lacerations and puncture wounds.

Every so often, Jason would escape from the horde for a precious few moments. Sometimes he would disappear into the deeper shadows at the base of the gorge wall. Other times he would dash over the surface of the river, his cloak deflecting smaller projectiles and Gordon's shields the larger ones. Jason took these moments to chant out a spell critical to his survival.

"Your blood is not yours to keep but mine on which to feast."

Ability: [Feast of Blood] (Blood)

- Spell (drain, blood).
- Base Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Silver 4 (03%).

- Effect (iron): Drain health and stamina. Only affects targets with bleeding wounds or who are suffering from the [Bleeding] affliction.

- Effect (bronze): Drains additional health and stamina for each instance of poison on the target.

- Effect (silver): Increasing the mana cost to very high and the cooldown to 2 minutes allows this spell to target all viable targets in a wide area.

The incantation was not strictly accurate, the spell draining blood-red life force rather than actual blood. It did look like streams of blood pouring through the air for Jason to consume, however. With so many bloodied and poisoned enemies, Jason's life force skyrocketed past what he should have been able to hold, courtesy of his Sin Eater ability. This, along with his formidable regeneration and constant life-drain attacks, was how he could continue endure the constant rain of assaults.

After draining so much life force at once, Jason's vitality reached levels comparable to that of large monsters. It was the advantage such monsters had over essence users,

although it paled in comparison to possessing essence abilities. Even the most exotic monsters lacked the cornucopia of powers that essence users enjoyed, which was why a well-trained adventurer could handle many monsters of the same rank. Jason was amply demonstrating that exact principle.

What monsters did have was a vitality that exceeded that of almost any essence user. Even the superhuman endurance of a silver-ranker didn't compare to that of a monster, although the bone feasters were far from the best example.

The bigger a monster was, the fewer powers they tended to have, but all the greater was their vitality. Even so, the small and numerous bone feasters outstripped ordinary essence users. They had killed one of their own by turning it into a spear porcupine. If it hadn't stood still and accepted the attacks, killing it would have taken far longer.

Jason was not unique in bolstering his life force, although it was most frequently found amongst guardian specialists. Like Jason, they tended to focus heavily on recovery powers, some even taking a secondary healer role. Jason's goal was enduring so many attacks that he was painted in his own blood, although it was barely noticeable. It blended with his blood robe and was covered over by his ephemeral cloak, his face hidden in darkness.

Above the battle was the fortress town of Arcazitlan. In its military command post, the commander of the fort's militia was watching a projection of the battle taking place below. There were magical sensors throughout the gorge and its surroundings that warned them of approaching monsters and allowed them to observe from safety. They could even deploy tiny magical drones that were an advanced variant of recording crystals.

The commander, Mordant Kerr, was surrounded by many of his militia officers as they joined him in observing the battle. With the monsters having paused their attack on the fort, its defenders were taking some much-needed rest. Even those that had not been operating the fort's defences had been on high alert since the first approach of the monsters.

Only the militia's core leadership gave up rest to observe the combat on which the fate of their fort relied heavily. While the adventurer's defeat did not mean the fall of their fort, it might mean the loss of their resupply. They watched the battle from a floating crystal, high above the fighting. Seen from overhead, the adventurer fighting with the monsters was a flickering shadow.

"This fight is weird," said the logistics officer, Luis. "There's barely any noise. It's creepy. And no one is killing anyone else; there's just fighting and fighting and nothing

dies. The adventurer isn't, which is good since they seem to be stabbing him a lot. He just seems to be running around, though. None of the monsters are falling over."

"Take a closer look at the monsters," Kerr said in his distinctive northern drawl.

"They're dying, sure enough; they're just taking their time about it. Our new darkness-loving friend is an affliction user."

"Since when do affliction specialists dive into the middle of monster hordes?"

"I said he uses afflictions," Kerr said. "I didn't say he uses the good sense the gods gave a plate of candied fruit slices. Ain't many as would take on that many monsters. I don't know what they're thinking, sending guild folk our way, but I'll take it."

The first time that streamers of blood flew out of the monsters and into a shadow to be absorbed by Jason, the room stirred.

"You're absolutely sure that this guy isn't worse than the monsters?" Luis asked.

"You'd best hope that he is, logistics officer," Kerr said. "He's the one with the resupply you've been complaining about all week."

Chapter 487

Never Underestimate Adventurers

Despite his mana-efficient abilities, Jason's reserves depleted as the fight dragged on. He and Colin had tainted dozens upon dozens of the monsters carpeting the bottom of the gorge, pushing Jason's mana towards empty.

Jason was uncertain of how many monsters were swarming around like ants. Well over a hundred, maybe twice that. The earliest afflicted were ready to drop. He hadn't loaded them up heavily and they boasted silver-rank endurance but without cleansing, Jason's afflictions made their deaths an inevitability. He vanished into the shadows again, this time not draining life force but the afflictions from one of the monsters closest to succumbing.

"Feed me your sins."

He only drained the afflictions of a single monster to replenish his mana and give his regeneration a boost by converting the afflictions into self-healing boons. This was useful as he continued to be hammered by attacks. While the monsters he already attacked were slowed down by his rigor mortis affliction, Jason was always going for the untainted ones, who were happy to pound away at speed.

"How is he still going?" Luis asked. "How long has it been, now?"

"You should never underestimate adventurers," Kerr said. "Any fool can take in some essences. Using them properly takes training and experience."

"This guy must be the best adventurer ever."

"Nope," Kerr said. "Never seen guild adventurers in action, have you? This feller's good, sure enough, but that's how the good ones are. That aura's a bit much, I'll grant you, but it takes more than that to get the job done."

"You're saying that any guild adventurer could kill all these monsters?"

"Of course not. You have to match the powers to the monsters but this guy wouldn't have saddled up if it wasn't the right fight. These affliction types may not kill fast, but they'll keep killing all day if you feed them enough monsters to be getting on with. I'll admit that they normally do it from behind a wall of other fellers, but it takes all sorts."

Jason was monitoring the monsters with his aura. Every single monster had finally been tainted and one in every seven or eight had died already, with more dropping fast. He could have vanished and left the rest to die but there were two problems with that. One

was that he didn't want the monsters resuming their attack on the fort. The other was that it was a long, slow grind to gold-rank and Jason had powers to level. This wasn't like Earth with its monster waves and proto-spaces. He needed to make the most of the monster surge.

Jason vanished into a shadow and reappeared from another, halfway up the side of the gorge. He kicked off the rocky wall and moved through the air, his cloak unfurling into starlight wings to keep him aloft. Gordon emerged beneath him, all six orbs turning into shields as bone projectiles were flung at them.

With so many monsters, the shields would only hold for a few moments but Jason didn't need long as he cast his spell. This time, it was the wide-area version.

From their bird's eye viewpoint, the militia officers watched as Jason took position high in the air. With the bizarre quiet of the battlefield, he was close enough to the sensor that they could hear him chant his spell.

"Feed me your sins."

Red life force emerged from the monsters like a sea of blood, the dark magic of Jason's afflictions swirling within it. The black and purple taint erupted from the red sea like a giant monster, an outpouring of sinister power so thick as to obscure the monsters entirely. All that dark energy stormed up to Jason, driving into his body as he drank it all in.

"Sir, are you *really* sure he isn't—"

"Don't say it, Luis. Just don't."

The first thing the Feast of Absolution power did was to swap out every poison, disease and unholy affliction plaguing the monsters for the burning light of transcendent damage. As the holy afflictions annihilated the monsters from the inside out, all the original afflictions flowed into Jason and were converted into boons. One was the resistance effect that didn't help Jason in his current fight. The other very much did.

-
- **[Integrity] (heal-over-time, mana-over-time, stamina-over-time, holy, stacking):** Periodically recover a small amount of health, stamina and mana. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

Despite the all-devouring light inside of them, the monsters didn't let up their attacks. Gordon's barriers shattered under a barrage of spears, arrows, needles and darts and Jason called him back. This left Jason suffering the attacks himself, although his cloak was an admirable shield. The weaker attacks were stopped dead, even in massive numbers as

clusters of bone needles were flung his way. Spears punched through his cloak, although many missed as it bent space to deflect them. The remaining attacks landed on Jason's body, but he could take the hits.

Jason already had a huge store of life force and the weapons left him unharmed. His interface ability measured his wellbeing with a small humanoid figure at the periphery of his vision that marked damage to his body with colour-coding. He rarely paid it attention, since he generally didn't need help to know he'd been stabbed. The excess life force, beyond his normal maximum, was now indicated by a red line over the little figure's head, like a hit point bar.

The attacks on Jason left him unharmed, his hit point bar diminishing rapidly as the attacks landed. It didn't even hurt, a spear ramming into his torso bouncing off with no more sensation than a finger poke. The health bar climbed back even faster, though, with the absurd regeneration from more than a thousand instances of the self-healing integrity boon.

Integrity was a short-duration boon but it dropped off one instance at a time. With so many instances, it would take a long while to get through them all. His conjured robes were not as resilient and he replenished them as he dropped towards the ground.

As for the monsters, they were lighting up from the inside, burning with transcendent light. Those who had been afflicted the longest started dying even faster, their dead growing to a fifth of their original number before Jason had even descended to the ground. He dropped quickly, superhero landing amongst the largest field of dead, close to where he had first started fighting the monsters. The earliest afflicted, many had not survived to receive the holy afflictions. As the monsters surged his way, he cast a spell, still on one knee.

"As your lives were mine to reap, so your deaths are mine to harvest."

The dead monsters were withered with rot, the freshest kills missing chunks dissolved into rainbow smoke as transcendent damage finished them off. Whatever remnant life that remained rose from the corpses and was stolen away by Jason's spell.

Ability: [Blood Harvest] (Blood)

- Spell (drain, boon).
- Base cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Silver 4 (04%).

- Effect (iron): Drain the remnant life force of a recently deceased body, replenishing health, stamina and mana. Only affects targets with blood.
 - Effect (bronze): Affects any number of bodies in a wide area.
 - Effect (silver): Gain an instance of [Blood Frenzy] for each corpse drained, up to a threshold determined by current rank. After reaching the threshold, gain instances of [Blood of the Immortal] instead.
 - [Blood Frenzy] (boon, unholy, stacking): Bonus to [Speed] and [Recovery]. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, up to a maximum threshold.
 - [Blood of the Immortal] (boon, healing, unholy, stacking): On suffering damage, an instance is consumed to grant a powerful but short-lived heal-over-time effect. Additional instances can be accumulated but do not have a cumulative effect.
-

Jason's life force was reaching a point where any more was overkill, but it was not the life force that he wanted from the Blood Harvest spell.

- You have gained multiple instances of [Blood Frenzy].
 - [Blood Frenzy] has increased your [Speed] and [Recovery] attributes.
 - Your [Speed] and [Recovery] attributes have reached the maximum threshold for your current limitations. Additional instances will be converted to [Blood of the Immortal].
 - You have gained multiple instances of [Blood of the Immortal].
-

Jason stood up, the monsters almost upon him. Instead of rushing out of the way, he held out the hand still holding his sinister black and red dagger. What looked like a sacrificial knife morphed into a holy sword of gleaming silver, blue glowing runes engraved down the length of the blade. The runes were the same symbolic language that the brand Jason's mark of sin burned into his enemies. In this case, they depicted the name of the blade.

Item: [Penitent, The Blade of Sacrifice] (silver rank, conjured)

Conjured holy sword for those willing to pay the price for victory in battles to the death (weapon, sword).

- Effect: Attacks refresh any wounding afflictions on the target. Those wounding effects require additional healing to remove.
- Effect: Attacks inflict an instance of [Price in Blood]. This affliction is applied equally to the person it is inflicted upon and the person who inflicts it. This affliction cannot be cleansed while a person who shares it is alive and is immediately negated if the person who shares it dies. Dismissing [Penitent, the Blade of Sacrifice] does not remove this affliction.

- [Price in Blood] (affliction, holy, blood, stacking): Damage between people who share the affliction is increased, including damage sources in place prior to this affliction taking effect. Damage from holy sources is further increased by an additional amount. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

It was a sword that escalated a fight with every strike by increasing the damage inflicted by both the recipient and the wielder. This meant that the monsters burning with holy afflictions would die all the faster, but every hit on Jason would be all the worse. With so many monsters bearing down on him, even his absurdly bolstered life force might not be enough if he kept taking hits the way he had been up to that point.

There was only a brief moment between Jason casting the Blood Harvest spell and the monsters converging on him. With his speed attribute boosted into a range rivalling the lower reaches of gold-rank, though, it felt almost luxurious.

As he moved to meet the approaching monsters, Jason was still immersed in the feeling of battle, slipping back into a combat trance state.

The speed of the bone feasters was their strongest physical attribute and they relied on quick reflexes over skill. That speed had led to Jason being wounded over and over, but now he was a ghost, passing through their midst untouched. Their movements now seemed to him as sluggish as they were inept.

Jason fell back into the combat trance that drew out every scrap of his potential which, with the increase in his speed, had taken a qualitative leap. Spears, swords and whips missed him by impossibly thin margins, while others seemed to land yet bizarrely slipped past as his cloak bent space around him. This was Jason in the full swell of power, immortal and untouchable.

Jason's holy sword flashed out again and again. Each time it bit into flesh, the transcendent power burning in the monster it struck grew more violent. The most afflicted monsters were already falling dead, so Jason focused on those who were the least impacted. It was no longer a battle but an execution as Jason started using his Verdict spell to finish doomed monsters. Every time he used his execute ability, a column of transcendent light struck down like a sword from the heavens.

Pulling out a bottle of crystal wash, Jason cleaned himself off. He luxuriated in the sensation of being truly, thoroughly and easily cleansed, which he had long missed in his time on Earth. The crystal wash in his cloud house running out was not the reason events on his homeworld had turned truly grim. It had been a milestone in things going so very

wrong, though, with everything from food shortages to monster waves to vampires bringing misery and death.

With crystal wash back in hand, purging the filth from his body, it felt like a chance to wash off the gloom of the past. There were more than enough troubles to be found locally, but Jason was determined not to fall into the same patterns of grim malaise. Having Farrah had held him together and now he had Rufus back as well. His team would follow and he was resolved to move forward with a renewed hopefulness, whatever he faced.

While Jason washed himself off, Shade's bodies moved through the dead monsters. He touched each of them so that Jason could loot them all at once. Jason didn't do so immediately because it would fill the gorge with the foul stench of rainbow smoke and he didn't want to be standing in it at the time.

He looked up at the small magical sensor he could sense floating in the air, knowing that the inhabitants of the fort had taken a bird's eye view of the battle. They no doubt had seen adventurers at work before but he decided that toning down the spectre of blood and death look would probably help with community relations.

Jason's outfit-switching mist shrouded him, vanishing to reveal more casual attire. To keep things mellow he went with shorts closer to beige than tan, with a relatively subdued floral print on his shirt. Unlike earth, where he'd kept his clothes buttoned up over the scar at the base of his throat, Jason now went happily open-necked.

One of Shade's bodies floated up the fort's balustrade and Jason shadow jumped to it, arriving outside their force wall. He took out an argy fruit to eat, enjoying the juicy tropical treat after the exertion of battle.

A handful of defenders watched him warily from the other side of the force wall. They were clearly militia conscripts; bronze-rankers with plain uniforms and the touch of monster cores in their auras. He gave them a casual nod as he waited for a commander to arrive, which only took moments.

The man who arrived was a silver-ranker, also touched by cores but with a grizzled, middle-aged appearance. That meant he was old enough to have been around the block more than a few times and Jason wouldn't underestimate the man's experience.

"G'day, bloke. I'm Jason Asano, delivery boy."

Chapter 488

Better Strange Than Scary

The fortress town of Arcazitlan favoured defence over comfort, with its stone chambers and claustrophobic corridors dug right into the stone wall of the gorge. This was worst in the spaces set aside for the civilians sheltering from the monster surge, with people crated-up like animals on a truck.

Living underground required specialised infrastructure, all of which ran on magic. Magic lamps were required to light up the dark and air needed to be brought in, filtered and circulated, with the old air pumped out. Magical plumbing for water was crucial for both people and animals, for drinking and hygiene. Latrines and showers, food preparation and storage all needed magic to stay in operation. Without them, the underground fortress would become a crypt.

As for the actual animals, herd beasts were also stuck in the tight underground confines. This made keeping them calm important since a stampede when there was nowhere to go was a horrifying meat grinder. There had to be magic to calm the animals or they would not accept being stuck underground, shoulder-to-shoulder, for weeks on end. Although they were penned up in stone boxes, illusions of the sky, complete with the warmth of the sun and a gentle breeze were matched with an artificial aura of calm. Their rooms were also shielded against aura penetration so they didn't panic if some monster or passing adventurer washed a menacing aura over the fort.

All in all, the price of safety was extreme discomfort throughout a monster surge that would last weeks, possibly even months. People were crammed together almost as tightly as the animals. The areas set aside for the militia were much more open, with wider, higher corridors and generally more space to move around. Their off-duty spaces were just as cramped as those of the civilians but the operational areas were large enough that they could move quickly and in numbers at need.

Mordant Kerr, the militia commander, was marching through the corridors from the command centre to the top of the fortress. That was the spot where the fortress wall and the gorge wall had a gap plugged by a magical barrier. Flanking Kerr was his second in command, Miranda Ramos, and his logistics officer, Luis Garzón. Their feet carried them swiftly through the fort, although Luis' mouth was moving faster.

"...I'm just saying, pick one and stick to it. Do you have evil powers or holy powers? You can't just run around being a plague-bringer of doom, then turn around and start smiting people with the fist of the heavens. Also, I definitely heard him say he was eating

sins, which is not a thing you can do and it's very weird to try. Also, what were their sins, exactly? They're monsters; eating people is what they do. It's like saying an apple is sinning for being juicy and delicious. Everything he sucked out of them was something he did to them in the first place. Who does all those horrible things to someone, calls them sinners and then absolves them by killing them all with the light of wrath?"

"Gods," Miranda said.

"Since when do gods do any of that?" Luis asked.

"Try reading their books," she told him. "Pretty much any of them. Those early chapters are all violence and smiting. Lots of sinning and punishment until some prophet or whatever comes along to ask the god to stop murdering people. Then we're supposed to be so grateful they stopped killing us left and right that we worship them forever?"

"Randy," Kerr said, his tone gently admonishing. "You can think what you like, but I've told you about that kind of talk amongst the troops."

"He literally asked," she said. "You never complain about anyone else's religious beliefs."

"I've got enough problems with monster hordes and sinister adventurers and their bloody holy fire—"

"Told you," Luis said.

"Mouth closed, ears open, Luis," Kerr said. "Randy, what I don't need is some ticked-off god knocking on my door because my right-hand woman is turning all their followers into heretics and infidels."

"That's not how it works," Luis said. "Otherwise, she'd have been squished by a giant sky fist long ago. The pamphlets alone..."

"Luis," Kerr scolded. "What did I just say about mouths and ears?"

"Sorry, Mord."

Kerr gave him a side glance.

"Sir," Luis corrected. "I meant sorry, sir."

They reached the bottom of the stairs leading up to the top of the wall.

"Do I really have to go with you?" Luis asked as they moved up the stairs, immediately violating his implicit promise to shut up.

"You're the logistics officer and he has the resupply, Luis. So, yes, you really have to go with us."

"But he creeps me out with all the darkness and the blood and the smiting."

They emerged from the top of the fortress and spotted the man in question. The on-duty defenders were arrayed in front of him, standing on the other side of the lightly

shimmering force barrier. Instead of the expected sinister figure, shrouded in darkness, they had what looked, at first glance, like a lost civilian.

The man had open-toe sandals, shorts and a shirt with a flower pattern. He was casually biting into a fruit as if he was at a market stall instead of a fortified stronghold halfway up a mountainous wall. He had dark, glossy hair and a neatly trimmed beard. His sharp features and prominent chin showed the polish of multiple rank-ups, although he hadn't reached the ethereal beauty many silver-rankers possessed. His most striking feature was the eyes that gave away his true nature.

The man's eyes looked like the orbs they had seen floating around him during the fight, like a blue and orange nebula. The strange irises and void-black sclera undercut his otherwise casual appearance, marking him as an adventurer.

Powers that changed the look of a person's eyes were far from unheard of, but for reasons unknown, it was rarely seen in monster core users. Even if they possessed the same power that changed an adventurer's eyes, a monster core user's eyes would usually remain untouched. The reason for the difference was something that even the Magic Society had yet to discover. As far as every known test could determine, the appearance didn't impact the nature of the powers in question. Many times it wasn't even a perception power that triggered the change.

The other features that caught Kerr's eye were the scars the man had. A narrow blemish bisected one eyebrow and another marked a line in his beard on the side of his chin. A third was at the base of his neck, implying an impaling wound that would take at least a silver-ranker to survive. They were possibly affectations, but Kerr had seen plenty of fakes and these were either authentic or very well done. Most people willing to fake it went for big and impressive marks that stood out and told a story.

The trio arrived in front of the man, the militia troops parting to let them through. The adventurer's eyes fell squarely on Kerr. Kerr could no longer sense any trace of the intimidating aura displayed in the fight. Having the man standing in front of him while his aura senses picked up nothing was slightly unnerving. As if sensing Kerr's unease, which he almost certainly did, a neatly controlled aura appeared around the man as if it had always been there.

"G'day, bloke. I'm Jason Asano, delivery boy."

"Mordant Kerr, fort commander."

The roof platform was a narrow strip where the aeronautically capable could arrive at the fortress. It was the only ingress point unless someone forcibly made a new one through the magically reinforced brick. A shimmering force wall cut off a third of the

rooftop, reaching from the dark yellow brick underfoot to the hewn rock overhang above. Jason was standing on the outside third, the militia defenders inside.

“You’re our resupply?” Kerr asked.

“I’m all loaded up. Do you want to crack a window so I can pop through, or should I leave everything up on the roof here so you can come out and grab it once I’m gone? I won’t take it personally; you never can be too careful.”

“If you were a bandit, there wouldn’t be much point coming after us. If you can do what you just did, the Adventure Society will pay you more than you can get raiding little towns for random supplies.”

“You can’t be sure about that,” Jason said. “I can’t go to them if I have a restricted essence combo, and after what you just saw, I can see how you might be wondering.”

Luis opened his mouth to speak but closed it again at a sharp gesture from Kerr.

“We will check that you’re not a shape-shifted monster,” Kerr said.

“You already are, I can sense it,” Jason said. “Shade, please stop blocking their magic sensors.”

“It is impolite to use invasive detection magic without consent, Mr Asano,” a dignified voice came from somewhere around Asano.

“He kind of asked.”

“Telling is not asking.”

“He lives in a rock fending off monster hordes,” Jason said. “Cut the man some slack.”

While they watched Jason argue with the mysterious voice, one of Kerr’s people came upstairs from the sensor room.

“Sir,” she reported, “something is blocking our sensors.”

“Nothing new for someone with stealth abilities,” Kerr said. “Just wait a moment, Adelina.”

“See?” Jason asked. “Now you’re making things hard for the nice lady.”

He gave Adelina an apologetic look.

“He’s very protective,” Jason explained.

“Someone has to stop you from getting killed,” Shade complained. “You’re demonstrably not doing so.”

“It’s not like I’m trying to get killed.”

“Perhaps your memory is failing you, Mr Asano. All you had to do was show Shako a little deference, but you had to be insolent to a diamond ranker.”

“He works for the Builder! Also, he’s kind of a prick.”

The militia members shared odd looks as they watched Jason continue to argue with the disembodied voice, seemingly oblivious to their presence.

“Look,” Jason continued. “We're meant to be reassuring these people and now they think I'm a weirdo who talks to himself. Just let... Adelina, was it? Lovely name, by the way. Just let Adelina do her job.”

He flashed Adelina an impish grin, his strange eyes flashing. She returned a nervous smile with a slight blush.

“Very well,” Shade conceded. “Don't blame me when they lock you in some magical trap room.”

“They're not going to lock me in a magical trap room,” Jason said. “Why would they even have a magical trap room?”

“It's for monsters that can move through the ground,” Adelina volunteered. “The walls are magically reinforced but we don't have good attacking options inside the ground, so we open a gap in the defences and lure them into a trap room.”

“Adelina,” Kerr said. “Why are you explaining the fort's defences to this stranger?”

Her eyes went wide and she gulped.

“Perhaps you should go back down and try the magical sensors again.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, scurrying back down the stairs.

“You really do have a magical trap room?” Jason asked. “Is there a trap door over it? Shade, does this world have rancors?”

“There is a bipedal lizard with an ogre bloodline that is quite similar.”

“How does a lizard get an ogre bloodline?” Jason asked. “On second thought, don't tell me. The answer will be weird and gross.”

Adelina returned from downstairs, reporting to Kerr once again.

“He's not human, sir, but whatever he is, it's what he appears to be.”

“Should I feel violated?” Jason asked.

“Make a gap in the wall to let Mr Asano through,” Kerr instructed Adelina.

“Yes, sir.”

She flashed Jason a glance as she headed back for the stairs.

Luis led Jason to a storeroom where he unloaded all the supplies from Rimaros. It was all for the magical defences, plus crates filled with spirit coins. The powerful defences like the force barrier, the magically reinforced walls and the wind blade runes took concentrated, heavy-duty magic. Rather than spirit coins, this meant mana accumulators, much like the one Jason had used to maintain his cloud house's functions on Earth. They

were far cheaper than the cloud flask, of course, which was exotic even in Rimaros, so they burned out over time.

The spirit coins were to keep the essence users in the fort fed, as well as maintaining the less intensive magical amenities, like lamps, plumbing and air filters. Jason hadn't brought any regular food, only magical supplies, since the food came from the dedicated food farms scattered around. Jason was looking forward to seeing one in operation, which he would at his next delivery stop.

After checking the supplies against their respective lists and making sure everything had arrived, Luis took Jason to Kerr's office, the commander wanting to speak with the adventurer. He sent Jason in as Miranda was just coming out.

"What do you think?" Luis asked Miranda in a half-whisper as the door closed behind her.

"About what?" Miranda asked.

"About Asano." Luis clarified as the pair started walking away. "What was that stuff about a diamond-ranker?"

"He was just talking nonsense. If he went mouthing-off at a diamond-ranker, he really would be dead."

"I think Adelina might like him."

"Nothing gets past you, does it?"

"But why? He's an evil weirdo and when he talks himself, something talks back."

"Now you're just looking for things. It's obviously a familiar; you're not that dense."

"I still think it's odd that she'd like him."

"Of course it's odd," Miranda said. "What woman was ever attracted to a powerful and mysterious stranger?"

"Wait, you don't like him too, right?"

"Of course not. He's an evil weirdo."

Jason took a chair in the small office at Kerr's inviting gesture.

"That was a deft, if rather unusual approach to putting my people at ease, Mr Asano."

"Better strange than scary," Jason said.

"Unless scary is what you're looking for."

"I'm done looking for scary."

"Scary may not be done looking for you. Why did the Adventure Society send a guild member with our supplies?"

"I'm not in a guild," Jason said.

“You’re not?”

“Not yet. I’m going to join the same one as my team, but some unusual circumstances have left me here, on the far side of the world. I’m trying to get back to them or get them back to me; whichever works. It’s tricky during a monster surge, as I’m sure you can imagine.”

“The Adventure Society likes people to stay put and work hard.”

“As well they should,” Jason said.

“Even so, you’re definitely at a guild level of bringing boot and ass together. Why would they send someone like you out here on a delivery run?”

“There are reports of pirates targeting the supply ships,” Jason said. “They’ve been loading the ships with some heavier hitters to try and catch them out.”

“I see. I assume you were told that you need to take our next supply request back to Rimaros.”

“I was.”

“Good. Luis will have that for you promptly. I was also hoping to presume upon you to deliver a package for me. To a friend in Rimaros. Mail is hardly reliable at the moment and even if the fort had a water link chamber, the service congestion in Rimaros is quite heavy.”

“The Adventure Society has taken control of all the water link services for the duration, or so I’m told. What do you want me to take? I don’t like putting mysterious packages into my storage space.”

“Just a letter and a recording crystal.”

“It wouldn’t be a recording of the fight I just had, would it?”

“It would. This favour will not disadvantage you, Mr Asano. My friend is not placed in the very highest reaches of society but he’s respected. More importantly, he has a lot of friends of his own, many of whom *are* in the highest reaches of society. He’s a good man to know and a better one to be known by. Especially for an out of town adventurer without a lot of local connections.”

“I’m not sure I like the kind of local connections I’ve been making thus far, but alright, Commander Kerr. I’m already playing delivery boy. Why not mailman?”

Chapter 489

Going Overland

Outside of the rocky gorge, the coastal landscape was filled with greenery, white sand and blue water. Jason stood on a hilltop, looking out at a gorgeous beach and the sea stretching out beyond it. Next to him stood his familiars. Shade had once preferred a shape akin to Jason in his cloak but now looked more like the silhouette of a butler. Colin was in a humanoid form, the leeches that made up his body having melded together into what looked like a blood clone of Jason himself. Gordon was the most alien, being a nebula draped in a cloak, surrounded by floating orbs.

“This is the life,” Jason said. “Setting out together to have some adventures. No worlds to save; no gold-rankers to fight and no vampire uprisings.”

“Mr Asano,” Shade said. “While I am loathe to dampen your enthusiasm, I feel obliged to remind you that you do still need to anchor the bridge that will stabilise the other world over time.”

“The magic's too messed up right now,” Jason said. “There's no way I get that right until the monster surge is over. That makes it a tomorrow problem. Today, our problem is where to stock up on local snacks for our tropical paradise road trip.”

Jason had dropped off the airship over the coast of what was, in his world, Honduras. He would need to make his way south through Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama to make his deliveries before portalling back to Rimaros. He wasn't sure how close the geography and climate would be, lacking familiarity with Central America in either universe. He was anticipating fewer resorts.

They were not far from the Arcazitlan fortress. Shade had taken the form of a land skimmer to carry Jason along the road out of the gorge on a smooth cushion of air. The road was part of a well-maintained network running through the jungles and hills, although he had stopped shortly into the journey to take in the panorama as the road crested a hill. He had called out his familiars to share the moment with him, although he had no idea if any of them appreciated sightseeing as a pastime.

Jason slapped Colin on the back.

“What do you say, blokes? Get moving?”

“Very good, Mr Asano.”

Shade was the only one able to speak but the others had their own means of communication. Gordon lit up one of his orbs with blue light, meaning yes. Blood clone

Colin opened his mouth and let out a noise that sounded like it rumbled up from the darkest pits of hell.

“I know you’re hungry,” Jason said. “You’re always hungry. It’s kind of your thing.”

Colin opened his mouth again, this time releasing the shriek of a soul being dragged to damnation.

“Yes, I know the bone feasters were skinny, but at least there were a lot of them. We’ll find someone for you to eat along the way. Would you like a sandwich?”

Colin’s response was a quiet, eerie sound, like wind whispering through a graveyard.

“Fine. A big sandwich.”

Jason could have moved faster than his current travel speed by having Shade take the form of a flying vehicle. He was certainly interested in the local equivalents of planes, which he hadn’t seen any of yet. Magical constructs built in the shape of flying creatures, they were typically private vehicles for wealthy families and high-ranking adventurers. Compared to airships, flying constructs were smaller and far less efficient in terms of capacity to cost, both for passengers and cargo. Jason appreciated the two advantages they had, though, which were speed and being giant robot birds. He would be willing to give up the speed.

The airship that had carried Jason away from Rimaros had not been travelling at its maximum speed. One of the things Jason had learned while talking with the airship crew was that any magical vehicle became exponentially easier to detect the faster it was moving. During a monster surge, full speed ahead was a recipe for disaster. It was probably why he had yet to see one of the small, swift flying constructs.

Since he wasn’t going to have Shade rocket him across the sky, Jason took the approach that had been recommended by the Adventure Society, which was to stick to the roads and follow the route he’d been given. He was allowed to take whatever pathway he wanted so long as he met his delivery deadlines but, for once, Jason decided on the path more travelled.

He followed the roads using the land skimmer, which was more or less a hovercraft. Jason was familiar with the vehicle type from his time in Greenstone. He’d ridden skimmers specialised for navigating wetlands and sandy desert, both of which were quite like airboats in their construction and operation.

Shade took a more heavy-duty form that resembled a large, open-top car. It reminded Jason of a land speeder from Star Wars if the props guy only had black paint. Rather than pushing air out the back for propulsion, like the vehicles he was familiar with, this one

moved through silent magic. Shade's ability to take on the form of transportation was much stronger at silver rank, meaning he could replicate more magically sophisticated vehicles. This was especially true when not working with Greenstone's limited ambient magic.

The forms Shade took were unable to mimic the weapons and defensive properties of similar forms of transport, with limited exceptions such as creatures with bladed arms or the impact bars of a vehicle. Even then, there was a fragility to such features that made them useful for little more than clearing rough terrain.

The only means Shade had to improve the defensive power of these forms was for Jason to share his cloak power with each of the bodies Shade used to construct the form. This could be relatively mana intensive, such as when Jason shared enough cloaks for Shade to create several passenger buses. That was in the Battle of Broken Hill, where many civilians required evacuating and there were more than enough monsters to drain.

"Going overland is better anyway," Jason explained, sitting in the back seat. One of Shade's bodies was pointlessly in the driver's position, with Gordon floating over the seat next to him. Colin was in the back, Jason's first familiar getting to sit next to him.

"Every time some open-world game puts in flying mounts," Jason continued, "it's more convenient but also more boring. Plus, you miss out on all the awesome stuff you just fly over without ever getting to see."

"Mr Asano, I don't believe any of us have played a video game."

"Gordon gave it a go, bless him," Jason said. "I had to buy Emi a new controller. Having beams of destructive force instead of hands isn't super convenient."

The empty hood of Gordon's cloak dipped sadly.

"Don't worry about it, mate. How about we let you pick the music?"

Jason pulled out his recording crystal stand, which was a series of rotating trays on a central shaft, with a handle at the top. Each time he tapped a finger to a compartment, it projected a listing of what the crystal inside had recorded on it.

"I need to get an artificer to make some kind of music player," he mused. "Something I can slot all these into and make some playlists. So, what are you thinking Gordon? The Doors?"

An orb glowed orange, a negative response.

"Beach Boys? Could be just right for a road trip along sandy shores."

Orange glow.

"The Hollies? A bit of *Long Cool Woman in a Black Dress*?"

Orange orb.

Jason tapped a finger to his lips thoughtfully.

“Okay, I think I’ve got it. Marlana Shaw.”

All of Gordon’s orbs lit up blue and Jason laughed. He took out a small crystal projector and leaned over the front seats to rest it on the dashboard. Jason missed the amenities of a car, like a music system, but not enough to get Shade to take a car form. Shade had never so much as suggested it, knowing Jason wanted to put Earth and its problems behind him.

Jason could have stealthed his way south. Even using Shade as transport, the familiar retained his ability to mask Jason from various forms of detection. Instead, he and his familiars were riding in the open-top vehicle along an empty road, *California Soul* blasting out of the crystal projector. He wasn’t going to reach gold-rank hiding from monsters and the surge would be his last chance to see them en masse for a while.

Ever since leaving Greenstone to spend months in an astral space, Jason had no shortage of readily accessible monsters. The astral space itself, then the proto-spaces of Earth, the monster waves and the transformation zones. For all the misery and tribulations he had been through, raising his rank at an impressive pace had never been an issue.

Jason had checked on his team’s status at the Adventure Society and they had all ranked up fairly recently. Even with the boost to advancement speed that humans enjoyed, Jason had beat out Humphrey and Clive by a good margin. After going through iron-rank at a sedate pace, Jason had raced through bronze.

Now Jason was in a more normalised space and had hit the grind-wall on the long path to gold. Once the monster surge was over, it would take years to make real progress. Even so, he wasn’t sad about that fact. After what he’d been through, he was ready to slow down, if only events would let him. That wouldn’t stop him from making the most of the monster surge while it lasted, though.

The most disappointing part of the trip turned out to be the lack of people. The coast was dotted with abandoned towns and villages, the citizens having evacuated to fortress towns or one of the local cities. None of the cities could match the size of Rimaros and lacked the resources to supply the forts with all their needs. This was where Jason and adventurers like him came into play.

Without people around, Jason was able to extend his senses to their full reach, the way he couldn’t in a city. Mostly he just sensed herd animals that hadn’t been taken away. They’d been set loose outside the towns in hope of drawing monsters from the empty infrastructure. People were hoping to come home without some wandering monster having trashed it.

The roads were excellent but the lack of other traffic was a little unnerving. Like the empty towns and villages, it reminded Jason unpleasantly of Earth when all the rural areas had been abandoned for the safe zones.

He stopped regularly to go off and hunt packs of silver rank monsters. Once he detected a gold-rank one at the periphery of his perceptual range and withdrew his senses sharply. He turned down the music and slowed the skimmer to a crawl. Fortunately, the monster either didn't sense him or was one of the blessedly non-aggressive types. He marked the location on his map ability to share with the Adventure Society anyway.

Gold-rank monsters could live for decades or even centuries before their bodies started breaking down, sending them berserk. As such, the Adventure Society often left the non-aggressive varieties alone, while keeping track of their location and age.

Arriving in one of the small cities, Castistis, Jason was happy to see people again. He was far more thoroughly examined at the gate than he was at Arcazitlan fort, from magical scans to checking and rechecking his contract documentation.

"You all seem a bit jumpy," Jason mentioned to a guard as she scanned his body with a fourth different device. "Something happen?"

"A vampire got in with a big batch of refugees," she told him. "Turned about a dozen people before we caught on. Those evacuation accommodations aren't set up for pitched battle and things got bloody. We lost a lot of people, refugees and city guard both. Now we check everyone. Adventurers, nobility, it doesn't matter."

"That's fair," Jason said. "And I'm sorry. I can see why you'd be careful."

She let out an unhappy snort.

"If you could maybe share that attitude with your adventurer friends, that would be nice."

"I'll do my best. I'm not a local, though, so no promises."

Jason didn't want to linger in the city. It was massively overcrowded from all the people taking shelter, which he had no intention of adding to. He would report the gold-rank monster he sensed and then get back on the road.

The guards told him that personal flight was allowed, but vehicular flight required a permit. So advised, Jason set out across the city using his cloak wings, although their mana cost was greater when used in the sunlight. He wouldn't be able to take any detours unless he wanted to drop down to ground level and rest, but the city held nothing that seized his interest.

The city was pleasant enough, especially seen from above, but was rather unremarkable. Compared to Rimaros and its sky islands, Castistis was small and lacked

attention-grabbing features. It was just inland enough to be sheltered by hills, which was valuable in the Sea of Storms. The Buildings were low and widely spaced, with plenty of greenery. If not for the swarms of people it would have been open and inviting.

Jason reined in his aura once more in the populated area. Relying on the directions the guards had given him, he swiftly made his way to the Adventure Society office, picking up the auras of the local adventurers as he drew close. He felt perceptions passing over him as well and he modulated his aura to seem capable but not elite. This matched most of the auras he sensed around him.

Jason's experience of adventurers came from two extreme ends of the spectrum. Greenstone and Earth represented the bottom of the adventurer barrel. The mediocre aura control of most of the essence users Jason had met all but screamed sloppy skills and little, if any, proper training. On the other side were individuals like Danielle Geller and Rufus Remore, as well as the adventurers of Rimaros. Even the adventurers assigned delivery duty in Rimaros would have been absolute elites in Greenstone.

In Castistis, the adventurers fell somewhere in the middle. Based on their auras, their skills were respectable, but not enough to make it in the big city. Jason knew that many adventurers had gone to Rimaros for the monster surge, hoping to be recruited into a guild. The adventurers here apparently understood their level.

There were a few auras that stood out, their aura control a definite cut above the rest. He felt a cluster of them close together, presumably a team. There was one gold-rank aura present, which felt much akin to the mid-rage auras that were the norm there, but polished by experience.

The Adventure Society building was a three-storey office without any attached buildings. Castistis was too small for a trade hall or even a dedicated building for the jobs hall. Jason landed out front and opened the doors just in time for a voice to come whining out of it.

"Do you know who my father is? You're courting death!"

"Oh, great," he muttered under his breath. "There's a Thadwick."

Chapter 490

Small

The lobby of the Adventure Society office was not large, even though it served double duty as the public face of the society and the jobs hall. About a dozen adventurers were standing around inside, with even this small branch made busy by the monster surge. The team of silver-rankers whose auras marked them as a cut above the others were present, looking with weary expressions at two other adventurers, facing off.

Jason had seen that expression before, on the face of Neil when Thadwick was about to do something stupid. Given that the team was superior to both of them, they were likely babysitting one or the other through the surge. Jason guessed it was the loud one.

"I am Argrave Mericulato, son of Ramon Mericulato. You think you can talk to me like that?"

He was a celestine with onyx hair and eyes and pale skin. His almost petulant expression made Jason peg him as genuinely young, not just preserved by his silver rank. As for the smugly derisive look on the other adventurer, it was embarrassingly familiar as well.

"Wait!" Jason called out as he entered the lobby. He started marching across the room. "You're the son of Ramon Mericulato?"

The adventurer who had been loudly proclaiming his family connections turned to look at Jason.

"Who are you? Why are you interrupting me?"

"I apologise," Jason said obsequiously. "I was just startled to learn that you're the son of Ramon Mericulato. He's an inspiration to me –to everyone, really – and even to meet his son is such an honour. I apologise if I've disturbed you at all."

"See?" Argrave said, turning back to the other adventurer. "This is how you show respect."

"Don't bother with this man," Jason said. "Dealing with people who are small only serves to make you smaller. You need to be the bigger man, if only because you so very clearly are. People like him and me are beneath you. You have no need to bother with us."

The idiot nodded at the praise, noticing neither the other adventurer opening his mouth to retort nor the pinpoint blast of aura suppression that silenced him before he spoke.

"What's your name," Argrave asked Jason.

“Neil Davone,” Jason said. “It’s an honour to be known to someone with such a prestigious background.”

“It is,” Argrave agreed, then turned to the elite silver team. “We’re leaving. This nonsense is beneath me.”

Argrave marched out of the room, pushing both double doors open as he passed through. One of the elite team members flashed Jason a grateful look as they followed, closing the doors behind them. Jason released the aura suppression on the other adventurer, who looked like he could breathe again after being caught underwater.

“What was that?” he asked angrily. There were a handful of other adventurers standing around, watching the whole debacle. Jason’s slightly hunched stance and obsequious expression had vanished the moment the lobby doors closed. He gave the other adventurer a friendly smile.

“Sorry about that,” Jason told him.

“Why would someone who can do that suck up to that little toad?”

“It’s like I told him,” Jason said. “If you get involved with someone small, it only makes you small as well. Take it from someone who’s been caught up in pettiness and been made petty himself for doing so. I’ve walked that road to the end and it doesn’t lead anywhere good.”

“He’s a smarmy little prick who doesn’t know how to do anything other than trot out his family name.”

“Yep,” Jason agreed. “People like that are essentially high-maintenance pets. If you feed them a biscuit and leave them to their handlers, they’re simple creatures and will wander off on their own. If you try to discipline them yourself, they won’t stop barking and, sooner or later, you’ll have to deal with the owner.”

“You think I’m just going to accept you crushing my aura like that?”

“Yes,” Jason said softly, the smile dropping from his face. “I do.”

Suddenly a sense of stillness came over the room that went beyond mere silence. The adventurers around them had a feeling that it was somehow related to an aura but couldn’t sense the aura doing it, leaving them unnerved.

“I think you’re smart enough to take some advice from someone who has been where you are and made mistakes,” Jason said, then held out his hand for the man to shake. “I’m Jason Asano.”

“Liston Kitt,” the adventurer said, shaking Jason’s hand. “Which one of us did you give the fake name?”

Jason flashed a grin.

“The name is real. I’m the fake part.”

Jason reported the gold-rank monster and got out of the city before he wound up in any trouble with entitled young adventurers and their more than capable entourages. Back in the land skimmer with his familiars, they started seeing more and more conjoining roads as they drew closer to an important transport hub. They passed several empty port towns, plus a large one that had the defences of a fortress town. It wasn’t on Jason’s delivery list, so he passed it by. Nearing the heart of the transport hub sector, Jason caught sight of an unusual building in the distance.

A huge tower loomed over the jungle, allowing Jason to spot it long before the roadways brought him to it. It rivalled the skyscrapers of Earth for scale and was set out in the shape of an octagon. The walls were large panels of dark green glass, set into stone walls whose lighter shade of green was very familiar.

“Shade, do those bricks look like the ones they export from Greenstone?”

“There is a striking resemblance, Mr Asano.”

“That’s a long way to ship stone.”

“The tower should be the magical farm of the Fertility church,” Shade said. “As the stone in question is valuable for the life and water affinities it inherited from the astral space apertures around which the stone is quarried, it would make sense to be used for this purpose.”

“I guess you don’t spare the expense when you need to keep giant monsters away from the food supply,” Jason said. “I was starting to think that I was rich but it turns out that I’m silver-rank rich.”

“Given that you are quite early on the path to gold, Mr Asano, your fiscal gains have been respectable.”

“Oh, I’m not complaining. I’m just seeing things like sky islands and skyscrapers made of magic stone shipped from the other side of the planet. It’s becoming increasingly evident that this fish has found itself in a very large pond.”

As the vehicle skimmed over the road towards the tower, Jason started sensing magical infrastructure. The road itself seemed to be some kind of magical conduit, part of a wide-scale mana accumulator feeding magic to the tower. Jason had seen something similar in the past when Farrah had used a similar setup to fuel the defences of Asano village.

They started passing over large defensive formations embedded into the ground. Jason felt them sweep through the vehicle, his familiars and himself with potent magic; a

protective array stronger than anything he'd encountered before. Perhaps Emir's gold-rank cloud palace could match it, but Jason's senses had not been advanced enough back then to compare.

The magic wasn't hidden but instead projected, to the point where even normal people might sense it.

Any monster with even minor supernatural senses would easily detect the threat in time to flee, let alone Jason's powerful senses. Jason recognised that the purpose was to deter monsters and save on the cost of activating the formidable protections.

Jason pushed on, being very open with his aura as the magical arrays probed it. He could tell the defences were designed for far greater dangers than he presented and he didn't want any accidental misfires because he was playing games.

Drawing close to the tower, the skimmer slowed to a stop in front of a bronze-rank elven woman in green robes, waiting for Jason's arrival. The robes were marked with a baby holding a grain stalk in each hand, the symbol of Fertility. Gordon vanished into Jason's aura and Colin soaked into Jason's skin. Shade and the skimmer both disappeared into Jason's shadow. Jason stood up as the skimmer dissolved around him.

"Are you the adventurer bearing our supplies?"

"I am. Jason Asano."

"It is good to meet you. My name is Flor. I'm unfamiliar with the house of Asano. Should I address you as mister, young master or lord?"

"Lovely to meet you, Flor. My preference would be Jason, if that's not unduly informal."

"Of course not, Jason. Would you please follow me?"

The exterior of the tower had uniform windows of dark green glass, except for the bottom level and the two or three at the top. The ground floor had two doors set into each side of the building that Jason had seen, all heavy-duty metal engraved with protective sigils. Of the two doors per side, one was a large freight door and the other a normal-sized one. The priestess led Jason in through the closest of those.

Inside, they followed one hall and then another until they arrived at an octagonal elevating platform shaft. She touched a crystal next to the shaft and they waited for the platform to descend.

"You're a few days ahead of schedule. That is much appreciated."

Although Jason felt like he was meandering, he had forgone the recommended method of stealthing carefully south while avoiding fights. Instead, he had lured in

monsters with the skimmer moving at a fast, but not too-fast pace. As a result and even with stopping to fight, he was well under the delivery deadlines he'd been assigned.

"It's a beautiful part of the world," Jason said. "The wildlife is a little stropy but the scenery is amazing. I've been told that this isn't a highly-coveted job but I've been more than satisfied with the experience."

"That is a good attitude to have, although perhaps not one that will serve the ambitious."

"I'm almost aggressively unambitious," Jason said, before adding with a sullen mutter, "for all the good it's done me."

The priestess gave him an assessing look but made no further comment.

The elevating platform arrived from above and they stepped onto it. It carried them upward and the glass walls of the shaft gave Jason a good view of each storey. Above the ground floor, every level they passed was a single giant room, each containing what looked like a vast and densely packed hydroponic garden.

"This method of alchemical cultivation is a little resource-intensive, thus the nutrient bath supplies we need on a regular basis," Flor explained. "Outside of monster surges, it is not a cost-effective method of cultivation and the alchemically-focused orders of the church use these facilities for research purposes. During a surge, however, this methodology allows us to grow enough food for a very large amount of people in a small and secure space. With the Storm Kingdom's civic authorities offsetting the costs, we, of course, do our best for those isolated in the fortresses and cities."

"I've seen similar techniques where I come from, although I've never seen it on a scale like this," Jason said. "Those methods were non-magical, however, so the results here are no doubt more impressive. I imagine that accelerated growth rates are only the beginning of your achievements. There have been food shortage problems over the last few years where we could have used these techniques."

"Are you speaking of another world?"

"You're familiar with outworlders?"

"Familiar might be too strong a term," she said. "I have encountered just one in the past. I believe there is another residing in Rimaros right now."

"At least one," Jason said.

They passed the third-highest floor of the building, which was very different and looked like some kind of industrial plant. The platform stopped at the penultimate floor and Flor led him out. This was a storage level that looked a lot like the supply depots in Rimaros.

“The top three floors are service levels,” Flor explained. “The level below us contains the systems that deliver the resources stored on this level to the growing floors. We have a sorting area where you can deliver your supplies. The floor above contains the shrine, the living areas and the coupling rooms.”

“Coupling rooms?”

“Would you like to see them? You’ll need to go through some testing first but you’ll be absolved of all parental responsibilities, of course.”

“No, I’m good.”

“Are you sure?” she asked, looking him up and down. “I wouldn’t mind—”

“Very sure. Thank you, though.”

She shook her head sadly.

“They say men only think about one thing,” she muttered, “but show them one assertive woman and they shrivel up.”

“Hey, I love assertive women. Also, there’s no shrivelling going on here.”

“Of course not,” she said sympathetically.

“There isn’t!”

“It’s easy enough to prove...”

“You’ll just have to take my word for it.”

Chapter 491

Uneasy Allies

"So much for drawing away the defenders," Neil said as the heavy land skimmer threaded a swift and dangerous path through the trees. In the driver's seat next to him, Belinda was concentrating on controlling the skimmer. The heavy combat skimmer procured specifically for the mission had full-coverage armour and defensive weaponry. It was an advanced vehicle that only those with the right abilities could operate.

"In fairness," Gary said, "I haven't seen any Purity priests. Or anyone else alive, for that matter. Just these things."

Racing through the forest, harrying the skimmer, was a crowd of centaur-like construct creatures. Built from dark wood and mottled iron, they were fast, powerful and agile; perfectly suited to race through a forest. The bulk of the centaur constructs were bronze-rank, with about one on five being silver.

Some of the constructs had bows that conjured arrows when the string was drawn back and were using them to pepper the skimmer with arrows. Others had spears and lances they used to attack the vehicle whenever they got close enough.

The armour plating shielded the occupants, who were using open access panels to retaliate. Neil was using his shield powers as enemies tried to stab through the panels, his Burst Shield power blasting away attackers. Belinda was using the vehicle's weapon system; a triangular column on the roof. There was a sigil on each of its three sides, each one capable of a different attack. One was an electricity attack that arced from enemy to enemy, while another blasted streams of fire.

These first two attacks had not proved highly effective against the constructs, so Belinda didn't waste the energy. The third option conjured heavy bolts with strong armour penetration, which dug into an enemy before exploding. They were proving much more effective, although Belinda tried not to overuse the weapon and drain the skimmer's energy.

The main attackers were Gary and Kenneth, son of Brian; the fourth and final member of the group. Gary was throwing his hammer, which bounced from one construct to the next, chaining through the centaurs before flying back to his hand.

Each hit came with a resonating-force explosion, tailor-made for destroying constructs. Gary's weapon was specialised for fighting constructs, being the silver-rank variant of a weapon he made for himself following Farrah's death. It was enough to take

out the bronze-rank centaurs in one hit, but not the silvers. It did inflict significant damage and send them tumbling into other galloping constructs.

Kenneth likewise worked on thinning out the bronze-rankers, but most focused on slowing down the silvers. One of his special attacks involved a conjured harpoon that he threw into enemies, prioritising the silver-rank constructs. Once buried in a target, more harpoons were conjured around it, launching themselves at the centaurs around it. The secondary harpoons were connected to the initial target by magical ropes that dragged the subsequent targets. They all crashed into the first, binding them together in an awkward bundle. Bound up, the centaurs were stuck trying to fight their way free from one another, inflicting mutual damage even as they were left behind by the rolling combat.

Ken had the skirmish confluence, which made him very useful in this kind of running battle. Many of his powers could trip up the enemy, literally and figuratively, keeping the skimmer from being overwhelmed by the huge herd of constructs. Leaving the destruction of the bronze-rank constructs to Gary's powerful attacks, Ken concentrated on stalling the silver-rank centaurs with trip-lines and net traps.

"I thought Purity and the Builder were meant to be uneasy allies," Humphrey shouted from the roof of the skimmer as it raced through a gulch. "If this many construct creatures are protecting the dam, it would seem we were wrong."

"Making too many assumptions on not enough information is a poor pathway to knowledge," Clive yelled back. "I'm not sure we should have let Sophie go off alone."

"Let her?" Humphrey asked. "Since when does she wait for anyone's permission for anything?"

"Is she going to be alright back there?"

"Of course," Humphrey said proudly.

The centaur herd bunched together as they followed the skimmer into the narrow gulch, which was exactly what Humphrey wanted. He was ignoring the arrows bouncing off his dragon armour since they all came from bronze-rank constructs. Sophie was nowhere to be seen, having left the skimmer long ago to stall the silver-rank ones.

As the lance-wielding centaurs thundered toward the rear of the skimmer, Humphrey stepped off, landing heavily in their path. The huge sword in his hands was in the shape of a dragon wing with rainbow scales. The blade was wreathed in fire.

Humphrey stood his ground as the centaurs bore down on him in tight formation, shoulder-to-shoulder, lances out. The centaurs might only have been bronze-rank but charging attacks were their specialty and their weapons had greater reach than even

Humphrey's huge sword. Dragon wings manifested on Humphrey's back and reached around him to form a wedge against the onrushing weapons, which were deflected away at an angle. The wings immediately swept back to reveal Humphrey already swinging his sword in a huge horizontal arc.

The sword smashed through the tightly-packed front row of centaurs without even slowing down, passing through wood and steel like a hot train through butter. The centaurs all but exploded from the force, flames from the burning blade spreading to many of the scattering chunks, raining down as burning debris.

That was not even the end of the attack as a wave of fire and another of force were sent hurtling along the gulch by the swing of Humphrey's sword. It wasn't as destructive as the original attack but still toppled the charging bronze-rank constructs like bowling pins.

Humphrey leapt high into the air with his silver-rank strength and, with a powerful sweep of his wings, propelled himself forward. He swooped over the gulch, opening his mouth to breath fire like a flamethrower, blanketing the centaurs still pursuing the skimmer.

Unlike the flames from the skimmer weapons, the fire from Humphrey's powers had an extreme effect on the constructs. The silver-rank effect of his aura, Dragon's Might, transformed any flames created by his abilities from ordinary fire into dragon fire. Dragon fire was far more effective against any kind of flame resistance, from protective magic to flame-retardant materials.

Wood quickly turned to ash and steel melted away as the silver-rank flames ravaged the bronze-rank constructs. Even the rocks were on fire, cracking and melting. In the wake of Humphrey's sweeping flight over the gulch, all that remained was burning wreckage, scorched earth and dark smoke, rising into the air.

More constructs were charging out of the forest and into the gulch. Humphrey turned to look for the skimmer, about to vanish into the woods again. Deciding that he'd bought it enough time, he teleported onto its roof before it moved out of sight.

Despite the construct centaurs moving through the trees in a tight herd, Sophie had no problems moving amongst them. If anything, it made her harder to hit with lances and bows, which were not designed for close-quarter fighting. So long as she avoided being trampled she was fine.

She wandered through the herd like a breeze, graceful and untouched. Even when it seemed like she was struck by a charging construct she wasn't, the very concept of distance bending to her will. She ignored the weaker centaurs, knowing that Humphrey would turn them to piles of molten scrap.

Sophie's biggest weakness was that she lacked the capacity to inflict decisive damage, whether up-front like Humphrey or building over time, like Jason. She did have powers that could land the occasional big, singular hit, but it required set-up, timing and usually team cooperation to make the most of those opportunities. She mostly tackled her low-damage problem by relying on her greatest strengths: speed and precision.

Sophie's damage was small but she inflicted both resonating-force and disruptive force with every hit. That meant that whatever armour or magical barriers were in place, what damage she did do wouldn't be shrugged off. By hammering away with every part of her body she could rain down attacks at a blinding pace. She was too fast to stop and too elusive to pin down.

The other key aspect of Sophie's approach was precision. Her attacks did not grow in power with ranks anywhere near as fast as the resilience of enemies did, so she needed to make every hit count. An ogre was incredibly tough. The side of its knee, not as much.

Centaur constructs, as a construct design, had clear strengths and weaknesses. Their speed and charging power gave their attacks incredible impact damage, allowing even the bronze-rank variants to pose at least some threat to silver-rankers. Their weaknesses stemmed from their horse-like bodies.

Against a small and agile enemy, fighting up close, their size and inability to quickly turn hurt them badly. Their designs gave them more flexibility than an actual horse, but it only ameliorated the problem, rather than solving it. Normally, this was not an issue while the constructs were moving at a gallop, as they were in pursuit of the skimmer.

To Sophie, however, the pace of the centaurs was inadequate to deserve the word speed. Moving backwards or sideways, even throwing out rapid attacks, she could easily outpace both their movement and their reflexes. She danced around the charging constructs as if they were standing still.

The other flaw in their horse-like bodies was that damage to their legs could be crippling. Sophie took full advantage of this by pounding on the legs with attack after attack. If the constructs had been actual centaurs instead of unfeeling automatons, they would have been frustrated at their inability to swat the fly buzzing around them.

Compared to the brutal, fiery cataclysm Humphrey unleashed in the gulch, Sophie could have easily gone unnoticed by someone watching the herd pass by. Her attacks were pinpoint and her attitude methodical, hobbling one construct after another with the diligence of a tradesperson making their way through the tasks of the day. One by one, the silver-rank constructs were crippled and left behind.

The constructs didn't have a key advantage that living silver-rank things did: the ability to rapidly heal. While some constructs had such abilities, they tended to be expensive, custom works. These centaurs were mass-produced models, their main advantage being numerical.

With the silver-rank constructs either disabled or critically slowed, Sophie turned her attention to rejoining Clive and Humphrey. Before she left, though, she decided to thin out some of the weaker constructs while she was at it. She'd already followed the herd to a gulch where she could tell Humphrey had been to work from the smoke rising out of it. It seemed like the best place to cluster the herd together.

Sophie's Wind Blade power was something of an outlier amongst her other abilities. It was ranged, rather than melee, a direct magical attack and, when she drew on the higher-rank effects, quite mana hungry. One of Sophie's greatest strengths was that her abilities were mana efficient and her mana regeneration was strong. This played into the natural gift that celestines shared that made all their abilities more mana efficient.

Wind Blade, even pulling out all the high-rank stops, didn't have a massive impact on enemies her own level. For clearing out a bunch of bronze-ranks, though, it was up to the task. First, she needed to reposition, so she launched herself into the air with a blast of wind. She then shot forward, flying much faster than Jason or Humphrey could with their respective flight abilities, arriving at the far end of the gulch, centaurs bearing down.

Landing in their path, Sophie swept a long, horizontal kick that produced a blade of wind in the direction of the constructs. She could modulate the nature of the blades depending on how she produced them, with a long motion producing a wide, slow-moving blade. As of bronze-rank, the blades grew wider as they travelled, with the wider the initial blade, the faster it grew. By the time it reached the onrushing centaurs, the blade had become a wide but thin wave, like a huge scimitar stretching across the width of the gulch. Many monsters and any essence user could have easily avoided it, but the centaurs were charging in tight formation.

Sophie had launched second, third and fourth blades by the time the first struck. Every part of a wind blade that hit a centaur exploded into a secondary explosion; circles of cutting force like the rings of a planet. If Jason had been present, it would have looked familiar. The wind-blade runes of the Arcazitlan fortress had much the same effect.

Multiple blade waves devastated the charging constructs, although Sophie could not match the apocalyptic force with which Humphrey had left the gulch a smoking scrap yard. Only the low-rank of her enemies allowed her to partly mirror his success. Satisfied with her work, she launched into the air again and chased after the skimmer.

"Thank you for answering my questions on reproductive techniques," Jason said to the priestess as darkness emerged from his shadow to take the form of a land skimmer.

"I think you should be open to more practical instruction."

"Once again, I'm just looking for information. But thank you. For the repeated offers."

In the outer reaches of the Seas of Storms, three invisible people moved through the air, over the road network cutting through the jungle. They were matching pace with an open-top land skimmer full of strange figures.

"That man is very strange," one of the people said, his voice male. A privacy screen shrouded his words.

"He's just talking to his familiars," a female voice responded. "Everyone talks to their familiars."

"There is no way he understands what that thing is saying."

"I understand what my dog tries to tell me and that's just an ordinary dog."

"Your dog doesn't sound like it keeps tortured souls in a jar."

"That's enough," another female voice said, her tone making it clear that she was the leader. "Stay focused. He may be silver-rank but his aura is strong and his senses are sharp. If he detects us, this whole trip goes to waste."

Chapter 492

Supply Chain Problems

The next fortress town Jason visited wasn't under active attack, letting him get in and out quickly. Situated on the coast, it was connected to several storm accumulators. The offshore, windmill-like devices collected power from magical weather events for which the Sea of Storms was named. The prevalence of such storms in the local area was why an adventurer made the trip rather than an airship that could easily be caught up in the volatile weather.

This particular town used the power it collected to charge mana batteries that other towns could use to power their defences, reducing their reliance on the kind of long-distance deliveries that Jason was making. Jason was just adding to local adventurers already delivering to surrounding areas. Jason handed over a fresh batch of empty batteries and collected charged ones to take to his next stop. One of the most isolated forts in the region, it was outside the range the local adventurers normally travelled. It would also be the last stop on Jason's route before returning to Rimaros.

Far to the east of the forts being supplied by Jason was the fortress town of Carazela. One of the most outlying towns in the Storm Kingdom, its latest supply run was deeply overdue. The fort's defences had expired almost a week earlier and if not for a visiting essence user, either of the last two monster attacks could have overrun the town.

As it was, several monsters made it over the walls and the fort's commander had lost people driving them back. The commander, Merrick Harlowe, sat on the balustrade atop the wall, weariness engraved on his face like a sigil. He raised his head, offering a tired smile as someone walked up to join him.

Melody Jain was the essence user responsible for the fort lasting as long as it had without supplies. She had even made a run to the local Fertility food tower after the last attack, saving the civilians from starvation. She had fought hard and the stains and rents on her white leather armour told the story of the effort she'd expended in shielding the fort and its people.

Unlike her irrevocably stained armour, her white hair and dark skin were clean. Water was the one resource they had no shortage of and Melody liked to take showers. Merrick had no idea if she was a former adherent of Purity or a loyalist; he was afraid to ask and didn't really care. Either way, she had an affection for cleanliness that he guessed was a

long-ingrained habit. He was certain that she hated wearing her marred armour, yet she always did, ever at the ready.

Merrick looked at her white hair as she sat next to him, returning his tired smile with one of her own. She had cropped her hair short after a brutal head injury cut a good chunk of it away. The wound had been healed but she had trimmed her lopsided hair to a short pixie cut.

Melody gave Merrick a look that was filled with regret.

“Merrick, I have bad news.”

“You’re leaving,” he said, his voice devoid of surprise.

“I’m sorry.”

“I understand,” he said. “You’ve already done more than we had any right to ask.”

“I was hoping I could stay until new supplies arrived, but I have my own responsibilities. I’ve put them off as much as I could. More than I could, if I’m being honest.”

“Maybe those supplies will finally arrive before the next lot of monsters,” he said, forcing optimism into his voice that he didn’t feel.

“We both know they won’t,” Melody said softly. “I’ve heard things, and perhaps you have too. This isn’t an ordinary monster surge. Some things are falling through the cracks. You and your people are one of them.”

“There’s always hope.”

She looked at him crestfallen.

“I…”

She trailed off, shaking her head.

“What is it?” Merrick asked.

“I can’t say. I shouldn’t.”

He let out a laugh, heavy with resignation.

“Ms Jain. Melody. Everyone here is going to be dead in a week. You don’t have to fear your secrets spilling out.”

She hunched forward, looking at her feet as she shook her head again.

“You’re a good man, Merrick Harlowe. A decent and diligent man who looks out for his people. You wouldn’t damn them to save them.”

He sat up straight.

“Save them?”

Melody continued to shake her head.

"I only have one thing to give, Merrick, and you don't want it. Your people don't want it. I won't make them into pariahs."

"What are you talking about?"

Still hunched over, she turned to look at him.

"You know what I'm talking about," she said.

He looked away, running his hands over his face.

"Purity," he said.

"I know you haven't been asking because you were scared of the answer. Were you afraid that I'd leave or that you would have to make me?"

"Either. Both. So, you're still..."

"Yes," she said. "It's unwise to wear the symbols in these times, but the faith remains."

She stood up.

"I'll go."

"Wait," Merrick said, gently grabbing her forearm before snatching his hand away.

"Sorry," he said, stepping back. She turned around with a beaming smile, placing her hand on his forearm.

"You'll never have to apologise to me, Merrick. I've watched you give your all for the people here. You could take your strongest and make a break for safety but that never even crossed your mind. I have nothing but admiration for you."

He bowed his head.

"Do you have a way?" he asked, his voice barely audible. "A way to save them?"

"I can't recharge the fort's defences, Merrick. The power I have to offer becomes part of the people who claim it. Forever. It can't be given back, and it comes at a price."

"What kind of power? And what kind of price?"

"I don't think you should —"

"Tell me!"

His words, loud and sharp, rang out across the wall. Sentries watching for monster attacks turned in their direction.

Melody trailed her fingers down Merrick's arm and gripped his hand.

"I can't ask you to do this."

"I'm asking you."

She let go and turned away, bowing her head again. He reached out with a hesitant hand, pausing before touching it softly to her upper arm.

"Melody, please. If you have a way to save my people."

"I don't," she said without turning around. "Maybe – *maybe* – there is a way for them to save themselves, but I can't..."

"Please, Melody. I'm begging."

She slowly turned, bringing herself close to Merrick with a half-step.

"What do you know about the church of Purity?" she whispered. "Do you have any idea of what you're asking?"

"I'm asking for help."

"I belong to a group," she said. "An order. The Order of Redeeming Light. Have you heard of it?"

"No."

"We take the things that are unclean. Impure. We purify them. Turn them into clean weapons of righteousness against the very filth from which they came."

"Like monsters."

"They are the most pervasive impurity in this world."

"And you have some of these weapons of righteousness?"

"You've heard that my church is in league with the Builder?"

"I have, but I barely know what that means. We live simple lives out here, away from important people and their problems."

"The Builder is very bad. Our entire church has had to do things to see it cleansed, things that others can't understand or forgive. But the Builder has something it gives to its soldiers. Something that makes them strong. My order has taken one of the things that produce this weapon and passed it through the purifying light of our redemption rituals. Now we can make people strong, without tainting them. Give this world a chance against the Builder. But the world hates us. Anyone who takes that power will be an outcast."

"Better outcasts than corpses," Merrick said. "What is this weapon?"

"It's called a redeemed core. If you give it to an essence user, they lose their powers but gain new ones. More importantly, they gain an entire rank. Immediately."

"An entire rank?"

"It won't work on gold-rankers."

"But on silvers?"

"It will take them to gold-rank."

Merrick took a step back running his hands through his hair with a shocked expression.

"This is not a simple fix, Merrick, or some easy path to power. There are consequences, beyond how society will look at you. You give up all your essence abilities."

You get new ones in return but not as many. You won't be the equal of an adventurer of your new rank."

"But strong enough to fight monsters."

"Yes. But there is another price as well."

"And what is that?"

"Faith. The taint of the Builder is gone but the new power has to come from somewhere."

"From your god."

"Yes. You must open your heart and your soul to Purity without reservation or his power cannot flow into you. You cannot toy with divine power. I've seen what happens to those who try to claim this power with a deceitful heart. They become powerful but also mindless. Simpletons who know only how to obey and not to think. I would rather someone be honest and turn from my god than go through that."

"I can worship your god. If he gives me the strength to save my people, he deserves my faith."

Melody looked around, wary of the sentries who might overhear. She moved closer to Merrick again, speaking in a whisper as she rested a hand on his chest.

"It's not that simple, Merrick. I've already told you more than I should. More than I'm allowed. I just... I see you. I see your courage and dedication to these people. You are the kind of man this world should be celebrating, not leaving to his death."

"Then give me this power."

"I can't. If my people are going to expose themselves to help you, they have to know that you'll truly be with us."

"What are you saying?"

"It can't just be you, Merrick. It has to be all your silver and bronze people. If you want Purity's help, you all have to make a show of faith. Together."

"I can't tell my people to do that."

"I know. This is why I didn't want to say anything at all."

Merrick walked away from Melody, back to the edge of the wall. He leaned on the balustrade, looking out over the sea. The breeze tousled his hair, the magical barrier over the fort long-depleted.

"It doesn't even have to be monsters at this point," he lamented. "Without the magical barrier, even a storm could deal with us."

"There might be something else," Melody said. "If your people were willing to show their faith, then perhaps I can convince my people can help you, in ways I cannot alone."

“What kind of ways.”

“If you and your people take the power, it will take a little time for you to adjust. Days, in which you won't be able to fend off monster attacks. But if my people knew they didn't have to fear you, we could stand for you, until you are ready. Perhaps even share some of what supplies we do have. I can't promise anything on my own, but—”

Merrick turned around to meet her gaze, eyes steely.

“I can't tell my people to do this,” he said. “But I can ask.”

Jason was riding along a wide jungle roadway when he sensed the approach of several essence users. He was passing by another fort town when four auras emerged and rushed towards him. They were essence users; three bronze and a silver. All had monster cores in their auras, so not adventurers.

Shade pulled the skimmer to a stop, the vehicle and Jason's familiars disappearing as he waited for the approaching people. He stood in the road, letting them come to him. It did not take long, all sprinting up the connection road leading from the nearby fort town.

“Adventurer,” the silver-ranker said as they arrived. They had gone hard enough that the bronze-rankers were exhausted from pushing themselves to match the silver's speed.

“I take it that you are residents of that fortress town,” Jason said.

“I'm the town commander. Are you a supply courier?”

“I am, but my supplies are not for your town.”

“Please,” the commander said. “Our courier is more than a week overdue. The food came from the Fertility farm tower but our remaining mana batteries won't hold out through another monster attack.”

“And if I give you the supplies for another, even more isolated town, what happens to them?”

“Please, I'm begging.”

Jason frowned.

“I can't give you these supplies,” he said. “They were provided by another fortress town that charges mana batteries, though.”

“They have access to storm accumulators?”

“Yes.”

“Then you can leave your supplies here and go back for more. All we need are charged mana batteries.”

“I can't make that decision,” Jason said. “But I've been there. I can portal you and I back there and you can plead your case to them for more supplies.”

The commander's face lit up.

"You have a portal power?"

"I do. We can go right now."

Standing in the open gates of the town, Merrick and Melody were facing one another, his hands clasped in hers.

"Come back quickly," he said.

"I will," she told him with a smile. "With good news, I promise."

He reluctantly released her hands and she left, moving quickly but stopping to look back more than once before she disappeared into the jungle. She picked up the pace until she was certain that she was beyond Merrick's aura senses. She slowed down and soon after, two women in white armour appeared. One wore tough but flexible leathers, like Melody, and handed her a fresh set from a dimensional bag. The other wore heavy armour made from the chitin of a monster, recoloured white.

"How did it go?" the leather-wearer asked as Melody stripped off her dirty armour.

"As planned," Melody said. "All the silvers and bronze-rankers."

The armoured woman chuckled.

"You're still the best, Mel. Should we let the next supply courier through? We kill too many and people might come looking."

"No," Melody said. "It's a monster surge and they send the expendable people for a reason. We'll shield the fort from the next attack, give them supplies and let them fend off the one after by themselves. Then we let a supply run through. We can't have them regretting their decision, after all."

Chapter 493

The Hitting It a Bunch Plan

The original plan had been to sneak into the dam quickly and quietly in two small groups while the defences had been pulled away by the attack on the valley. From the outset, it was clear that the defences had been massively increased since Clive, Humphrey and Sophie first scouted it out. Their intent had been to launch the operation immediately after their original surveillance. Travelling to reunite the team, meet Dawn and then the start of the monster surge had caused multiple delays.

The newly added presence of the constructs in such large numbers suggested either something had significantly changed or something important was happening. It was unlikely to be a reaction to leaking information about the attack on the valley because there hadn't been time to emplace herds of constructs all through the territory approaching the dam.

Guard squads of Purity loyalists were stationed outside the entrances at each end of the dam. Each squad was made up of one silver leading some bronze-rankers and were made short work of. Both teams needed to move fast because of the constructs they had left behind without eliminating.

At one end of the dam, Belinda deftly negated the magic on the heavy security door and picked the mechanical lock. On the other, Clive and Sophie split those tasks between them. Both teams went inside and ruined the magic of the doors, sealing them shut against anyone trying to go through, friend or foe.

The inside of the dam complex was cavernous, with huge open space and a ceiling that loomed high overhead. The dam spanned the entrance to a sprawling valley and the dam's interior followed that line in a huge, arcing curve. The roof, walls and floor were concrete, while huge devices of heavy industrial magic occupied the floor and stuck out from the walls. This was artifice on the largest scale; the kind used by cities to manage the infrastructure that supported their great populations. Here, it not only managed the water flow through the dam but the magic carried within that water; accumulated, refined and repurposed.

Plan A, stealth, had gone out the window before the two groups even reached the dam. Plan B, blitz past the diminished defences was rendered laughable by defences that had been increased, not decreased. Purity loyalists were already bearing down on them. Some were clearly guards, charging at them. Others looked to be artificers who served as

magical technicians. They were abandoning the infrastructure they were modifying and running in the other direction.

At one end of the dam, Sophie dashed forward while Humphrey poured out a circle of bone powder from a bag. Clive and Onslow stood protectively in front of him as he summoned his dragon warriors and Stash leapt from his pocket. The Shape-shifting little dragon turned from a mouse into a rune tortoise like Onslow. He couldn't match the full powers of the other familiar, especially when Onslow and Clive worked together, but he still made for a strong defensive bulwark.

Humphrey took out a pair of twelve-sided dice and rolled them in the circle of bone power. Light rose from the upturned faces of the dice, one projecting a glowing green line drawing of a crocodile's head. The other was more of an indistinct brown blob. The dice flew back to Humphrey's hand and he returned them to his dimensional space as a column of light shot up from the circle.

Sophie was already engaged with the approaching guards while Clive and the two Onslows were blasting magical attacks past her. Behind them, monsters were emerging from the light of Humphrey's summoning circle, one after another.

They were crocodiles made of mud, anywhere from five to seven metres long. Bone protruded all over their bodies, mostly taking the form of scales that looked less crocodilian and more draconic. The bone scales, as well as the long teeth, were all topped with panels and caps of enchanted metal. One of Humphrey's powers conjured basic magic items for each creature he summoned.

Despite having legs, the mud monsters slithered forward on a slimy path, like fat snakes or speedy slugs. They left a trail of mud behind them as they moved to attack.

The guards had the numbers initially but the tables quickly turned as twenty of Humphrey's dragon bone mud crocodiles filled even the huge floor space of the dam's voluminous interior.

The crocodiles didn't just clamp onto the dam guards but dragged them to the ground and into a death roll, sucking them into the mud of their elemental bodies. In doing so, the bony scales passed through the bodies of the guards, who disappeared into the creatures and didn't come back out. Each monster had to pause and digest before moving onto the next victim.

Only the bronze-rank Purity loyalists suffered this fate, although that was most of the guards. The silver-rankers amongst them were strong enough to fend off or avoid the sluggish monsters, despite there being so many. Humphrey, Sophie and Clive were much harder to avoid.

At the other end of the dam, Belinda was taking frontline duties while Gary summoned an ally of his own. Using her ability to grow larger and stronger, she called up the heavy weapons and armour Gary had forged for her. Her echo spirit familiar, named Gemini at Jason's suggestion, mimicked her form and gear as it stood beside her. No longer bound by its iron-rank limitations, Gemini now had physical substance and could even emulate some of Belinda's abilities.

Behind the pair, Gary was calling out his own summoned entity. A singular entity, compared to Humphrey's small army, Gary's forge golem was a towering edifice of crude iron. A white-yellow glow shone from between the heavy panels that made up its lumbering body. It was neither quick nor agile, but it was massive, at almost twice Gary's height. While it was every bit as strong and resilient as it looked, more impressive was its most powerful attack. The panels on its chest opened up to reveal a cavity full of molten metal it could spray over enemies.

"This is wrong," Clive said as he looked over a large device.

They had partially fought their way along the dam and Clive had stopped to sabotage a large piece of equipment that looked like an industrial pump into which someone had stabbed a bunch of huge crystals.

"You can't sabotage it?" Humphrey called back from amidst the ongoing combat. His summons were still fighting more of the Purity loyalist guards, alongside Sophie and Humphrey himself.

"I can sabotage it, sure," Clive said. "But this isn't doing what we thought it was. Not just that, anyway."

Humphrey drew back from the fight to speak with Clive, leaving Sophie and his monsters to hold the line.

"What do you mean?" Humphrey asked.

"Oh, yeah, boys," Sophie yelled from the front, even as she continued acrobatically beating on the enemy. "This is a great time to stop for a chat!"

"Have you noticed that these guards are fighting tooth and nail, even though they're clearly outmatched?" Clive asked.

A guard flew through the air, landing on the ground next to Clive. Immediately after, Sophie landed on the guard in a mount position and started beating him in the face.

"No," she said. "I didn't notice that at all."

She backflipped off the guard, then kicked him derisively in the head before disappearing back into the melee.

"I think that whatever they're doing here," Clive said, "these guards are trying to buy time for them to at least partially finish it. I think the artificers are trying to accelerate the process taking place here."

"And what process is that?" Humphrey asked.

"I'm not sure," Clive said. "This whole dam should be collecting magic and using it to hide the valley and the Purity loyalists in it. That's only consuming part of the collected magic, however; the rest is being collected and funnelled somewhere else."

"For what?"

"I don't know," Clive said. "Somehow, though, even more power has started coming in from the valley, on top of what's being drawn from the river. I'm not sure of the source but there's something off about it."

"Off?"

"How many times can I say I don't know," Clive said. "I'd have to examine this setup for longer to figure out what's happening here."

"Oh sure," Sophie said as she sprang off the wall and kicked three people in the head before landing. "Take your time; it's fine."

"Actually, it's not," Clive said. "Give me a moment to sabotage this and then we should get to the main infrastructure hub at the centre of the dam as quickly as possible. We can't just stand around."

"ARE YOU KIDDING ME?"

After fighting their way through to the middle of the dam, Humphrey, Sophie and Clive found the others, already waiting. Dead guards were strewn about and they finally found the technicians who had fled earlier. Some were dead while others had been strung up with rope and were being interrogated by Kenneth. Neil was making sure they survived the questions.

Gary and his golem were clearing away bodies while Belinda examined a large magical device. It was large enough that it had clearly been constructed on-site but showed signs of recent and hasty modification. Parts had been crudely removed or added and there were magical diagrams scrawled all over it in chalk.

"Took you long enough," Belinda said, not turning away from the device. "Were you just standing around talking the whole time?"

Sophie flashed a glare at Clive and Humphrey.

"No idea what you're talking about," Clive said as he joined Belinda. "Any idea what they're up to?"

"I'm working on it," Belinda said. "This is weird, right?"

"Yeah," Clive agreed. "You saw the power being drawn in from the valley?"

"Yeah. I figured out that whatever's going on, we don't want it to, so I went ahead with the sabotage."

"Same."

"What's the source of power in the valley?"

"As far as we know, there shouldn't be anything in the valley that could produce the amount of power this place is drawing in. It has to have been brought in since we scouted the area out."

Belinda walked Clive through what she'd already learned examining the setup, the others quickly losing track of what they were talking about. The pair of magic experts pulled out various devices from their storage spaces as they tried to decipher the purpose of the huge device and its modifications.

Sophie moved over to Ken and Neil as they brutally questioned a dangling artificer.

"Get anything out of them?" she asked.

"The path of the zealot is a rigid one," Ken said. "It affirms their resolve in times of trial. An admirable trait, but an impediment to our current endeavour."

"He means no," Neil said. "They're not weak, I'll give them that."

"That is what I just said," Ken told Neil.

"And I translated it into the way normal people talk. Why does this group always need one guy who talks like he's from another world?"

"My manner of speech is rich with meaning and precise in that which it conveys," Ken said. "Perhaps you should take the time to listen instead of assuming that the people around you are simpletons."

"That's not what..."

Neil groaned and stomped off.

"He misses Jason," Gary said, approaching Sophie and Ken. "Such a tsundere."

"You know I don't like that term," Sophie said.

"That's because you are one," Neil called back.

"You can participate in the conversation or go off and sulk," Sophie told him. "You can't do both."

"Watch me!"

Gary poked the artificer dangling unconscious from an overhead beam.

"Are you done with this one?"

“We are,” Ken said. “We’ll continue through the remaining survivors but I doubt that any will talk here. We’ll take them back to the Adventure Society to be questioned properly. They’ll break eventually.”

“Is this really necessary?” Humphrey asked. He had been looking at the carnage with a grave expression. “Killing enemies is one thing, but torturing them is another.”

“What do you think is happening to people when you set them on fire with your abilities?” Sophie asked him.

“I know that,” Humphrey said. “But this doesn’t feel right. Fighting the enemy is one thing. Stringing up helpless people and making them suffer is another.”

“You’re sweet,” Sophie said, placing a hand on his arm. “We’re definitely torturing the evil zealots, though.”

“It won’t be torture,” Ken assured Humphrey, stepping out a puddle of blood left by the man he’d just tortured into unconsciousness. “Torture is, as a means, unreliable and inconsistent. I’ve only taken this step here in the hope of extracting critical and timely information from people who do not want to give that information up. The Adventure Society has more humane and effective methods.”

“It’s always easy to find an excuse,” Humphrey said, stepping up into Ken’s face. “Your questions are over.”

Belinda slid up to Sophie, speaking to her softly.

“Is it just me or does Humphrey get kind of sexy when he goes all ideological?”

“Oh yeah. Jason used to do it too, but he just came off as kind of a prick.”

“You know we’re all silver-rank, right?” Neil asked. “Just because you’re whispering doesn’t mean we can’t hear you.”

A blushing Humphrey desperately looked at Clive to change the subject.

“What have you found?” Humphrey asked him.

Clive glanced at Belinda, who shrugged back.

“This place is collecting magic,” Belinda said. “We knew that going in. We thought it was all being used to hide the valley from magic detection but that’s only expending part of the power, the rest of which was being collected.”

“Like water behind a dam,” Clive added.

“This new power source, coming from the valley, is very new,” Belinda continued. “It’s not an ongoing source, either. It came in one big lump and the dam’s magical processing is being used to refine it. This lump only came in a matter of hours ago. When we leaked the attack on the valley to potential Purity and Builder spies, it seems they immediately moved into the final phase of whatever their plan here was. They’ve been rushing to some

final stage where all the power from the dam and the valley is being sent out and used for... something.”

“Something?”

“The power collected here,” Clive said, “both from the dam itself and the valley, is being refined and then sent back to the valley for whatever is going on there.”

“The place where we sent a bunch of teams on a feint attack,” Neil said.

“Yes,” Clive said. “We have no idea what we’ve sent them into.”

“What about the original plan?” Humphrey asked. “Can we still use the power flowing through here to blow the dam up and flood the valley? The team leaders all have magical devices to shield their teams from the floodwaters. Won’t that stop whatever the Purity church is up to?”

“Even if we don’t know what they’re doing,” Neil said, “I’m fairly certain that stopping it is good for us.”

“There’s not enough power left to destroy the dam,” Belinda said. “They’ve been sending it all into the valley for whatever it is they’re doing. We can’t repurpose that power from here anymore.”

“What can we do?” Humphrey asked.

“Well,” Clive said, “we think they couldn’t avoid needing this central device here to regulate the magic being fed to whatever is happening in the valley. We can’t redirect it, but we could potentially disrupt it.”

“So, we could just hit this big magic thing a bunch,” Sophie said.

“We don’t know what that would do,” Clive said.

“We know that it would make whatever’s going on down there not go the way they want,” Belinda said. “I like the hitting it a bunch plan.”

“Again,” Clive said, “we don’t know what that will do. It’s reckless.”

“As is failing to act at all,” Ken said.

“It’s happening right now, right?” Gary asked. “If we’re picking between what the evil zealots want and something else, without knowing what either choice is, then I choose the something else.”

Humphrey turned to Ken.

“The Adventure Society put you in charge of this team,” he said. “The choice is yours.”

“Stuff that,” Sophie said. “I say vote. Hands up who wants to smash the crap out of this thing?”

Her hand was joined in the air by Neil, Gary and Belinda.

“That’s a majority,” Belinda said.

“Whatever the Adventure Society might say, your team is not mine to command,” Ken said. “Whatever you choose, I shall abide, and it seems that your members have spoken, Mr Geller.”

“Great,” Gary said, hefting his hammer. “I’ve been wanting to hit these big magic machines since we got here but Belinda wouldn’t let me. I’m going to start with one of them big crystals.”

In the mist-shrouded valley below the dam, a picturesque rural village was being splashed with blood and death. Purity loyalists were desperately defending against teams of adventurers.

“Keep them away from the ritual site! It’s almost complete!”

As the battle raged, huge waves of magic surged from the woodland reaches of the valley. Transcendent lights of blue, silver and gold rose out of the forest canopy at points up and down the valley. Each of the large magic conglomerations twisted into a ring shape that floated high in the sky.

Streams of magic continued to rise up, feeding the rings’ power as huge portals opened within them. Winged, angelic beings started to emerge from each of the portals, filling the sky like a plague of sexy, feathery locusts.

The fighting below stalled as the battling forces watched the angelic creatures emerge. The adventurers were filled with confusion and the Purity loyalists with triumph until the streams of energy feeding the portals started to flicker and pulse. The portals became unstable and the angelic creatures started flying swiftly away from them, even as more came through.

Finally, the portals exploded. Violent eruptions of magic shot in every direction, turning angels into red mist and blasting craters in the ground. Adventurers and Purity faithful alike fled from wild blasts of magic shrieking through the air and thundering into the ground. Everything turned to chaos and destruction as the ground was thrown up in clouds of dirt, shattered houses and trees. Ear-tearing explosions smashed into the people on the ground and the angelic creatures in the air, their broken bodies raining from the sky.

Eventually, the magic faded. The survivors had escaped; adventurers and Purity loyalists on the ground and the angelic creatures through the sky. Dust clouds still lingered, most of the village and the surrounding woods now a devastated moonscape of craters and desolation.

Inside some of the craters, people started regaining consciousness, naked and hairless. These were not survivors of the battle, instead somehow left behind by the wild explosions triggered by the breaking of the portal rings.

One of these people was a man with chocolate skin and a pro-wrestler physique. He came to, the dirt scattered over him falling away as he stumbled groggily onto his feet. Looking himself over, he saw his nakedness and ran his hands over his bald head. He talked to himself, disoriented, his high-pitched voice not matching his imposing physique.

“What the hell, bro? I’m in the nicki-noo.”

Chapter 494

I Liked the Fighting Better

Jason was once more riding a land skimmer along the road network that wove through the local equivalent of Central America. Each side of the broad thoroughfare was lined with dense jungle. According to his map, Jason was less than an hour from the final destination on his journey before he could portal back to Rimaros.

Something twinged at his aura senses, so light that he wasn't sure he hadn't imagined it. It was certainly closer than he wanted anything to get undetected. It could easily be an especially stealthy monster. If it was a gold-ranked one he was in trouble, although sneaky monsters were typically less effective in an open fight.

Jason blasted the area where he'd glimpsed the aura with a heavy fist of suppressive aura force and his magic senses felt something break. Three figures in white outfits became visible by the side of the road. One of them swept a sword from which a blade of light shot out and split Jason's land skimmer in half. Jason landed lightly on the ground as the vehicle dissolved into his shadow.

He conjured his blood robes and cloak around him as he looked at the three people. They all wore white leather armour, a man and a woman flanking a second woman in the middle who was clearly the leader. She was scabbarding the sword she had used to destroy Shade's vehicle form.

All three had stark white hair and their auras read as human, despite the man amongst them having the slender frame and tapered ears of an elf. It wasn't just their armour that was white but everything they were wearing, from the metal of their belt buckles to the blade of the woman's sword. Jason had only known one person to dress like that.

"You're as perceptive as promised, Asano," the woman in the lead said.

Jason's mind quickly processed. The white clothes; knowing who he was and where he'd be. Along with making him realise something he should have already anticipated, it told him who they were and what they were doing.

"Purity church," he said. "The Builder sent you."

"Laughably, the impure being is under restrictions as to who he can send after you."

"That's laughable? A bunch of Purity adherents playing flunky to an 'impure being' and he's the one deserving of mockery?"

"None of his people could take you down under the restrictions he is under because his filthy minions are weak. He made a concession to our principles because we know

exactly how to handle filthy little plague-bringers that hide in the dark. And as you can see, we're all silver rank. There's only the three of us; no overwhelming numbers. No excuses for your interdimensional friends to interfere in affairs that aren't theirs."

"That's funny, coming from someone shackled up with the Builder. If I didn't—"

Mid-sentence, Jason suddenly opened a portal. The Purity trio wasn't caught unaware, the subordinate woman throwing an object as the portal arch rose from the ground. Jason dove for the portal but the thrown object moved in a flash, a conjured chain wrapping around his body before vanishing.

-
- You have been affected by item [Inescapable Chains].
 - [Inescapable Chains] has been consumed to inflict [Inescapable]. This effect ignores resistances.
-

Jason knew the affliction, as his own Inexorable Doom power could inflict the same one.

-
- [Inescapable] (affliction, magic): Cannot be affected by non-hostile teleport or dimension effects.
-

It rendered the portal in front of him useless and prevented him from shadow jumping. They had come prepared, having an item that could negate one of Jason's most critical techniques. It passed straight through his powerful resistances to sealed off any chance of easy escape while also crippling his normal combat style. The trio looked at him smugly, still not moving to attack.

"You should just come quietly, Asano. You can't win. That agreement made on your behalf might stop us from using gold-rankers but there was nothing about very expensive and specialised items. They hid us from your senses and now have cut off your ability to run or hop around in the dark. Combined with our abilities, which already counter yours, you have no chance."

Jason winced under his hood, the enemies not seeing it. Trying to take him alive made what would come next a much trickier proposition.

"The Builder wants me dead," Jason said. "Going along quietly doesn't seem like a good choice for my long-term health."

"We have a use for you, first. Come along and maybe you'll find a chance to escape. Better than fighting and dying."

"I've been taken prisoner and I've fought and died," Jason said as he conjured a dagger into his hand. "I liked the fighting better."

The three Purity loyalists all drew swords. No one moved as they continued to eye each other off.

“What does Purity need with me?” Jason asked.

“You aren’t worthy of our god’s attention, Asano. One of our members needs you to be her worm on a hook.”

“There’s a lot of that going around,” Jason said and dashed forward.

The three Purity loyalists reacted swiftly, one of them throwing up a hand that flashed with blinding light.

➤ **You have been afflicted with [Flash Blindness].**

Being reliant on sight in the midst of combat was something Jason had been trained well beyond. His other senses painted a perceptual picture he had long used when his eyes were insufficient or deceived. The sound of the blade; the resonance of the magic passing through its enchanted metal. The feel of the air being displaced around him and the intent in the auras too weak to hide from him. If anything, the impediment helped Jason slip into his combat trance state.

Despite being one man with a knife against three people with swords, Jason held his own. Being surrounded by enemies was nothing new and his powers and skills combined to make him supernaturally elusive. Shade's ability to suppress various giveaways prevented them from using the same senses Jason did to read the battle. His cloak masked his movement and feints made with his aura misled their magical senses.

In many ways, Jason had blinded them more than they had him. Even attacks that should have landed missed as his cloak bent space around him. The bright swords of the Purity loyalists flashed with rapid and precise movement but it was as if they were stabbing at an empty cloud of darkness. On top of everything else, two of Gordon’s orbs were intercepting attacks in shield form, buying Jason precious breathing room.

Jason didn't pull out his familiars for different reasons. With Colin, he needed to maximise his regeneration until he had built up the effectiveness of his drain attacks with afflictions. Also, Colin himself was very reliant on afflictions and Jason wanted to diminish the resistances of the enemy before deploying him to full effect. There was also the risk that the enemy would have some countermeasure to the leech swarm. They knew his abilities and came prepared; they would be fools to ignore arguably his strongest trump card.

Similar factors led to him retaining Gordon. Having Gordon not manifest meant that Jason could use a pair of much-needed shields and Gordon added to Jason's already formidable aura strength. Jason was simultaneously suppressing three auras of his own rank, preventing three auras worth of benefits to the enemy and detriments to himself. These were not weak or inexpert auras, either. Their solid control lacked weak points that made them easy to collapse. Only consistent pressure and raw strength got the job done.

There was also the likelihood that the enemy had attacks that could hurt Jason's incorporeal familiars, Shade and Gordon both. Jason was saving Shade in case the fight went poorly and he needed to make an escape.

Even with a combat trance pushing him to the limits of his capability, Jason was heavily pressured. Unable to shadow jump away, he stood his ground, every moment on a knife's edge. The trio of loyalists showed off exceptional training that marked them as elite adventurers on top of being religious zealots. For all that Jason's training had been diligent and exceptional, that of the Purity adherents was no lesser.

The difference between Jason and his opponents was the reason Rufus had founded a training annex in Greenstone. Elite adventurers from high magic zones trained in safety, too valuable to risk losing before they came into their true power. They were raised through the use of mirage chambers and carefully cultivated monster battles under the watchful eye of instructors.

Jason, by comparison, had been fighting life and death battles from the beginning. Before he was an adventurer – before he was even iron rank – he had faced battles where he was unprepared, underpowered, outnumbered and outmatched. Fighting on the knife's edge was a place where he knew how to stay balanced.

Jason's cloak and senses were doing some heavy lifting as the four silver-rank combatants flittered around one another like leaves in a wild gust. Jason's other abilities did not fare so well.

-
- Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin], [Price of Absolution] and [Wages of Sin].
 - [Sin] had been resisted and does not take effect.
 - [Price of Absolution] had been resisted and does not take effect.
 - [Wages of Sin] had been resisted and does not take effect.
-

Unsurprisingly, worshippers of Purity had potent resistances. The only effects that managed to stick in the early stages of the fight were those that, like the affliction preventing Jason's shadow jumping, ignored those resistances. Each attack levied against Jason incurred the sin affliction from his aura. Unlike the same one from his special

attacks, those afflictions went straight through their resistances. Further, each instance of sin on his enemies let Jason's aura diminished their resistances.

One of the biggest problems that affected Jason when his afflictions were slow to build was that it hurt the effectiveness of his Amulet of the Dark Guardian. One of his most precious useful items, he had earned it alongside the first scar on his soul and its power grew with him over time.

For every affliction Jason delivered, the amulet gave him a shield that could absorb damage and, after it had, became a short-lived healing effect. Each shield and heal was weak but Jason normally output a vast number of afflictions. The rapid acquisition and expenditure of the shields was a critical buffer to Jason's ability to endure hits. Without it, Jason was working with a much smaller margin of error.

The loyalists would not stand around and wait for Jason to build up power, however, and they had abilities of their own. Using their numbers to pressure Jason, they positioned him to suffer attacks that couldn't be avoided through small, evasive motions. Waves of searing light and short-lived, conjured sword-squalls burned and cut. Even with all his evasiveness, the swords of the enemy still managed to land some magic-infused attacks. The enemy was too skilled to dance in Jason's hand.

Jason couldn't avoid everything and was struck by savage special attacks that burned his flesh and even dispelled his cloak. He suffered extra hits even in the brief moment it took to conjure it again.

Although his regeneration was potent, Jason was not building up fast enough. Without afflictions properly landing on his enemies, his drain attacks were too weak. Without the ability to jump out of the combat, he couldn't buy a moment to cast a more powerful drain spell. Even if he could have, its effectiveness would likewise suffer from the same absence of afflictions.

Although it was looking bad, hope was far from snuffed out. Not every affliction fell short, especially as the resistance of his enemies slowly dropped.

-
- Special attack [Leech Bite] has inflicted [Bleeding], [Leech Toxin] and [Tainted Meridians].
 - [Bleeding] is already in effect. [Bleeding] has been refreshed.
 - [Price of Absolution] had been resisted and does not take effect.
-

Tainted Meridians was one of Jason's silver-rank afflictions that had seen little use as it had minimal impact on monsters that used mana in a different way than essence users. Landing the affliction on his current enemies was much more useful.

-
- [Tainted meridians] (affliction, poison): Subject's stamina and mana costs for magical abilities are increased. The effect of drain abilities used on them is increased. Bleed effects on them cause mana loss commensurate with blood loss.
-

Jason's only realistic chance at winning the fight was to out endure his enemies, but silver-rankers had no shortage of endurance. The tainted meridians afflictions would accelerate the clock Jason needed to run out.

Tainted meridians taking hold marked the turning point in the fight as Jason's afflictions finally started to bite. As he continued to clash with the loyalists, dark blood and jagged rents marred their once-pristine white armour. Jason was bloodied himself, but it was soaked by his robes or hidden by his cloak, while he was healing.

The enemy had been healing as well, at the start, having their own passive regeneration. Now that afflictions were taking hold, bleed effects were soaking the healing and leech toxin was refreshing the bleeds as the healing consumed them. As the fight dragged on, his enemies grew weaker as he grew stronger.

He was about to move the fight into a new phase and start draining afflictions when his enemies beat him to it. One member of the trio created a magical dome around the three of them.

"Gordon," Jason said, his familiar appearing and immediately blasting the barrier with six beams of energy specialised in breaching magic. Even so, the barrier was resilient, being a channelled ability. Channelling powers required the user to give up any other active abilities, but the power was worth the inconvenience when used well.

The barrier was used very well, showing off the trio's teamwork. The moment it went up, the leader started chanting a spell incantation that chilled Jason to the bone. The last time he had heard it was the very first time he fought a silver-ranker, also from the church of Purity. He remembered its effects, which were a bane to almost every combat power Jason had.

Jason realised that when they claimed their powers countered his, it had been no empty boast. A cleansing light washed out of the barrier, through his enemies and then through him.

-
- All of your afflictions on [Purity Priest] have been cleansed by an effect that ignores all cleanse prevention.
 - All of your afflictions on [Purity Adherent] have been cleansed by an effect that ignores all cleanse prevention.
 - All of your afflictions on [Purity Adherent] have been cleansed by an effect that ignores all cleanse prevention.

- All of your boons and the boons on your items have been negated by an effect that ignores dispel prevention.
-

At the same time, the third loyalist cast a slow but powerful healing spell to follow up. With Jason's afflictions gone, it took full effect, erasing all the damage Jason had done. In moments, everything Jason had accomplished in the fight was washed away. He didn't hesitate, recalling Gordon and having Shade bodies flood out between himself and the barrier.

This was the contingency for which Jason had been holding Shade. Jason burned a large chunk of his mana to manifest starlight cloaks over all the Shade bodies, then disappeared amongst them. His aura vanished, the enemies still inside the barrier losing all track of him.

The one advantage Jason gained from his enemies bottling themselves up was that it finally gave him a chance to break away. The Shade bodies, Jason amongst them, dove into the jungle and scattered. The incorporeal creatures were unimpeded by the thick Panamanian jungle and Jason was not much worse off. His cloak bent space, not to ward off attacks but to allow him to slip easily through the dense jungle growth.

The Shades and Jason alike melted into the shadows cast by the thick canopy overhead. If he could play hide and seek long enough in the jungle, Jason could wait out the duration of the affliction blocking his ability to portal away to safety.

The auras of Jason's enemies were moving closer as he sensed them flying over the jungle. He knew that his own flight power was mediocre and unlikely to match their speed. As for staying in the jungle, even slipping through the growth like a ghost couldn't outpace their flying over it. He slowed down enough that the remaining Shades he hadn't sent out could muffle the sound of his passage through the harsh terrain.

Tiny bird-shaped lights came darting through the canopy like phosphorescent hummingbirds, banishing the shadows around them. They spread out in a sweeping arc, quickly revealing which of the shadowy figures moving through the jungle were decoys. Jason kept moving but the glowing birds were both very fast and very numerous, tracking Jason down in far less time than he was happy with.

He called out two of Gordon's orbs, using them to shoot down the birds they lit up his hiding places but more quickly came. It was immediately evident from the auras converging on him that the birds were giving away his position the moment their light fell on him.

Running out of options, he blasted the light birds closest to him to restore the shadows and then dove into a thick mud pit. Unfortunately, the three Purity loyalists were not the Predator and Jason was not Arnold Schwarzenegger. While the conjured birds were deceived, the loyalists were not fools. They realised Jason had to be hiding to escape the reach of the birds and started sweeping his last confirmed area.

They slowed down their flight and brought out what looked like miner's lanterns, if miners were extravagantly wealthy and made their tools from silver and gold. They started slowly panning over the jungle with beams from the lanterns. Jason had no doubt this was another item procured to overcome one of his advantages, likely Shade's ability to mask his presence from various means of detection. This aspect of the familiar's power was more versatile than strong, so Jason was sure a specialised tool would penetrate it.

Jason was running out of options and it was coming down to luck as he waited for a chance to sneak away in a moment he was overlooked or the sweeping beams passed him by. The moment didn't come as one beam, then a second and third settled on him. Moments later, his three pursuers descended through the jungle canopy on wings of light.

Laying filthy in the mud, Jason glared up at the three loyalists.

"Look at you," the leader said. "It was always going to come to this."

Jason got to his feet and conjured his blade into his hand.

"It always does," he said, flashing a savage, bloody grin before it disappeared into his hood as he conjured up another cloak.

The leader sighed.

"Very well," she said. "Melody will have to be disappointed. Kill him."

Chapter 495

That Usually is My Day

The gold-rankers secretly trailing Jason watched with surprise as three people appeared out of nowhere.

“This is it,” Liara Rimaros said. She was with two members of her old team, from when she had been a restricted essence enforcer for the Adventure Society. Like many gold-rankers, the current disposition of their team wasn't about everyday monster-hunting because there weren't enough gold-rank monsters to hunt with the power to push them closer to diamond.

Most gold rankers didn't even chase after diamond rank. Those that did, like Emir's teammate Callum, spent much of their time in extremely high magic zones. These were places where the average power of monster manifestations excluded all but a few specialised population centres. These were wild frontier towns, where even silver-rankers were asking for death by roaming without protection.

Gold-rankers in civilised society pursued more civilised agendas. It might be mastering a craft, founding a township, garnering political influence or duty to a nation or guild. Their teams came together at need, whether for the occasional monster hunt or to assist a member with their individual goals. With lifespans extending into centuries, monster surges often served as reunions.

Liara had needed to make sure that neither Jason nor anyone waiting to ambush him would detect his observers. With her team in the city for the surge, she had access to people whose abilities she knew and trusted. Jana and Ledev were a brother and sister pair that, along with Liara herself, had made the hunter component of their specialised hunter-killer team. Together, they had been following Jason from the moment he left the airship.

“Do we move in?” Jana asked.

“Let's wait and see what happens,” Liara said. “Surprisingly, they're only silver-rank, so we can afford to let it play out.”

They listened to the conversation between Jason and what turned out to be Purity loyalists, instead of the expected Builder cultists.

“Who could possibly put restrictions on the Builder that it would adhere to?” Ledev asked. “And why would they do it for this guy?”

“They intend to take him alive,” Liara said. “That's better than we hoped for. It means we don't have to intervene to save him and we can track them back to their nest.”

The three Purity adherents hovered in the air above Jason. They had little room to move under the jungle canopy, even if the wings of light holding them aloft were intangible and unaffected by the trees. Jason knew that even though it was tactically unsound, his enemies couldn't resist the chance to look down on him. Being one himself, he could easily spot a showboat.

Unleashing his aura, Jason didn't suppress all three but focused on the leader. His power gripped her like a fist crushing an egg and he unleashed a soul attack that left her face twisted in a silent scream.

The attack on their leader gave the others pause for only a fleeting moment, but it was a moment Jason ruthlessly took advantage of. A shadowy arm shot out, grabbing the stricken leader and dragged her down out of the sky. Jason tossed her into the mud pit that he had just climbed out of and the mud immediately started to roil madly, like a bubbling cauldron. The wasn't boiling but filled with leeches that immediately inundated the leader, her already dirty armour now painted in dark, clingy mud.

The leeches dug into her flesh. They wriggled through the rents left in her armour by Jason's dagger and squirmed into her boots and sleeves, clamping onto any exposed skin. Lamprey teeth dug into her hands, face, even her eyelids as she thrashed to get out and free of the tiny carnivores.

The other two zealots were only startled for the most brief of intervals and weren't shocked into anything as stupid as freezing in place and calling out their leader's name in anguish. Trusting their leader to handle her own problems, they turned their focus on Jason and moved to the attack.

The less than ideal tactical positioning of the zealots bought Jason time as he ducked into the jungle, his cloak allowing him to slip through the dense growth. It was not much of an impediment to his enemies and their silver-rank power but it bought Jason the time to pull a potion vial from his belt and swig the contents.

It was a general power-enhancing potion that boosted his basic attributes. This gave the same comprehensive enhancement as a spirit coin, but instead of a quick spike, the power was smoothly distributed. It didn't give Jason the same level of power jump as a gold spirit coin would, keeping him inside the silver range. The effects would last much longer, however, with far less debilitating after-effects.

It was a highly expensive potion, the silver-rank variant costing more than the gold-rank coin it was roughly comparable to. Jason was not short on money, however, and his

current situation was the kind of desperate situation where it seemed very much worth the price.

Jason had a brief window while the strongest member of the enemy trio was caught up extracting herself from a pit of Colin. Silver-rankers moved fast and her companions were crashing through the jungle as Jason barely had time to get the potion down. They came charging through the undergrowth like rhinos but, rather than flee, Jason moved to meet one and they crashed together. Using her own charge to get inside her sword reach, he rammed home his dagger.

In the terrain, Jason's short dagger was far better than the zealots' swords and he jammed it right into the throat of the woman that slammed into him. Impaling the throat of a silver-ranker was far from enough to kill them, or even impede them that much, but Jason knew from experience that there was more to it than that.

Outside of protection specialists, very few people, even at silver rank, had suffered the kind of countless attacks that came with Jason's self-healing combat style. For all his evasion techniques, every time he slipped up, misread an attack or was simply outplayed, his body had paid the price. His experience had allowed him to move past instinctive reactions to wound that to even a bronze-ranker, were critical. His opponent lacked this experience and couldn't help but clutch at her savagely pierced neck,

Jason's experience was his strongest advantage against enemies that were well trained but hadn't spent their entire careers going from one life and death battle to the next. One of the lessons that came from walking that line over and over was that the difference between victory and defeat often came down to just a few critical moments.

This was why Jason worked so hard to buy even fragments of time and strove to make the most of each. He had bought one moment with his aura attack, another with his dive into the jungle and the zealots handed over a third with their poor positioning. With each one he'd bought a key advantage; boxing up the leader, boosting his power and seizing the initiative. Now was his moment to own the fight.

Jason positioned himself between the two zealots and a nest of shadow arms snaked out of his cloak to entangle the loyalist that didn't have a gaping wound in his neck. At the same time, Jason landed more attacks on the one he'd already stabbed; sewing machine pricks, quick and shallow, as he tried to load her up with afflictions. Even with his boosted power, though, the results were patchy at best. His resistance suppression powers were weaker at a baseline level than the Purity zealot's resistances.

Despite snatching the battle's momentum, Jason was in a bad way. He had been about to replenish his reserves in the first stage of the fight when the shield delayed him.

The powerful heal and purge powers used within than shield turned delay into denial. Jason was left ragged and spent while his enemies were fully healed and free of the afflictions on which Jason's powers relied. The only measure by which they remained depleted was their mana supply.

Shade emerged from the jungle, reconverging after scattering in Jason's failed attempt at escape. He couldn't physically hurt them, but his ability to drain mana attacked their biggest current weakness.

Jason had a brief window in which he had the edge, between the absent leader, his potion boosted-power and his control of the fight's momentum. He had while it lasted to redo all the gains the purge spell had wiped away. He gave it his all, snatching every moment and seizing every advantage in a desperate attempt to turn his current momentum into victory.

Every trick and every tool was used. He threw out darts that created shadows, explosions and decoy auras. One type entangled the enemies in vines, which was especially effective in their present terrain. He even pulled out an electricity gun, half-melted from overuse. It wasn't powerful enough to inflict real damage but the surprise factor of an attack so removed from his abilities was one more advantage he could make use of. He wasn't willing to give any of them up as he scraped the barrel for everything he had.

It wasn't enough.

Resetting Jason's buffs and afflictions at the moment he was at his lowest and about to replenish himself had reset a battle already stacked against Jason to an even more lopsided starting point. All his skills, tools, tactics and powers could accomplish no more than forestalling the inevitable. Jason's enemies couldn't match his experience or skill, but the difference was a matter of degrees, not orders of magnitude.

The zealots were highly capable, with an abundance of resolve. They didn't let Jason's cockroach survivability diminish their patience and push them into sloppy mistakes. While they might not have Jason's experience of life and death battles, they did understand oppression. They knew well that patience would inevitably give them victory.

The leader escaped Colin, her powerful resistances shrugging off almost all the poison the toothy leeches inflicted. The game familiar continued to hold her up for a while, taking his blood clone form and binding her up in strips of bloody cloth. Eventually, though, she burned most of his body mass away with searing light and rejoined her companions.

Shade had likewise taken hits for the team. As Jason had feared, his opponents had attacks that could cut down Shade's incorporeal forms. When only a few remained, Jason

recalled them. Like the portion of Colin's biomass Jason always retained, it was enough to reconstitute them both without the need to resummon them. Gordon was already stashed away because he didn't have extra bodies to lose. Jason also needed the shields from the borrowed orbs.

Jason had made impressive headway in afflicting the two enemies he confronted himself. It was a struggle between his ability to impart his various maladies and their ability to resist and purge them. Being Purity worshippers wasn't for nothing and they both had cleansing powers, although Jason was able to impede them. The silver-rank effect of his Inexorable Doom spell was an additional affliction that helped lock the other maledictions in place.

-
- **[Persecution] (affliction, curse, stacking): Subject gains resistance to incoming boon, recovery, cleanse and heal-over-time effects. These resistances cannot be voluntarily lowered. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.**
-

Even with his advantages, Jason felt the momentum turn against him like a vast ocean vessel, slowly but unstoppably changing course. Purity's most zealous worshippers had too many purgation tools at their disposal, both abilities and items. Their teamwork let one cover the other to drink a quick potion. As a result, Jason hadn't done enough by the time the clock ran out.

The leader rejoined her companions just as the effect of Jason's potion was coming to an end. His temporary strength turned to weakness; nowhere near the after-effects of a spirit coin, but still damning in his current circumstance. He was too weak to fight all three and he couldn't have outrun them at his best. He'd failed to turn the fight around or drag it out long enough that he could once again use his portal.

The portal he opened was still in place, back on the road. The other end was in his cloud house and Jason had been hoping that Rufus and Farrah would come through from the other side. It was a slender hope, though, as they had missions of their own. Neither would slack off during a monster surge.

In the end, Jason was tired and hurt, weak and ragged. Even so, he kept fighting, futile as it was. He'd reached his desperate bottom line, but they wouldn't be able to catch him without killing him.

"What is he doing?" Ledev asked as he watched from high in the air with Liara and Jana. "He knows they want him alive, so why would he fight to the death?"

"Because he knows we're here," Liara said.

“There’s no way he sensed us,” Ledev said.

“He didn’t,” Liara said. “The Purity loyalists showed him we were here.”

“They don’t know either,” Jana said.

“They didn’t have to,” Liara explained. “Asano is aware that we know how the Builder’s people react to him. He knows we have access to his assigned route. He also knows that if anyone can find people suspected of working with the Builder to leak information to, it’s the anti-Builder taskforce. As soon as these people were waiting for him, he realised that we were fishing for cultists with him as bait. He even said as much.”

“He thinks we’ll step in and save him,” Jana realised.

“Forget it,” Ledev said. “He thinks he can force our hand, but if he wants to die, let him. It’s more valuable to follow them back to their people than tip our hand.”

“We can’t just let him die,” Jana said. “I’m going to help him, Led. And so are you.”

“Fine,” Ledev groaned.

“There is more to Asano than I’ve been allowed to tell you,” Liara said. “I think the lengths the Builder is going to over one silver-ranker makes that plain enough. Even if he weren’t, though, we placed Asano in this situation. We’re taking him back out of it.”

Jason could barely stay on his feet, but his strange eyes were alive as they glared at the zealots from the darkness of his hood. Even run ragged, Jason was making the Purity adherents pay a higher price than they wanted to take him down. They thought it was the last, prideful gasp of a dying man, unaware he was waiting for someone else to make themselves known. While he remained defiant, he was starting to worry that they either weren’t there after all or would just let him die. Then three gold-rank auras locked into the Purity loyalists.

The Purity people didn’t go easy but the gold-rankers and their surprise attacks took them prisoner, hurt but alive. After making sure the trio were thoroughly locked up in suppression gear, Liara, Ledev and Jana dragged them back to the road. Jason was leaning heavily against a black land skimmer, covered head to toe in mud, blood and exhaustion. With Colin’s biomass severely depleted, Jason was reduced to drinking a healing potion, and it wasn’t his first. He’d taken three of healing and two of mana in as quick a succession as he could without poisoning himself.

“I’m an idiot,” he said. “I should have seen this coming from the moment you saw those Builder cultists react.”

Ledev and Jana threw curious glances at Liara.

“They don’t know,” Jason realised, watching Liara’s teammates. “They’re not in the anti-Builder unit? Are they your own team?”

The stealth specialists revealed nothing from their auras but lacked Liara's political training to mask body language.

“They are your team,” Jason said. “This is a private thing. Oh, crap. The old man really is deciding whether to—”

“Yes,” Liara said, cutting him off. That told Jason more about how much Jana and Ledev knew.

“You really think I’d go along with that?” Jason asked. “Especially after today?”

Ledev's face was filled with growing disapproval as he listened to Jason and Liara talk.

“You’re speaking with a princess of the Storm Kingdom,” he told Jason. “You need to address her with respect.”

“Respect is earned,” Jason said wearily. “And lost.”

Ledev opened his mouth to retort but stopped at a gesture from Liara.

“You knew we were here,” Jana said. “If you’d gone quietly, we could have tracked them back to their base and then rescued you.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “Because that’s what selling me out to the Builder cult engenders: trust.”

“I know we haven’t treated you well, here, Mr Asano,” Liara said.

“I spotted that too,” Jason said. “But I won’t claim to be innocent of using others without thinking of the consequences.”

He frowned, then narrowed his eyes at Liara.

“Except you did think about it, didn’t you. By now, you must know pretty much everything I’ve ever done in this world. You’ll know that I have a history of reacting badly when powerful people try to use me. You want to see if I’ve learned better. Except it’s not you. The old man is having me tested, and not just by you. Do say hello to Trenchant when you debrief him.”

“You think you warrant that kind of attention and effort?”

“You’re here, aren’t you?”

“You think very highly of yourself,” Ledev said.

“That’s not news to anyone,” Jason said. “And I never asked for all that effort. I was looking for a nice, quiet stay in your very lovely kingdom.”

“There are no quiet stays in a monster surge,” Jana said.

“It depends on your standards. By mine, a monster surge is plenty relaxing. The Builder invasion will be rough, though. I’ll give you that.”

“You think a monster surge is relaxing?” Jana asked.

“Sure,” Jason said. “You’ve got the Adventure Society and all these gold and diamond-rankers to save the world so you don’t have to do it yourself. They have a great spice market on Arnote; I’m going to put together a mix for cheese enchiladas when I get back.”

“You were right that I’ve learned a lot about you,” Liara said. “And today, I learned more. People the Builder wants to kill personally don’t get nice and quiet, Mr Asano.”

“Then you should check my files again. He’s already killed me personally and it didn’t take. Now he’s sending henchmen. He has no idea how to dark lord properly; he’s doing it all backwards.”

“You and I need to have a long talk, Mr Asano.”

“No, we don’t, Princess of the Storm Kingdom. You just want to.”

He let out a long sigh.

“Look, I’m tired and I still have a job to do, so I’m going to make my last delivery and go home. Come find me in Rimaros and maybe I’ll muster up the energy to get angry and say something stupid. I have a lot of practise.”

“That’s it?” Jana asked and Jason gave her a quizzical look.

“That’s what?” Jason asked.

“An organisation key to orchestrating an interdimensional invasion is targeting you specifically for death. You barely survived their ambush and you’re just going to what? Go about your day?”

Jason gave her a tired but friendly smile.

“Lady, that usually is my day. If I stopped working every time some evil church or the local Magic Society director had me kidnapped, I’d never get anything done. This was meant to be a nice break for me, where people like you deal with the global conspiracies and forces from beyond reality. But your princess, here, went and hung a pork chop around my neck. Now I’m going to be hip deep in zealots, cultists and evil magic robots from space. Again.”

Jason opened the door of the skimmer and slumped into the back seat.

“You can’t just leave,” Ledev said. “We’re not done with you.”

“You’re bloody right you’re not,” Jason said, without turning around to look. “You people are following me until I’m done in case someone else tries to kidnap me. You’re the

ones who told these pricks where to find me, after all. We're only an hour out of the next fort town anyway."

Ledev looked incredulously at the top of Jason's head, laid back on the plush seat of the skimmer. He opened his mouth to talk but again Liara silenced him, putting a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"That's fine," she said. "We owe you that much."

Jason sat up, turned and gave Liara a long, assessing look. Unlike the others, he could not read her sincerity or lack of same at all. He gave her a small nod, turned back and waved his hand forward. The land skimmer started moving, soon zipping away down the road. Ledev's face still showed his anger at Jason's insolence, while Jana looked sceptical and confused.

"Did he say he was kidnapped by a Magic Society director? And what's a robot?"

Chapter 496

Unyielding Faith

What had once been an idyllic, mist-shrouded valley was now a bombed-out wasteland of craters, broken buildings and broken bodies. The mist had faded away, the air now filled with an ozone tingle of lingering magic and the iron taste of blood. Little more than a few buildings, lucky to have even one wall left standing, was all that remained of the village. Adventure Society and Magic Society personnel swarmed what was left like ants on a corpse.

The Adventure Society staff were mostly hauling away the dead, piled onto wagons that floated over ground too rough for wheels. The Magic Society investigators were conducting magical analysis even as the dead were being carted off around them.

While the adventurers who had participated in the battle had casualties, they had managed to avoid all but a few fatalities. The Purity loyalist had more fallen amongst their number but most of the dead were the angel-like beings that had come through the sky portals. Torn apart and dropped out of the sky, large portions of their bodies had been annihilated, leaving only macabre remnants behind.

"They call themselves messengers," Clive explained as he and the rest of the group picked their way through the carnage. "They're too inherently magical to use essence magic and they aren't native to our world."

"Your sister can summon one, right, Humphrey?" Belinda asked.

Humphrey's sister, Henrietta, was a summoning specialist, with an array of summoning abilities and familiars. It was an unusual specialty that made her something of a one-woman team.

"That isn't a true messenger," Clive said. "Messengers are living things from physical reality. A summoning ability essentially creates a controlled monster. It might have the shape and the power, but it's not the real thing."

"Is that what happened here?" Neil asked. "Some kind of mass summoning?"

"No," Clive said. "If the messengers here were just summoned fakes, the dead ones would be going up in rainbow smoke by now. Those rings were portals bringing the messengers from somewhere. Even with the kind of magic that dam had gathered up, it shouldn't be possible."

"Jason came here," Sophie pointed out. "Twice."

"These are not ordinary times," Ken said.

“Exactly,” Clive agreed. “This monster surge is unlike anything we’ve ever seen. It is a time where the impossible had become possible, at least for a while. Every surge weakens the dimensional wall between our universe and the deep astral, but this time it’s been shredded. It will take a while to repair itself. Until it does, we’ve got the worst monster surge in recorded history to deal with, plus whatever manages to invade through the gaps. First the Builder and now these messengers.”

“Which leads to the question of their intent,” Ken said. “The Builder’s purpose is clear: the plunder our astral spaces. What do these new beings want?”

“All the ones that survived flew away,” Humphrey said. “We’ll find out when some of them are captured.”

“We already know what they want,” Gary said. “They were called here by Purity extremists. They’re going to declare everyone and everything they don’t like to be unclean and try to wipe it off the face of the planet.”

“There has always been a question as to why Purity chose to take a part in this affair,” Ken said. “Pitting itself against the entire world, with only something it should detest as an ally. Perhaps we finally caught a glimpse of their ultimate objective.”

“Even if as many of those messengers came through those rings as the valley teams reported,” Humphrey said, “that’s not enough for the Purity church to take on a whole world full of adventurers and other churches.”

“You’re assuming this is the only place they’re doing it,” Clive said. “We forced their hand, here, and they opened the portals ahead of plan. What if there are places like this all over the world? What if they were waiting for the conflict with the Builder to reach full swing before swooping in with a global army of messengers?”

“Why would these messenger things participate?” Neil asked. “What’s in it for them?”

“And why are they called messengers?” Sophie asked. “What’s the message, and who is it from?”

“What I’m about to say is broadly generalising,” Clive said. “Very broadly, since we’re talking about a people spread across multiple realities. From what I understand, however, the messengers have a very rigid and uniform culture. They are also one of the few intelligent beings known for interdimensional travel. It’s the main reason they are so well known.”

“We get it,” Belinda said. “It’s not a research paper, Clive. You can just explain things without needing to qualify every detail.”

“Fine,” Clive said. “By and large, messenger culture has a single, unifying idea: that they are the highest form of life and that they represent the will of the living cosmos.”

"The cosmos is alive?" Humphrey asked.

"Not that I'm aware of," Clive said.

"Since when does something not being true stop people from believing in it?" Neil asked.

"Very true," Ken agreed. "Once people invest enough in an idea, true or false no longer matters. They have made it such an intrinsic part of their identity that any challenge to that idea's validity is viewed as an attack. Once it takes hold in an entire culture, that culture becomes very dangerous to its neighbours."

"That's the problem with the messengers," Clive said. "Their idea is that they are born perfect and that this makes them inherent rulers."

As they made their way through the valley, the remains of messengers were still being hauled away. Sophie watched a floating cart, piled high with bodies, driven past them by an Adventure Society official.

"So much for that," she said.

"Has Purity decided that these things should be in charge and started to bring them in?" Neil asked.

"That's for the Adventure Society to find out," Clive said. "It's out of our hands, now. There's no way they leave this in the hands of a silver-rank team."

"It won't be a team," Humphrey said. "I imagine they'll either set up a new department, like the Builder response units, or roll it in with the Builder response and bump their resource and staff allocation."

"You said that they can travel between dimensions," Belinda said to Clive. "Wouldn't that make them showing up here a lot less impossible than you said? And what do they need portals for, then?"

"It's not that they can travel between dimensions inherently," Clive said. "One of the things that makes them unique is that their bodies and souls aren't separate the way they are for almost every other physical being. Nor are they beings of pure astral energy, like disembodied souls or ordinary astral entities. They're something in between, neither fully physical nor fully spiritual in nature. They are gestalt beings, body and soul fused together. Only through death do their souls become completely spiritual."

"Sure," Neil said. "What does that actually mean?"

"It means," Clive said, "that they can endure dimensional forces far beyond what we can. More even than a celestine, like Sophie, with her inherent astral affinity. Dimensional travel is hard. Even if you can punch through the dimensional membrane and escape

physical reality, that puts you outside it. No physical reality means your body stops existing, leaving your soul to drift off to wherever souls go when we die."

"That's what happened to Jason, right?" Humphrey asked. "Except for the soul floating away part."

"Yes," Clive said. "Outworlders are plucked out of their worlds and sent down a channel of magic to another one. Their bodies stop existing, exactly like I said, but their souls form a new one to inhabit when they arrive. It's very similar to the process of a monster manifestation. Of course, all essence users go through the same process of forming a body out of magic as they rank up; we just do it more gradually. Jason being an outworlder simply gave him a head start."

"You're saying that we're all monsters?" Sophie asked.

"There are some differences, but it's a matter of details and specifics," Clive clarified. "We're more similar to summoned familiars."

"What does any of this have to do with dimensional travel?" Belinda asked. "Is it that these messengers don't get turned into dimensional breakfast spread the moment they head out into the astral?"

"It's not quite that simple," Clive said. "They are far more resilient to dimensional forces, but even they can't just roam around the astral without being annihilated. For beings like us, we would require some manner of dimensional vessel. Essentially, a small astral space that can fly around with a pocket of reality for us to live in."

"Wasn't the Order of the Reaper's astral space some kind of broken dimensional vessel, like what you're describing?" Sophie asked.

"Yes," Clive explained. "So, it doesn't even have to be that small. These messengers, though, can use much harsher means of dimensional travel. Something close to the randomly forming magical streams that carry outworlders between worlds, although it would need to be more regulated and more stable. Methods like that would destroy any of us, but the messengers can endure it because of their gestalt nature. Of course, creating the kind of dimensional stream is beyond any astral magic we have here. Or had here, before the Builder showed up."

"But these messengers have it, and they've given it to the church of Purity," Ken said.

"So it would seem," Clive said. "Even with the right knowledge, it would require an almost unconscionable amount of power and resources to accomplish. Even the dam wasn't enough and they had to sacrifice gods know how many people. Even then, it's not a means of dimensional travel that we could use. Only the messengers can survive that kind of journey."

"And these messengers traverse worlds to imposing their own ideology and order?"

Ken asked.

"I don't think they came to increase their between-meal snack options," Neil muttered.

"You're right, Ken," Clive said. "Also, as Gary suggested, they'll fit Purity's ideals far better than the Builder. Having them come in and take over may well be the god's true goal."

"That's bad, right?" Neil asked. "That sounds bad."

"It doesn't change anything," Sophie said. "There's a bunch of pricks coming to our world and we need to punch them a whole lot."

"We may be getting ahead of ourselves," Humphrey said. "For all we know, the messengers here are the only ones, and a large portion of them were killed before they could escape. This might be a negligible threat."

"Humphrey," Gary said. "I don't know if you've been paying attention for the last few years, but if you bet on things not getting worse, it won't be your money you lose. It'll be your head."

The group made their way out of the destroyed village and through a woodland path where more wagons of dead were being taken out. These, unlike the ones they'd seen previously, were covered with tarps. The dripping blood gave it away; the smell of death was too pervasive to pinpoint a specific source.

They arrived in a large forest clearing. One of the main ritual sites used to create the portal rings, the ground had been covered in massive ritual circles. It was also covered in blood. Like everywhere else, the original state only remained where not cratered with damage from the ritual being sent awry by Clive and Belinda's sabotage. It seemed to have been less heavily affected, though, and was crawling with Magic Society investigators. It looked like the bodies had already all been removed from this area, to facilitate the investigation. The last of them had been those they had seen being taken away along the forest path.

"Does it seem to anyone else like there's a surprising amount of blood on the ground?" Humphrey asked.

"There was a battle," Ken said.

"And people have a lot of blood in them," Neil said. He was a healer and knew this better than most.

"Yep," Sophie agreed. "You'd be surprised at how much there is once you take it all out."

The rest of the group all turned to look at her.

“What?” she asked.

“Over here,” someone called out to them. Miles Cotezee was weaving his way through the craters and the investigators poking around at any trace of ritual circle left behind. He signalled them with a reserved wave as he approached.

“Any word on what the power source here in the valley was yet?” Clive asked immediately.

“Yeah,” Miles said gravely. It was a change from his general air of tiredness at the bureaucratic lot that was his life as an Adventure Society official.

“You know how this place was where all the Purity loyalists brought their families?” Miles asked. “We thought it was to keep the most zealous worshippers safe, but it turns out these evil bastards were just stocking firewood.”

Clive went pale.

“What?” Humphrey asked.

“Ritual sacrifice,” Clive said darkly. “Everyone has magic in their bodies. Even normals. Like the blood Sophie was talking about, there’s a surprising amount once you take all of it out. I’ve never seen it done myself but it’s one of the worse ways to go. What’s left after is...”

They all turned to look back the way they came, where they’d seen the covered wagons.

“We need to burn what’s left of this filth religion to the ground,” Miles snarled. “There were kids on those wagons. What used to be kids. I’m never going to unsee that.”

“Can these people get any more foul?” Sophie asked. “I thought I’d met some detestable gutter scum in my life but this is something else. How many people are we talking about?”

“Too many,” Miles said. “With what’s left of them and the general destruction, we’ll never have solid numbers.”

“They sacrificed their own families?”

“From what we’ve been able to tell,” Miles said, “most of them went willingly. The parents, anyway. That’s the kind of faith we’re dealing with. It looks like not all of them were willing to lay down for the cause, though. A lot of these people didn’t go quietly, so it wasn’t all unyielding faith.”

“Most of Purity’s worshippers turned aside from the god as the truth came out,” Ken said. “I knew that only the most zealous orders remained with the church, but I had no idea the ramifications would be this.”

“They’re not a religion anymore,” Neil said. “I’m part of a church and I won’t let them say that they’re the same as me. They’re just some kind of death cult, now.”

“That’s an opinion being mirrored by anyone who had to see this mess,” Miles said. “That’s not what I called you in here for, though. This is way bigger than any of us, now.”

“Our goal hasn’t changed,” Humphrey said. “We want our team member back.”

“Funny you should say that,” Miles said. “Come with me.”

He led them away from the main area and onto a forest path out of the clearing.

“We’ve set up in another clearing that wasn’t full of dead... where we’re processing the people who arrived at the bottom of the craters.”

“Any idea who they are?” Humphrey asked.

“Or where they came from?” Clive added.

“Yes, and yes,” Miles said. “The who is outworlders. A hundred and nineteen outworlders, all arrived at the same time. As for the where they’re from, that’s what you’re here for.”

“Why us?” Humphrey asked.

“Because when we told them they’d been brought to another world, they all asked about Jason Asano.”

Chapter 497

Something He Could Never Get Back

What looked like a refugee camp with rows of tents had been set up in a forest clearing. Adventure Society and Magic Society officials were managing a group of people variously panicked, nervous or demanding. Miles led Humphrey, Gary and the others around the outside of the camp towards the largest tent.

The outworlders were easy to pick out by their auras. Species was a relatively subtle aspect of a person's aura but being surrounded by outworlders made it stand out. All of the outworlders looked human and were either bronze or silver rank, aside from a small handful of normals. Most of them carried a heavy taint of monster core use in their auras, including all of the silver-rankers. The bronze-rankers with auras not saturated in cores also showed more evidence of proper training with their aura control.

The largest tent in the camp was the administrative centre and the group was about to enter when someone called out from within the camp.

"Hey, Clive! I slept with your wife, bro!"

The group turned to where an Adventure Society functionary was telling a huge man to be quiet. They weren't sure at first, as the voice was oddly high-pitched for a man who matched Gary for size. Very unlike Gary, he was hairless and had chocolate skin. Clive looked at the crowd between them and the man, then at Miles and chanted a spell.

"Exchange your fates."

Miles and the big man swapped places, depositing Miles in the middle of the camp and the man in front of them. Like all the suddenly-arrived outworlders, he'd been given clothes, but he was too big for anything but Leonid outfits. Unlike Gary, who had permanently adopted the colourful fashion of Greenstone, most Leonids went with revealing outfits of leather straps, which the big man was now stuck wearing. He looked like he'd been dragged away from either a very good or very bad time, depending on his personal proclivities.

"Seriously?" Miles called out, now in the middle of the camp. "Come on, guys."

The big man was nonplussed at the teleport but recovered quickly.

"G'day," he said. "You're Jason's team yeah? Plus Gary the sexy lion-man and some rando."

"You know us?" Humphrey asked.

“Sure do. You’re Humphrey. And you’re Sophie, the tough one. Belinda, the smart one and Neil. I thought you were meant to be fat, bro, but you seem pretty ripped. What do you lift? Oh, and Clive. Sorry about your wife, bro.”

“I don’t have a wife!”

“It didn’t work out? Makes sense. If she keeps cheating, that’s not a healthy relationship. Best to make a clean break.”

“You know all of us,” Gary said. “Who are you?”

“I don’t know this guy,” Taika said, holding a hand out for Ken to shake. “I’m Taika Williams.”

“Kenneth, son of Brian,” Ken introduced himself.

“You’ve seen the crystal recordings Jason was always making,” Humphrey said.

“Sure did. I don’t normally like watching people’s holiday videos but they were pretty sweet.”

“How did you get here?” Sophie asked. “Was it the same way Jason got back?”

“He did get back then?” Taika asked. “These people won’t tell us anything.”

At that point, Miles shoved his way back out of the clustered people, staring daggers.

“Really, Clive?” he asked.

“You seem pretty shirty, bro. Are you Clive’s wife?”

“Who is this guy?” Miles asked.

“I’m Taika. G’day, bloke. Where’s Jason?”

“He arrived on the other side of the planet,” Clive said. “We’ve been working to earn a trip to go to where he is. Travel is restricted right now.”

“I suspect he’ll be brought to us, after this,” Miles said. “It’s an enormous mess and the higher-ups are going to want answers. Why do all these people keep asking about him?”

“He’s super famous, bro. The guy who went to another universe and got magic powers. So you tell us we’re all in another universe and he’s the first thing that comes to mind.”

“Then the rest of these people have only heard of him?” Humphrey asked.

“I only know a few of them myself, so I can’t say,” Taika said. “I’m happy to tell you all about it, but I want to trade that for some pants. I look like a commemorative chocolate of Sean Connery in Zardoz. There’s a reason they didn’t make those.”

Having completed his final delivery without further incident, Jason was done with his journey through the Storm Kingdom’s western reaches. The last fortress town was very

happy to receive their supplies and the handoff was blessedly free of complications. The fortress town had tight quarters, was densely packed and had a thick smell of animals, so he quickly left.

Outside the gates, Liara and her offsideers, Jana and Ledev Costi were still around. They had been following him using specialised personal flight platforms that looked like speeder bikes from *Return of the Jedi*. Having watched them follow him through the jungle for the last hour, he was almost surprised that no Ewoks emerged. The bikes were specialised for stealth, Jason's magical senses not detecting anything from them. Like the gold-rankers riding them, they were able to hide even from Jason's powerful perception.

Less stealthy was a simple floater platform containing the chained-up and power-suppressed Purity loyalists.

Jason tried to open a portal to the teleport square of the Adventure Society campus in Rimaros but it failed to become active. The archway appeared but remained empty instead of forming a dark portal.

"Oh, come on," he groaned. It was a potential scenario that he'd been warned about, where any time one of the islands was under attack, the defences would be activated, preventing dimensional travel. This meant a diamond-rank monster or large pack of golds was close to the city, or perhaps there was even a Builder attack.

"What is it?" Liara asked.

"The Livaros defences seem to be up," he said.

"The monster surge is in full swing, now," she said. "Rimaros was about due an attack."

Jason flicked a hand at the portal and it filled with darkness.

"Look's like Arnote is fine," he said. "At least I get to go home and rest before going in to report."

Jason walked through and the archway vanished back into the ground.

"Why do you give him so much leeway?" asked Ledev.

"Because strange forces circle that man," Liara said. "Powerful people – and powerful things – have gone up against him and suffered for it."

"He would have been taken out by three silver-rankers if we hadn't stepped in," Ledev said. "How is that guy dangerous? I mean, for his rank he's rock solid but that's not the puddle he's splashing around in."

“We’re the only reason he was in that situation,” Jana said. “It doesn’t feel right, setting someone up like that. It wasn’t like this when we were going after necromancers. I miss knowing that we’re on the right side.”

“It was just a test,” Liara said. “We were always going to step in. He knew that himself.”

“Because he figured it out. We didn’t tell him that. Do you think it felt like a test to him?”

“No,” Liara said. “No, I don’t.”

Jason rested for a couple of days on Arnote, only stepping out to handle a couple of monster manifestations that occurred on or around the island. One he handled with the gold-ranker who lived nearby, cleaning up the small stuff while the gold-ranker went for the main monster.

The other encounter was out to sea. What originally seemed like a series of sea serpents turned out to be one monster with tentacles that each ended in an eel-like head, all stemming from a main body that was a ball of flesh submerged deep in the water. Jason was able to field test his specially-purchased underwater adaptation gear as he prevented the monster from attacking a boat. Normally boats didn’t sail during a monster surge but the specific circumstances around the current surge meant that additional risks were being taken.

When Jason returned to Livaros, the defences having been lifted, the streets were filled with chatter about the diamond-rank monster that attacked. Coming up from the south, it was a smoke dragon that could switch between solid and amorphous states. The population of Livaros had enjoyed a front-row seat to the battle between the monster and Zila Rimaros from behind the islands powerful dome barrier.

Jason had been disappointed not to have seen the diamond rank monster, as well as the combat ability of a diamond-rank adventurer. The locals were more than happy to discuss what they saw, although Jason already saw signs of people’s stories starting to change in the retelling.

In the course of the battle, the dome had been heavily rocked by the collateral force from the battle and the defences were now in a stage of maintenance. Normally disguised nodes all over the city were being worked on by artificer technicians. Asking around, Jason learned that they were from the Irios family.

A noble house of the highest order, the Irios family was respected both for their adventurers and their mastery of artifice, the creation of magical items. They designed and

maintained the most important defences in the city, from Livaros, where the Adventure Society was located, to the royal family's sky island. The Irios family were deeply involved in both the Magic Society and the Artificer's Association, with a huge amount of influence in the city.

It made perfect sense that the royal family would want to maintain good relations with the Irios family. Unfortunately, a planned political marriage to the Hurricane Princess had been cancelled after the Princess met some man while away from the city and went into a formal mourning period after hearing of his death. This had created tension between the Rimaros and Irios families at a time when unity was especially important.

Jason engaged one group of artificers in conversation as they took a break from work, offering them a round of sandwiches and drinks. The appreciative magical technicians were happy to speak on the topic of the family they were proud of and the work they did for it. In addition to the islands of Rimaros, the Irios family designed and built the defences for many of the fortress towns. According to the family members at least, this led the Irios family to be known as the shield of the Storm Kingdom.

Jason was getting some sense of the magnitude of political brown stuff into which he had been dumped. During the most dangerous monster surge ever, relations between the royal family and the people who maintained the kingdom's defences affected not just the nobility but everyone in the nation. He had been positioned as the reason that those relations were now uneasy.

As he roamed the streets of Livaros somewhat aimlessly, Jason considered the latest turd dropped on him from a very great height, courtesy of the never-ending conveyer belt in the sky. It felt like he was in an endless loop where someone powerful used him for one thing or another, he got angry, made a little speech and nothing ever changed.

Every desperate move he'd made in an attempt to overturn the board and take back some agency came with heavy consequences. He was under no illusion that anything other than luck and extreme circumstantial oddities were responsible for his continuing to be alive. Sometimes a bold move had paid off, while other times it was an inability to keep his mouth shut as the frustration inside him boiled over.

Jason's last resurrection before the decade or longer it would take to reach gold rank had been spent for nothing. All he had to do was keep his mouth shut and not antagonise the diamond-ranker. But he couldn't let it go. Shako, in that moment, had been the representative of all the forces bearing down on him and if he'd just rolled over instead of biting back, Jason would have lost something he could never get back. He really would have become a puppet for whoever grabbed his strings and tried to make him dance.

He had no idea what to do about it. As much as it aggravated him to be once again played with by the latest edition of the people looking to control him, he was more conscious than ever of what would happen if he lashed out blindly. The problems between the houses of Rimaros and Irios affected people who lacked even the agency Jason managed to claim for himself.

The vast majority of the Storm Kingdom's citizens could do nothing but hope the people running things didn't get them killed. If Jason became petulant and caused trouble, they would be the ones paying the price, not the kings and aristocrats. He needed to be patient and harden up, whether that was fair or not. He had responsibilities and there were plenty worse off than him. He was rich and powerful and it was time to stop being a Thadwick.

As for what that meant specifically, he had no idea. He had to be quiet; to listen more than he spoke and to learn more than he revealed. It was a far cry from his strong suit, but if he wanted things to go better than they had in the past, he needed to be better himself.

With a renewed sense of direction, even if it was only in attitude, Jason set out for the Adventure Society campus.

Chapter 498

Dignified Young Adventurer

While still a bustle of activity, the Adventure Society campus wasn't the shoulder-to-shoulder throng it had been in the opening days of the surge. The queues no longer reached outside the jobs hall building and Jason could go straight in. He went up past the floors for the lower-rankers, noting that they weren't especially full. The iron and bronze-rankers were treated more like soldiers during a monster surge, formed into large units and deployed accordingly. When monsters appropriate to their rank did appear, they tended to arrive in extreme numbers and the Adventurer Society responded in kind.

Normally, vast numbers would be dealt with by area-attack specialists rather than sending small armies of adventurers. With activity picking up heavily, though, that wasn't always possible. The Adventure Society was responding to threats as best as they were able, while also waiting for the other shoe to drop from whatever the Builder was planning.

The office for handing in completed contracts was separate from where they were assigned and had a different feel. The adventurers there were all fresh back from the fight, the tension of heading out into the monster surge relieved for at least the current moment. Unless something went wrong, they were happy and joking around with one another.

Monster surge contracts didn't offer direct payment the way normal ones did. Instead, every contract completed would help them tally up on the rewards list. This incentivised adventurers to stay busy since extra effort would reap considerable benefits. For many, though, the most coveted prize wasn't handed out by the Adventure Society. It was widely known that the guilds used monster surges to scout out diamonds in the rough. For most ordinary adventurers, there could be no greater reward than gaining the attention of a guild and being offered even a chance at membership.

The guilds managed their own affairs, largely separated from the Adventure Society's organisational structure. The society handed the guilds large activity quotas and left them to manage them on their own, with only some liaison officers as go-betweens. This was a test for the guilds to prove they deserved the privileges they enjoyed.

This system alleviated the pressure on the Adventure Society, which could then focus on managing all the non-guild adventurers. This meant that the bulk of the people in the jobs hall were non-guild, but it was common knowledge that Adventure Society officials would make recommendations to guilds they had connections with.

The resulting atmosphere was quite boisterous, a combination of joy at having come back from a contract with success and a need to play themselves up on the off chance of

getting noticed. Jason made his way up to the third floor, where silver-rank contracts were managed, and quietly joined a very loud line.

“You handing in the contract for your team?” the adventurer in front of him asked. It was a runic, the people with dark blue skin marked with glowing runes that looked like magic tattoos but were an inherent trait.

“I got caught away from my team when the surge hit,” Jason said. “They’ve got me doing delivery runs.”

“That’s rough. Running solo; no chance to make a big impression on the guilds.”

“I’m just looking to make it through the surge, get out of town and back to my team. They’re a long way from here.”

“That’s a good attitude. It’ll keep you alive. A lot of people take big risks during a surge, trying to make a name for themselves.”

“But not you?”

He flashed Jason a grin.

“Oh, definitely me.”

Jason laughed.

“Good luck, then.”

There were multiple desks keeping things moving along and Jason soon found himself in front of one of them. He handed over the contract documentation, with acknowledgement of materials picked up and received at the various supply depots, fertility church facilities and fortress towns. The Adventure Society functionary checked Jason’s documentation and looked over his report.

“You spotted a gold-rank monster and it didn’t come after you?”

“I’m not sure if it was oblivious or docile; I ran for it rather than sticking around to check.”

“Wise.”

“I detoured to the closest society branch, reported it and got back to my contract.”

“Very wise. You portalled a fort commander to meet with another?”

“I was asked to spare some supplies for a fort that didn’t get a scheduled delivery. I didn’t have the authority to hand over my supplies but I was able to facilitate a meeting so they could organise it amongst themselves. It was less than an hour of my time and there are notes from both fort commanders at the end of the report.”

The official flicked through the pages and took a glance at the notes before turning back to the report.

“Good choice. You showed sound judgement in realising that it wasn't your call to make while still finding a way to help without compromising your contract. I'm going to mark you down for a reward bonus. It won't be much, but keep doing good work and it'll add up.”

“Thank you.”

“Lastly, under combat activity, your report reads...”

He looked down to quote the report directly.

“...several combat encounters, schedule unaffected.”

“That's right. I hit all my deadlines with comfortable margins. It was all signed off by the fort logistics officers.”

“You didn't feel these combat encounters warranted more detail?”

“I was told that there wouldn't be additional rewards for monster kills during supply runs. It makes sense since you don't want delays from people trying to prove they deserve more than delivery contracts. As such, I didn't think it mattered if I ran into a monster or two or got ambushed from stealth one time. The deliveries were made in full and on schedule.”

“That's an accurate assessment, although do try and avoid combat while on delivery contracts. Wagering the welfare of entire towns to clear out a monster is a poor risk/reward dynamic. We're losing too many people on supply runs as it is because we're stretched far too thin. I know many adventurers consider it an unimportant task but there are people out there counting on us.”

“I agree.”

“Your contract is complete, adventurer Asano, and meets your weekly action quota requirements. I would strongly recommend you continue to accept contracts, however. You will find that exceeding minimum requirements is the key to success when it comes time for reward allocation.”

“I would not go taking any fresh contracts just yet, Mr Asano,” a voice spoke from across the room. It was quiet but carried on a wave of gold rank aura that filled the room with a hush. All eyes turned to the doorway to see a gold-rank celestine with the signature sapphire hair of the royal family. The silver-rankers parted like the Red Sea as Liara Rimaros marched up to Jason.

“Princess,” Jason greeted. “Are you staking a claim on my time?”

“I am.”

“That's convenient for me, at least.”

He took out another piece of paper and handed it to her. She took it and glanced over the contents.

“An invoice?”

“As you know, I used up a lot of consumables in our little joint operation. I was going to file this with the Builder response unit, but since you’re here.”

Liara gave him a flat look, then slapped the invoice down on the desk in front of the Adventure Society official.

“See that Mr Asano is reimbursed as part of his weekly reward allocation.”

“Of course, ma’am.”

The official addressed Liara in her role as a higher-ranked officer in the society, as opposed to as a princess. This reinforced to the room full of silver-rank onlookers that she wasn’t just throwing her weight around as a gold-ranker or a princess. She gave the official a slight nod of approval.

“Come with me, Mr Asano. It’s time to debrief you after... our joint operation.”

Under the eyes of the other silver rankers, Lira strode out, Jason trundling after like a duckling. She led him downstairs, out of the jobs hall complex and across the campus grounds. Once they were out of the building, she enacted a small privacy screen.

“Those are quite common it seems,” Jason said. “Makes sense, when everyone has superhuman hearing.”

“Joint operation?” Liara asked.

“Don’t even try and tell me that doesn’t play into what you’re doing. Coming to get me personally, in front of all those people? You’re deliberately raising my profile. You’ve decided what to do about the political situation with Zara.”

“That is Princess Vesper’s area, while I deal with you from an operations standpoint. You have met Vesper, yes?”

“Is that Zara’s aunt? The one who went to Greenstone with her?”

“Yes.”

“We met briefly. I don’t think she liked me.”

“She didn’t. This little display was her idea. To raise your profile, as you say. This was my idea.”

Liara took a small piece of card from a dimensional pouch and handed it to Jason, who read it and stopped walking.

“Mr Asano?”

“Thank you for this,” he said. His expression had no trace of the usual snark.

“Genuinely, this is very considerate.”

Her expression softened.

“We did treat you poorly, Mr Asano. I don’t regret doing so as we now have some important prisoners, but you deserve compensation for the liberties we have taken.”

“I appreciate that. And I do want to contribute to the fight against the Builder.”

“I’ve seen your unabridged records, Mr Asano. I believe you.”

They resumed walking.

“So, what now?” Jason asked.

“Have you heard about the dimensional cities?”

“Just rumours. Flying cities full of Builder armies.”

“They don’t all fly. Somewhere in the Great Western Ocean, there is a city floating in the depths. His ancestral majesty has been monitoring it personally as there are multiple diamond-rank auras within.”

“You’re talking about Soramir.”

“Yes.”

“Nice to know I’m not the only one he’s keeping tabs on. The diamond-rank auras are why no one has launched a massive invasion on this underwater city?”

“Precisely. Thus far, it hasn’t gone past an aura clash. We believe the city had already deployed several expeditions before it was discovered and we are still attempting to track their activity. From what we’ve found, we believe they may be doing what they failed to do several years ago.”

“They’re going after the astral spaces?”

“Yes. Prior to your departure from our world, the Builder cult claimed a number of such spaces. The results were disastrous for the surrounding landscape and anyone living on it. In most cases, however, their efforts were defeated. You and your companion both died making sure that was the case.”

“And now you think they’re making a second run?”

“It is the prevailing assumption, but nothing is being ruled out yet. For the moment, known astral spaces are being monitored. We anticipate that open conflict will soon begin.”

“Just let me know. I’ve picked up some new tricks while I was away that the Builder’s little minions aren’t going to like.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Jason looked around at where Liara was leading him.

“This isn’t the direction of the Builder response unit’s offices.”

“No. Tomorrow is the Builder. Today is politics.”

“Zara.”

“For the moment, we’re positioning you as a valuable asset to the Builder response unit. It has the advantage of being true. That’s why you’ll be seen meeting with me, even when you’re meeting with Vesper. Or Zara.”

“I’ve been wondering when that was going to happen.”

“She’s been told that you’re back. She is sorry that she used you.”

“Everybody’s sorry. Never seems to stop them though, does it?”

Liara and Jason passed through a maze of corridors in the Adventure Society’s main administration building. Every hallway was busy except the last, which was completely devoid of people. She led him into a nondescript meeting room, closed the door behind him and then tapped a crystal on the wall. A privacy screen encapsulated the entire room.

The other occupant of the room was Vesper Rimaros, who stood from her chair and came around the table where she and Jason assessed one another. She was largely unchanged from their previous meeting, three years earlier. She had the same gracefully restrained aura, brimming with confidence. It was no longer overwhelming to Jason, now he matched her silver rank, but he respected the level of control she demonstrated. She had the signature caramel skin and shimmering blue hair of the Rimaros family, but hair was longer than Jason remembered. It was now a gemstone waterfall, cascading down over her shoulders.

Compared to the practical hairstyles Jason was used to seeing from adventurers, it was quite striking. Knowing there was a good chance that Soramir was watching his aura, he tried to push aside his concern that he was developing a celestine fetish.

Jason had changed much more, with his strange eyes, facial scars and features smoothed into the handsomeness typical of silver-rankers. His outfit, however, was identical to what he had worn at Emir’s barbecue: bright floral shirt, shorts and sandals.

“Why are you dressed like a fool?” Vesper asked by way of greeting.

“I came by it honestly. I am a fool.”

“Not anymore,” she said while moving back to the table and sitting down. “Now you are a mysterious and – this part is important – dignified young adventurer. You’ve been away from our world, thought dead, conducting enigmatic affairs related to the Builder invasion and now you’re back to play a critical role. Is that understood?”

“I can sell that,” Jason said, taking a seat across the table. Liara sat next to Vesper.

“Can you?” Vesper asked.

“Aside from the dignity part, it’s pretty much true, so yeah.”

“I think you might be overestimating your actual value,” Vesper said.

"I'd be interested in hearing about those affairs related to the Builder invasion," Liara said.

"I bet you would," Jason said. "Vesper, if you're looking to turn me into a respectable young man of society, you're trying to validate Zara's claim. You aren't looking for me to actually marry her, right? I agreed to help you but that's further than I'm willing to go."

"We're going to pass it off as a one-sided infatuation on her part," Vesper said. "The foolish act of a foolish girl. It doesn't matter if it's true, just that it's at least vaguely plausible enough that people can save face. Which means you need to play the mysterious stranger from another world and stop wearing shorts and absurd, flowery shirts."

"I have been meaning to update my wardrobe," Jason said. "I'll miss the shirts but I've already been recommended a tailor."

"You can't just use anyone," Vesper said. "Who are you going to?"

"Sensual Attire for the Sensual Gentleman."

"Alejandro Albericci," Vesper said. "Alright, that's acceptable, but I'm going to be sending him some instructions."

"I'm sure we can find an acceptable stylistic compromise," Jason told her. "You still haven't told me what all this is in aid of, though. We need to have a conversation about Zara."

Chapter 499

I Can Do Sleazy

“Why are you willing to toss Zara’s reputation into the fire?” Jason asked. “How does that help you with the Irios family?”

Vesper looked unhappy but Liara, sitting next to her, nudged her shoulder.

“You might as well tell him,” she said. “He’ll be more trouble than you think if you try to lead him around by the nose, believe me. You think Zara is bad? He’s worse. When he decides he’s not going along with your plan, he *commits*.”

“You didn’t tell her about us running into each other out west?” Jason asked.

“This isn’t about fighting some rogue priests in the middle of nowhere,” Vesper said. “This is the heart of the nation, with a lot of eyes on us. The marital affairs of royalty might not mean anything to you, but lives are in the balance.”

The amused smile dropped from Jason’s face.

“I’m aware of the stakes, Princess. I understand how critical the Irios family is during a monster surge and the ramifications of them falling out with the royal family. I know that in politics, reputation is both sword and shield. All I want is a look at the snake pit before you ask me to jump in.”

“We’re not looking for any initiative from you,” Vesper said. “Telling you any more than what you need to understand is just inviting trouble.”

Jason resisted the urge to get up and leave. He closed his eyes and calmed his mind before opening them again.

“I get it,” he said. “You’ve been saddled with managing a situation and I’m floating in the middle like a turd you’re not allowed to fish out of the punch bowl.”

“Charming.”

“You need to control the variables and I’m a factor out of your control, so you want to put me in a box as much as you can. But that’s not going to work, Princess. I’ve been in a lot of boxes and I just can’t seem to stop poking holes in them.”

“You agreed to help us with this.”

“I agreed to participate, not to serve. I do recognise the importance of what’s happening here and I’m looking to help, not make things harder for you. But I’m not just wandering blindly into whatever situation you want, either.”

“So, what do you want?” Vesper asked.

“To know what I’m walking into. It’s a reasonable request and I think you know that, or they’d have assigned someone smarter to this. I realise that you’re under a lot of pressure

to get this right and I know that my general demeanour doesn't always inspire confidence. How about we both take a step back? You take off your princess hat, I'll take off my clown shoes and maybe we can figure out how to move forward without stabbing one another."

Vesper sat back in her chair, giving Jason an assessing look.

"Alright," she said. "This situation is complicated enough without us being at odds."

"Which brings me back to my question," Jason said. "What does burning Zara's reputation get you? You want me to come in and play the dashing man of mystery that captured her heart, but all that does is make her look like a naïve girl. Your goal is to strengthen ties with the Irios family, but just saying she's an idiot doesn't help that much, even if I am the most swashbuckling purveyor of derring-do ever to swan in from another universe."

"You want to play at this level, Mr Asano? If you mean what you say about wanting to help more than hurt, I need to know you aren't going to blunder around causing more problems than you solve."

"What kind of assurances are you looking for?" Jason asked.

"I need to know you're not an idiot, to start with."

"You want me to take a test?"

"Why not?" Vesper asked. "You've been given some insight into our political situation, and you claim to know what's at stake. Instead of me telling you about Zara, why don't you tell me?"

"You want me to guess?"

"If you have to guess, Mr Asano, then you aren't playing the game; the game is playing you."

"Fair enough, Princess. I'll play."

He leaned back in his chair, contemplating what he knew. Zara acted on her own because her family would never go along with her choice of plan. That meant the motivation was hers. Just avoiding the concept of an arranged marriage wasn't the answer; her whole culture and the way she was raised would make it normal to her. If it had been some chunky old guy that was one thing but it was a handsome and accomplished young scion. He knew that much from asking around.

"Mr Asano?"

"Give me a moment to think this through. I'm pretty, not smart."

The boy could be a Thadwick, but Zara was the king's eldest daughter. If they had to marry someone to a Thadwick it would be a loose cousin or something. In fact, any problems Zara had with her potential match would be something the family could handle. It

could be that she found someone else, someone inappropriate, but the only viable play there would have been to run off together. It wouldn't take long for her illicit lover to be found and disappeared, which is why she picked someone already dead for her desperate plan. Jason couldn't think of a single good reason for Zara to have done what she did with the political training he was certain she had, which meant...

Jason's eyes went wide.

"It wasn't her fault," he realised. "It was the boy the Irios family put up. She covered for him to take the heat because she's the Hurricane Princess and can make people eat this formal period of mourning nonsense, even if they don't like it. If he'd been the one to call things off, that would get the royal family coming down on the Irios family like a pallet of bricks. If the royal family side is in the wrong, though, that balances out the relative strength of the two families by giving House Irios some political capital. Thus, the state of tension."

Jason got up from his chair and started pacing as he thought it through out loud.

"But why do it like this?" Jason pondered. "It creates a huge mess when they could go to the families and fix everything behind closed doors?"

He paused, face lighting up with realisation.

"Oh, she did a me. She didn't think the people with the actual power would go along, so she made a plan that was loud and bold without thinking through the wider consequences. Announcing this mourning story was too public to just sweep under the rug. Am I right?"

"You are," Vesper said. "What else?"

Jason tapped his head thoughtfully as he resumed pacing.

"Zara makes this big play, the wedding is off and she's in the dog house. But I'm guessing she's daddy's favourite, and people go along as predicted, doing their best to clean up the mess. At least you have this formal mourning period where she has to play good daughter instead of whatever crazy stuff she'd normally get up to, if this debacle is anything to go by. It also gives you a couple of years to smooth things out with House Irios, but they're cranky and the monster surge is already overdue. They're responsible for the Storm Kingdom's defences, which is why you wanted them happy in the first place, and the timing gives them even more political capital. They start pressuring the royal family with this newfound influence because their proud scion getting cuckolded isn't great for the reputation of a proud noble house. How am I doing?"

"Go on," Vesper said.

“Now, we’re closing in on the end of this mourning period and you’ve probably got something lined up. Another marriage, maybe. A match that gives a nice bit of prestige to the Irios family and smooths things over. But then you get a couple of wrinkles. Zara’s deceased paramour rises from the dead and the monster surge finally begins. I have no doubt you considered killing me off, only to realise that I genuinely am a mysterious stranger from another world. There are events you don’t understand at play and you have no idea who is lurking behind the enigmatic silver-ranker who is oddly in the middle of cosmic events. And you have to be careful of whoever’s lurking behind me – wise choice, by the way.”

“I don’t suppose you’d like to share who or what that is?” Liara asked.

“I’m sure it’ll dawn on you eventually,” Jason said. “Anyway, things are going pear-shaped and with fresh eyes on this whole affair, something’s changed. Zara kept her mouth shut, I bet. I’m thinking it’s the Irios kid who cracked, or maybe someone around him, and now both families realise that Zara was taking the heat for the boy the whole time. Suddenly, all the attitude they’ve been throwing at the royal family is coming back to bite them. But you want to smooth things over. It’s the monster surge and helping the Irios family save face gets what you wanted in the first place; a harmonious relationship with an important noble house.”

Jason stopped, frowning as the cogs continued to turn before resuming both the postulation and the pacing.

“The problem is, this whole mess had played out very publicly and you can’t just air it all out. That would make both families look like fools who danced in the palm of a pair of teenagers. She was nineteen when I met her, right? So, you decide to lean into Zara’s original story and paint her as the naïve girl who fell for a stranger in a foreign land. Said stranger makes a shocking reappearance, giving Zara the chance to show that she’s more mature than when she was three years ago. She rebuffs the would-be Lothario, demonstrating that she’s learned from her mistakes and is ready to step up and handle more responsibility. The Irios family magnanimously decides to forgive the indiscretion, for which the royal family is appropriately grateful. All you need is someone who can plausibly sweep a young woman off her feet, is willing to play along and maybe accept one or two dents to his pride. All the better if he’s looking to skip town as soon as the monster surge is over so the whole thing can be left behind.”

Jason dropped back into his chair.

“How did I do?”

“You’re not completely an idiot, then,” Vesper said.

"I do my best, but the occasional bit of competence slips through."

"What you described is broadly accurate. We need to make you appear at least vaguely plausible as a man that could turn the head of an inexperienced girl."

"I'm not going to come out of this looking good, am I?" Jason asked. "My reputation never seems to go quite the way I want, and this might be a new low. But I can do sleazy for you."

"Don't go too over the top," Liara said. "We want to rehabilitate Zara's reputation, not stain it further."

"You want me to play a guy who creeps on teenagers. I think sleazy is unavoidable."

"I saw the two of you together," Vesper said. "You are a guy that creeps on teenagers."

"I was twenty-three and she was nineteen. It wasn't that bad."

She gave him a flat look.

"It wasn't!"

Vesper and Liara shared a glance.

"What about the Irios kid?" Jason asked, hurriedly changing the subject. "He's the start of all this mess, right? Why did he not want to go through with this marriage?"

"You tell me," Vesper said.

"Alright," Jason said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "How old is this kid? Zara's age?"

"A year younger."

"Okay. Sheltered rich boy. Probably not a total tool bag, if you were willing to have Zara marry him. She went to some extreme lengths to look out for him, too, so I'd say they knew each other pretty well. Childhood friends, put together years ago with this marriage in mind?"

Vesper nodded.

"Alright. He's young, horny, yet somehow not on board even though they're close and Zara's so gorgeous that it's kind of insulting to the rest of us. I mean, we have to walk around not being that good looking?"

"Mr Asano."

"Of course you don't think it's a big deal," Jason said, gesturing angrily at Vesper. "Look at you. It's like the god of sexiness made you just to piss people off."

"Perhaps try and stay on topic, Mr Asano?" Liara suggested.

"Yeah, I should have read the room," he said. "You're no better. There's clearly no point complaining to the Rimaros family about not being attractive enough. Which is kind of the point. I know the whole childhood friend thing. Mine looked downright homely

compared to Zara and that girl messed me up. Which tells me that this guy is gayer than a nautically-themed dance troupe called Hot Seamen.”

Vesper and Liara shared a wide-eyed glance.

“That shouldn’t be a problem, though,” Jason said. “They could just have him marry some bloke. The church of Fertility can let people pump out a kid without ever touching one another. They can grow the adorable little sprog in a jar. Most aristocrats do it that way, men or women, right?”

“You’re familiar with the Fertility church’s capabilities?”

“Took a tour, recently. I knew a conversation like this was coming, so I grabbed the chance to learn about how the aristocracy handle baby-making. Turns out that growing them in a vat is actually the norm and you can just staff your house with sexy gardeners or whatever without mum and dad ever talking to one another.”

“It’s not always like that,” Liara said.

“Yeah, but it’s an option, which makes me wonder what the Irios kid’s problem is. He’s a teenager, so a kind of terrible life choice is a safe bet. I’m guessing a boy. Probably too old and way too inappropriate. Musician?”

“Tattoo artist,” Vesper grumbled.

Jason burst out laughing.

“And they stuck you with cleaning up this mess?” he asked. “Oh, you poor woman.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I take it that guy is out of the picture, now?”

“Very,” Vesper said.

“You didn’t kill him, did you?”

“He’s on an airship somewhere over the Great Western ocean right now with a dimensional bag full of money and a very thorough understanding of what happens if he ever comes back to this hemisphere.”

“Fair enough,” Jason said. “I guess we’re ready to go, then. I’m not looking to make things hard for anyone, so I’ll change up the wardrobe and play mysterious outworlder for you. I assume you’ll want to parade me around a little, maybe make some noble girls swoon.”

“Mysterious brooding loner might be a better choice.”

“Sorry, but I’ve just had my silent brooding period; you missed the window. But I’ll see what I can do about dashing and charismatic.”

Vesper let out a resigned sigh.

“The good thing is that no one will expect perfect etiquette,” she said. “You’re not just a commoner from another country but a whole other world. Adventurers get a lot of leeway if they’re competent, so we need to drum up a conspicuous achievement or two.”

“Thus, the escort from the jobs hall,” Jason said. “You’re looking to make me seem like an important asset to the Builder response unit.”

“You are an important asset to the Builder response unit,” Liara said.

“Which works out. Never lie when the truth can lie for you and don’t do things for just one reason if you can get away with it. Since you’re part of the Builder unit, you can manage my activities, bump up my reputation and be my public contact with the royal family, right?”

“Exactly,” Liara said. “We can also make some judicious leaks from your record. We’ll need your permission for that so the Adventure Society admin doesn’t come down on us.”

“I would have thought you’d just do it without asking their permission, let alone, mine.”

“The Adventure Society doesn’t answer to the royal family,” Liara said. “Neither do you, for that matter.”

“Yet, here I find myself.”

“This business about coming back to life helps us with your reputation,” Vesper said. “How did you come back from the dead? Actually, don’t tell me. Or anyone else. It adds to the mystique. In terms of etiquette, I’m going to give you instruction. Self-made adventurers, especially foreign ones, are held to a different standard. If I’m going to get you into a princess-wooing state, though, you’ll need some polish. You’ll need to know how to eat a meal or participate in a social function without embarrassing yourself. You need to know how to dance.”

“Oh, I can dance, but learning the local steps will be fun. I haven’t been dancing in a while. Too busy being an interdimensional man of mystery. Are you going to show me the moves, Princess?”

“Yes,” Vesper said. “We need to keep this as contained as possible. Your only public contact will be Liara, who will bring you to me at need. For now, we’re going to do a bad job of hiding your value to the Builder response unit. We want people to find you, rather than introducing you ourselves.”

They continued to discuss the details and specifics Jason needed to know. Jason was then sent off in search of a new wardrobe, leaving Liara and Vesper alone. Vesper leaned back wearily in her chair as Jason closed the door behind him.

“This is going to be a huge mess.”

“It always was,” Liara said. “What do you think of him?”

“He’s dangerous, and not in the good way.”

“He seemed to grasp the situation easily enough.”

“Which is exactly the problem. He’s the kind of person who thinks they see through everything. People like that inevitably have a great idea and go off-plan, getting blindsided by the thing they missed or had no way to see coming.”

“Maybe he should marry Zara,” Liara said with a laugh.

“Gods help us all. Do you think you can make people believe he’s some secretly amazing adventurer?”

“That’s the easy part,” Liara said. “Even his unabridged record is full of mysteries, and now we have Asano’s permission to put some of it out there. In social settings, he’ll largely be judged by his aura, which is the opposite of a problem. If anything, that’s what’ll sell this whole story.”

Liara stood up.

“I need to go. This political mess is consuming too much of my time as it is.”

“Drinks tonight?” Vesper asked. “I think we both deserve it.”

“Maybe. I probably won’t have time, but I’ll let you know.”

She went to the door and opened it, pausing before she left.

“What’s a Lothario?” she asked.

“I have no idea.”

Chapter 500

An Object Lesson in Foolish Risks

While Rimaros was considered a single city, the islands that comprised it were spread over hundreds of kilometres. With three main islands and many sky islands that were themselves often sizeable, it was a city of many flavours, with each island having its own feel.

The most populous island was the easternmost of the three main islands, Provo. As well as being the general trade hub of the city, it was home to the majority of the non-magical citizenry. Its infrastructure was all designed to support a large population with biological needs that essence users no longer shared.

Livaros was just the opposite. The island of adventurers was an adventurer city from the foundation up. It wasn't strictly unwelcoming to the non-magical, but most felt uncomfortable being a Clark Kent in a world of Supermen. The thoroughfares of the island were specifically designed to accommodate floater platforms, magical vehicles or simply riding around on familiars. Local transport wasn't expensive to rent for those earning adventurer money, but for normal people on normal wages, it was prohibitive.

Even with everything working against it, there was still a small population of normals living and working on Livaros. They were shop assistants, functionaries and other jobs that were essential, but not particularly valuable. There was one trait that every normal-ranker on Livaros shared; a collective knowledge passed between the non-magical like a secret language: The locations of the island's very, very small number of toilets.

"The adventuring districts of any major city are set up like this," Rufus explained as he and Jason rode void-black horses with glowing white manes and hooves, side by side through the city. "It's just that being divided by islands makes the delineation especially apparent, here."

Rufus was more well-travelled than Farrah, who did not share his wealthy upbringing. She was the result of generations of effort to obtain not just any essences but a powerful combination. Her family had also managed to afford a retired adventurer to give her the training she needed to hold her own in a competitive field. Farrah had fulfilled that ambition as her success, even as just a bronze-ranker, uplifted her entire family.

While Jason and Rufus were heading for a local tailor, Farrah was on the sky island that held the Magic Society campus, accessing the water link chambers. Liara had used her influence to schedule a call between Farrah and her parents, who hadn't seen her in more than three years and, until recently, believed her dead. While he knew the intent was

to keep him from getting too rebellious over being used, he at least appreciated the consideration with which the gesture was made.

Rufus continued his explanation, covering how those with backgrounds like Farrah's strove to make it in big, magical cities.

"The lure of a place like Livaros for normals is the higher wages. Many use that money to lift themselves up by saving for essences. Even if someone doesn't become an adventurer until they're thirty or older, once they get there new worlds open to them."

"But getting essences is just the start, right? You need training and monsters that aren't three ranks higher than you. Without a rich family cultivating their fights for them, won't these self-made adventurers just get themselves killed?"

"Definitely," Rufus said. "People come here and earn money because the wages are higher and the essences, on average, are cheaper. Once they have them, though, they tend to leave. With the high-rank monsters and well-trained elites in a place like Rimaros, they're better off starting over somewhere with less-potent magic. Lower-magic zones are much better suited to more borderline adventurers. Few places have the low magical density of Greenstone, but there are plenty lower than the Sea of Storms."

"You met Gary and Farrah in a place like that, right? Fighting zombies?"

"I did. It was a big operation, pulling in the locals and people from Vitesse. It wasn't a very high-ranking threat, just a widespread one, so lots of us from the academy were sent out for some valuable experience. Gary and Farrah were operating out of the same branch, knew each other in passing but never really met before. Things got a little wild, as they always do, and we ended up doing a lot of fighting together. Their talent stood out from the locals, especially Farrah, and I asked them to come with me back to Vitesse."

"So, the adventurers that stay in places like Vitesse and Rimaros are the good ones? The ones from families with the money and power to train their people properly?"

"There's more to it than that," Rufus said. "Most of these hardscrabble adventurers aren't a Gary or a Farrah. They're not looking to make something of themselves when they leave. They want to make something of their children. They might not be the best adventurers in the world but they can make enough to get their children a better set of essences and then send them to an academy or a training hall. Maybe not in Rimaros itself, but there are places in the Sea of Storms where the competition isn't so fierce. Not every academy is like the one my family..."

Rufus trailed off as Jason took out a glass of liquor and drank it in a gulp.

"Some days," Rufus said, "I wish you'd let the blood cult throw me in that pit."

Jason chuckled as he returned the empty glass to his inventory.

"I think I know what you're talking about," he said. "I visited a city in the western reaches during my delivery run. The adventurers there were a step up from Greenstone, but a step down from even the non-guild people here in Rimaros."

"That's the kind of place you'll find the less prestigious institutions, but that in no way makes them bad. Those instruction halls are where the majority of adventurers get trained and plenty of them have the potential to rise to the top."

"Those are the ones who've come to Rimaros, looking for that guild membership?"

"They are. The lack of training halls like we're talking about is the reason a place like Greenstone falls short. There, if you don't come from a prominent family, like Humphrey or Neil, then you're pretty much hoping that someone with more experience will mentor you. Danielle Geller established a training hall there, after the expedition disaster."

"I remember," Jason said. "She was just getting started before we went into the astral space. I even taught aura control there for a few weeks."

"It's more developed now," Rufus said. "It doesn't offer the level of training that the Gellers give their people in-house, but it's open to all essence users. They're even deferring payment until people get Adventure Society membership and earn enough to pay back the tuition fees. I even arranged for the Remore Academy graduates coming to Greenstone to do some basic instruction there. A trick I picked up growing up surrounded by teachers is that having students teach each other is a great tool to consolidate learning. I've found it complements the training annex programs very nicely. It's still early days, but I can see Greenstone's adventuring culture going through a qualitative shift over the next few decades."

"It sounds like you enjoy running a school."

"It's just a training annex."

"That you conceived of, developed, established and ran. You're allowed to be proud of yourself, Rufus; it won't make your hair grow back."

"Why would..."

Rufus stopped himself. In their time apart, he'd forgotten the dangers of asking questions about Jason's nonsense.

"If I'm being honest with myself," he said, "I've enjoyed establishing the training annex more than I've missed adventuring. Helping others to avoid my mistakes is a lot more fulfilling than the constant dread of making the next one."

Jason's aura senses were utterly transformed from what they had been when he knew Rufus in the past and now his friend was an open book to him. Jason always knew that Rufus and his team getting captured at the time Jason first met them, and then

Farrah's death weighed heavily on him. Now he could feel it inside Rufus like a wound. Even Farrah's return hadn't entirely erased it. He had a feeling that just like Gary had turned to his smithing, Rufus would turn to teaching rather than go back to the adventuring life. What that meant for Farrah remained to be seen.

"That's nothing to be ashamed of," Jason said. "Honestly, at this point, I think I'd rather be a tourist. All the fun parts of adventuring, but without stuff constantly trying to kill you and your friends. Sadly, that ship has sailed for me. I've got the Builder, then whatever comes next."

"Next?"

"All I've gotten from Dawn so far are ominous warnings. Whatever it is, I need to keep getting stronger, so it's the adventuring life for me. Honestly, I do like it when I'm not fighting and/or being used by great astral beings or gods or forest nymphs who live in a baby oil factory."

"What?"

"I've got to get lucky one of these days, right?"

Rufus shook his head.

"It's adventuring for me as well. The training annex is a pleasant distraction, but I chose to be an adventurer. If I step away from that, every person I could have helped and didn't is my responsibility. I've paid the price for my mistakes, so now I have to use the lessons I took from them."

"You're an idiot."

Rufus swivelled his head to look at Jason.

"Excuse me?"

"Rufus, are you a good teacher? Wait, don't answer that. You'll say some humble crap and I'm trying to make a point here. I know you're a good teacher because you taught me and I'm awesome. Even with my overwhelming natural talent, smouldering charisma and dashing good looks helping you along, that's still a pretty good result."

Rufus gave him a flat look.

"Now," Jason continued, flashing an impish grin. "Let's just say you go back to adventuring and save one person's life a week. On average. Now let's posit that instead, you go teaching young adventurers full time. How many of them can you help avoid the mistakes that you made? How many of them are going to go off and save one person's life every week? If you look at it that way, then going back to adventuring is equivalent to killing a whole bunch of innocent people because you failed to train the adventurers that

would have saved them. Are you going to kill a bunch of innocent people, Rufus? That's cold."

"Jason, I'm not Humphrey. I'm not going to accept some problem-riddled argument because you talked fast enough."

"Mate, it's about the point, not the details. I've saved a lot of lives, Rufus. Not mine, as much as I'd like, but other people's. I'm sure Farrah told you all about Earth when I wasn't around."

"She didn't think you'd want to tell it yourself."

"That's because she's smarter than us. My point, Rufus, is that every life I saved is a life that you saved. You taught me how. You and Farrah and Gary. So, when you tell me that going off and being a teacher is somehow abdicating responsibility, what I'm hearing is that everything you taught me, and everything I've done with it, isn't worth a damn. That you don't respect it."

"That's not what I'm saying."

"I hate to break it to you, cobber, but that's exactly what you're saying. You're also bizarrely claiming that being a teacher is somehow selfish. That's a pile of crap so huge that you could make a living selling Rufus-brand prime fertilizer. You think back to the people who taught you at this academy of yours. How many of them are shirking their responsibilities?"

They continued riding along the street on Shade's horse forms, Rufus falling into silent contemplation. He didn't share Jason's pathological need to get the last word.

In a water link chamber, Farrah was talking with two water clones of her parents. The magic was sufficiently developed that they were indistinguishable from her actual parents to the eye. Magical senses revealed their nature as projections, which hadn't stopped her from taking a half-step in the instinct to hug them when they appeared.

After a very emotional sort-of reunion, they were coming to the end of their time in the chamber. Liara had scheduled a generous block, but communication was at an absolute premium.

"We're trying to get you here, along with Gary and Jason's companions," Farrah told her parents. "It would be easier if we came to you, but Jason can't go anywhere without getting caught up in some huge mess."

"Yes, we met him and he's a very nice boy," Farrah's mother, Amelia, said. "A bit odd, but nice. If he brought you back to us, though, then he's family, now."

“At worst, we’ll make our way to you once the monster surge is over,” Farrah assured her.

“You just make sure and stay safe,” said her father, William. “No foolish risks. We want you coming back to us safe and sound.”

“Don’t worry,” Farrah said. “I have an object lesson in foolish risks running around with me. I leave that sort of thing to him, now.”

Jason and Rufus dropped lightly to the street as Shade's horse forms dissolved into Jason's shadow. They were outside a boutique store; a simple cream-coloured building with a light linen suit hanging on a dummy in the window, topped by a Panama hat. There was no other indication of the shop's name or signage of any kind.

“Oh yeah,” Jason said. “I’m getting one of those hats.”

Jason opened the door for Rufus, then followed him inside. The interior was surprisingly spacious, the small storefront obscuring the fact that internally it was quite large. The left and right walls were covered in racks of fabric samples that leaned heavily toward light fabrics and shades, appropriate to the climate. There were doors to the sides, large armchairs and the back wall was completely open to a courtyard with what looked like an outdoor bar-café.

There were tables shrouded by parasols where people were sitting and chatting as they ate or drank. There were young couples, a trio of old men playing cards. Everyone was exquisitely, if casually dressed. There were two people behind the bar, plus a cook in the kitchen behind it. The whole courtyard was filled with lush tropical plants.

Two celestine men were coming in from the courtyard. One was tall and handsome with sharp cheekbones and gunmetal hair and eyes. His aura placed him at the peak of bronze rank. The man with him Jason recognised as one of the Als, although this one looked younger than the other's he'd seen because of his silver rank. His aura was thick with monster cores, which was common in magical craftspeople. Most felt that chasing after monsters was a waste of time better spent dedicated to their profession.

Alejandro Albericci had sea-green eyes and identically coloured hair that spilled back off his head in waves. He wore a flatteringly-draped suit of white fabric, his cufflinks, shoes and pocket square all matched the colour of his hair.

“Thank you for coming in, Young Master Irios,” Alejandro was saying as the two men walked across the room.

“You were recommended to me. They said I should come in around now to catch you when you weren't busy.”

Jason smiled thinly. He'd received the same recommendation, which he now suspected came from the same source. He tapped a small pin on his shirt, a new purchase, and an invisible sound screen surrounded Jason and Rufus.

"Remind me to punch Vesper Rimaros in the boob," he said.

"No," Rufus said, reaching out to tap the pin on Jason's shirt and shut the screen off.

Jason and Rufus stepped aside as Alejandro led the young man to the door. Alejandro's gaze took in Jason at a glance, while the young man's eyes lingered a little longer on Rufus in passing.

"You will be contacted when your clothes are ready, Mr Irios," Alejandro said.

"Thank you, Mr Albericci."

"Please, call me Al."

As the young man Jason was certain to be named Kasper Irios closed the door, Alejandro turned to Jason and Rufus.

"You must be Jason Asano," he said. "I was instructed to offer you nothing but the best."

The door that had almost completely closed froze in place, the young man's hand still gripping the handle.

Chapter 501

Murky Waters

Jason felt the emotions play out in the auras around him. At the centre was the man on the other side of the tailor shop's glass, Kasper Irios. A peak-level bronze-ranker, he was standing frozen, gripping the handle of the almost-closed door. His shock was as plainly written on his face as his aura after hearing Jason's name.

The man who had spoken his name, Alejandro Albericci, was also a silver-ranker. The moment he sensed the reaction of Kasper, his welcoming aura filled with surprise and then suspicion with an underlying strain of anger. Jason realised that he wasn't party to the play being acted out, with whoever wrote the script remaining hidden in the wings.

Rufus was confused, having picked up on the tension in Jason's body language and the obvious link to the man on the other side of the glass. He was smart enough to know that if he didn't have the information to act, he should keep his mouth shut and listen, looking to Jason for direction.

Jason's aura was unreadable to the other silver-rankers, but the anger over being played yet again flashed on his face before he schooled his expression.

"Mr Albericci," Jason said. "This is Rufus Remore, out of Vitesse. I would appreciate you seeing to his needs while I take Mr Irios for a little walk. Let's not make a scene in your place of business."

Alejandro looked Jason in the eyes. Jason's aura revealed only its normal, polite façade, leaving him to assess Jason by what he could see. Jason was wearing his usual tourist-in-the-tropics outfit but the tailor knew better than most that it was not clothes that made the man.

"Thank you, Mr Asano. I appreciate the courtesy."

Kasper Irios was still gripping the handle of the almost-closed door, letting go and stepping back as Jason pulled it open. The bronze-ranker's movements were oddly stumbling for an adventurer, his physical unbalance revealing the depth of his mental equivalent.

"Kasper Irios, I take it?" Jason asked. "I'm Jason Asano. Just to get it out of the way: yes, the dead one. You and I are going to take a little walk."

Kasper's initial shock was giving way to wariness.

"How am I meant to know you are who you say?"

"It's a fair question," Jason said. "It's not every day your former fiancé's dead fake lover comes back to life. Not sure what to tell you, though. I don't think they make a

greeting card for 'sorry I used your death to avoid a political marriage and got you caught up in a huge mess although in fairness you were dead and that's not something I had a reasonable expectation of you coming back from.' It'd be hard to fit on the cover, if nothing else."

"What are you talking about? What's a greeting card?"

"Right, other world. Do you have gift baskets here?"

"Uh, yes. I'm not sure what-"

"A greeting card is like that, except instead of being full of nice things it's a piece of card stock. It's like a social puzzle where you have to figure out how long you need to leave it sitting around before you can throw it away without being rude."

Jason tapped the pin on his chest and an invisible privacy screen shielded them from eavesdropping. It wasn't impenetrable, but anyone who could do so without Jason noticing was out of his league anyway. It would be enough to stop the hidden observers Jason could sense already paying them attention.

"Let's walk, Mr Irios."

Jason felt fear from the bronze-ranker.

"I'm not sure I should be going places with you."

"We're not going anywhere," Jason said. "We're just going to wander around on the street a little, in front of plenty of people and have a nice chat. Well, a chat, anyway."

They started walking along the street, side by side. The streets were wide shopping boulevards with plenty of other traffic, both on foot and using various means of transport. They were far from the only people using privacy screens, unseen to the eye but visible to magical senses.

Alejandro's shopfront was part of a shopping district located between the more open market district and the more industrious craftsman's quarter. It was comprised of boutique stores catering to adventurers, nobility and the wealthy. Many of the people walking the street were all three, making anyone that caused trouble very stupid indeed.

Jason and Kasper wandered along the street, in awkward silence, at first. Jason noted that many glances were cast at Kasper; he guessed as locals recognised either the house Irios crest on the arm of his clothes or Kasper himself, although no one greeted him as they passed.

"Mr Irios, someone told you to come here, and they didn't tell you the real reason why. We're both dancing on someone's palm and I don't know about you, but I don't like that. That being said, we need to step carefully. I've had my share of lessons in getting out of one mess by making a bigger one, and we both know that you have as well."

“I’m still not taking your word for who you claim to be.”

“Nor should you,” Jason agreed. “The whole point of having us meet like this is so that you will go out and investigate. Or, more precisely, so your family will. That’s one of several reasons someone arranged for us to meet like this. Someone wants to stir up murky waters.”

“Who?”

“House Irios and the royal family are both looking to settle things down after the mess that you and Zara made. The exact who doesn’t matter right now. First, you need to make sure that I am who I say I am. My return brings certain things to a head, which your family will need to handle carefully. You, yourself, will need some time to process. I certainly did. I came back from the dead and find that instead of the nice quiet stay in the tropics, I’m suddenly the dead paramour of some princess I met a couple of times three years ago. Plus the Builder’s trying to assassinate me again, but that bit’s not on you.”

“What?”

“Look, mate. You just found out that, one: I’m alive, and two: I’m here. There are ramifications that need to be thought through. Someone – who is going to get a good talking to – decided that having you and I bump into one another oh-so coincidentally would be a good way to do that murky water stirring.”

“Why?”

“Probably to see if we make a scene. They’re still trying to figure out how I handle myself and need to know if I’m reliable when put on the spot. I need to be a little bit of a controversial figure for what comes next, so a public confrontation between you and I wouldn’t hurt that goal. As for you, you’ve made trouble before. They want to know if you’ll do something stupid like run off to Zara and cook up another terrible plan.”

“I don’t think I should be talking to you.”

“Correct,” Jason said. “I’m going to tell you what you should be doing. You need to go home. You need to tell your family that you met me. Then you need to have a nice long think and a nice long talk with them. After that, you do what they tell you.”

Kasper went to respond but Jason silenced him with a gesture.

“Now, I’m going to tell you what you shouldn’t do. You should *not* go find your friend Zara and have her devise some plan to get some control over the situation that sets in motion a cascade of events that ruins everything for you, me, her, your family, the royal family and thousands of people who are relying on all of the above to keep them safe.”

“Oh, hey Kasper!”

A trio of young men in fine clothes was approaching them with waved greetings. They were all bronze-rank but close to silver, like Kasper himself. One was wearing a loose robe of light, breathable fabric, with the colours and emblem of the Magic Society. Not all Magic Society members were also adventurers, and the monster cores in the young man's aura suggested he was not. His aura control was solid, though, so he was not untrained.

The other two were more likely adventurers, from their clean auras. One wore a long jacket covered in pockets and potion-vial loops, marking him as an alchemist. The third bore no identifying equipment but Jason noted the precision of his movement and his attentiveness to the surroundings. Of the three Jason pegged him as the most capable.

Jason tapped his pin to drop the privacy screen.

"Hey, Kas," the Magic Society member said. "I thought the family had you bundled up indoors when you weren't out on a contract."

"I, uh, I came out to order some clothes."

The three picked up on Kasper's nervousness and moved their attention to its obvious source.

"Who's your friend, Kas?" the alchemist asked.

"Kasper's a little busy," Jason said. "You can catch up with him later."

Alongside his words, he sent a little stream of aura to the third member of the group, giving him a glimpse of what lay behind Jason's polite aura facade. The young man put a hand on each of his two friends' shoulders.

"We'll catch up with him later," he said, echoing Jason's words.

The other two looked from Jason to their friend and back to Jason, their communication through glances showing Jason how close they were.

"Alright, Kas," the alchemist said. "We'll come and find you at home."

"Thank you, Hils," Kasper said. "I'll see you all later, then."

The trio moved on, throwing curious looks back at Jason.

"You know those three are going to talk," Kasper said.

Jason reinstated the privacy screen.

"My return is going to bring issues around you and Zara to the fore," Jason said. "Events are being set in motion. Your family, and now those three, are going to ask questions. When they do, undercurrents will start to flow."

"I think I do need to go home."

"Yes, you do," Jason said. "Look, I know what you're going through. You just found out a bunch of crazy stuff, you haven't had time to sort through it and there's some guy

who won't stop talking and you understand maybe a third of what he's saying at best. You need to stop, take stock and sort through everything. Talk to your family."

Kasper nodded.

"Good. Now, someone from your family will want to talk to me. You probably will too, once you've had time to sit with this for a while. When you're ready, come find me on Arnote. I'm staying in a little town called Palisaros. Just ask around and someone will point you my way."

Kasper took a personal floater disc out from the dimensional bag on his hip. Before he stepped onto it, he turned to look at Jason.

"If you are who you say, I want you to know I'm sorry," he said. "It never felt right, using your name the way we did. It's just..."

"Better to invoke the dead than hurt the living."

Kasper nodded.

"I won't say I wasn't angry," Jason said. "I was. Still am, to be honest, but that doesn't help us right now. I can yell at you in private, once you come find me."

"Does Zara know?"

"You didn't talk to her?"

"Her family keeps her on a narrow line since everything happened. We don't see each other much anymore. She said it wouldn't look good, anyway."

Kasper gave Jason a sad smile, stepped onto his float disc and drifted off. Jason watched him go, then tapped his pin to drop the privacy screen and started walking back toward the tailor shop.

"Tell your boss," he muttered, "the next time she wants me to dance, she needs to let me know before the music starts or she'll find me stepping on her feet."

He sensed the observers start moving away.

Adventure Society Director was a prominent position in any community. In a major adventuring hub like Rimaros, that was even more true. It was a demanding and high-pressure job, although the prestige and social standing that came with it were not inconsiderable. The director mixed with kings and queens, famous adventurers and foreign dignitaries. A director who did their job well found that once they moved on from the position, many doors would open to them. Those that fell short dropped into a pit of obscurity from which there was no escape.

Gil Vinatos was the current occupant of the position, and fully aware that his performance in the coming weeks would define the rest of his life. An unprecedented

monster surge and the Builder invasion were more than enough, even without the reports that were starting to come in from around the world. For someone like him, who worked their way up from the bottom through solid administrative skills, it was a critical time.

He was taking a much-needed break, although he didn't have time for a long one. Laying out on his office couch, eyes closed as he ate sliced fruit from a bowl sitting on his chest was the most he could afford before he had to get back to work.

"A well-earned break, Mr Vinatos."

Gil sat bolt upright, the bowl tumbling to the floor. He couldn't sense the person who had just spoken at all, despite his gold-rank senses. Admittedly, his rank came from monster cores, but he had been diligent in his training. He was also the director of the Adventure Society, so his office was both very difficult and very foolish to break into. He saw a man sitting on the edge of his desk, emitting no discernable aura at all. Gil was about to ask who he was when he recognised the face.

In heart of the royal palace, which Gil had visited many times, was a hallway full of portraits that lead to the throne room. He had spent a certain amount of time waiting outside to be admitted and had looked over the closest portraits more than a few times. Gil recognised the man in front of him from one of those portraits. The one at the very end, right next to the throne room doors.

"I'm sorry, Mr Vinatos. I've made you drop your fruit."

Chapter 502

Integrity is Forever

Gil picked up his fruit from the floor, lamenting that he'd been too startled to catch it when, normally, his gold-rank reflexes would have no trouble doing so. Then he realised that Soramir could also have caught them even more easily but quickly quashed his annoyance at that. He looked up sheepishly, knowing that the diamond-ranker would have certainly sensed the emotion and where it was directed.

"Don't concern yourself, Mr Vinaros. I'm not here to make things harder for you."

Gil looked down at the bowl of fruit slices now covered in carpet fluff. He absently considered that he should have picked a carpet that handled the humidity better.

"Of course not, ancestral majesty."

Gil moved to his desk and sat the bowl down. Soramir stopped leaning on the desk and took one of the seats as Gil moved behind the desk before doing likewise.

"To what do I owe the honour?" Gil asked. "Is this related to the Builder city? Her highness, Princess Zila, informed me that you were monitoring it."

"Several of my peers are currently watching it in rotation," Soramir said. "We diamond-rankers are taking a more active role in current events, although we are keeping our activities quiet for the moment. Your position makes you one of the few with whom we are sharing our activities. Some of them, in any case."

"What can I do for you, ancestral majesty?"

"I need for you to arrange to have some people portalled here from Vitesse. Six silver-rankers and two bronze."

"Obviously, you're aware of how tightly regulated high-rank portal personnel are right now. While I respect the royal family - and you, in particular - I can't ask the Vitesse branch to make that kind of allocation without a valid reason."

Gil opened a drawer and took out a sheet of paper.

"Curiously," he said, "I just received a similar request from Vitesse. They want two silver-rankers portalled in the other direction. Normally I would suggest that we could save on resources by using the same portal specialist to send one group across and then the other back. I cannot help but feel, however, that these two requests share a connection."

Gil handed the paper over the table to Soramir, who glanced it over.

"Jason Asano and Farrah Hurin," he read. "Why am I not surprised? Your assumption is quite accurate."

Soramir put the paper on the desk, tapping it with his finger.

“This does not state the reason for the request.”

“It’s related to events taking place in the northern regions of Estercost. The Vitesse branch sent out an expedition to attack a Purity church stronghold and got more than they bargained for. It’s quite a mess right now, but somehow this Asano is involved. I’m having the analytical office prepare a full report for me to look at before I respond to the request.”

“Asano cannot be allowed to leave the Sea of Storms right now. You need to deny the request.”

“With respect, ancestral majesty, while I am open to any request you wish to make of this office, it’s just that: a request. You don’t tell this office what it can and cannot do.”

Soramir raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“I respect that, Mr Vinaros—”

“Director Vinaros, your majesty. For this conversation, it’s Director Vinaros.”

“Of course. Director, let me share my reasoning. During my time away, I became aware of preparations being made for the invasion of our world and returned to help the Storm Kingdom weather those events. Since my return to Rimaros, I have been investigating the activities of the Builder cult. I’ve even discretely been throwing some assistance to the Adventure Society’s Builder response unit.”

“This was not reported to me.”

“They don’t know I’ve been assisting them. I’ve recently contacted one of their leaders, my descendent, Liara. I will be working more closely with them going forward, so you can anticipate reports on the activities in question.”

“That is much appreciated.”

“One of the things I discovered was that several months ago, the Builder cult undertook some kind of infrastructure project, buried underneath an uninhabited island. They then abandoned the island entirely, so that their work couldn’t be found unless you knew to look.”

“Which you did, I assume.”

“Yes. It was some manner of astral beacon. Like other astral magic being used by the cult, it was very advanced, by the standards of this world. My initial thought was that it was a launch point for the coming invasion.”

“Did you destroy it?”

“I decided not to. The advantage in knowing where the enemy would arrive is considerable, as you can no doubt imagine. However, it was not an invasion force that came through but two silver-rankers, both of whom were listed as having died fighting the Builder cult several years ago.”

"The Builder resurrected them?"

"No, Asano is an outworlder and was resurrected on his own world. I believe he had an object called a World-Phoenix token that revived him and sent him back where he came from. As for his companion, she seems to have become an outworlder after her death by likewise resurrecting in Asano's homeworld. As for the specifics, I have no idea."

"There must be quite a story there."

"Yes, although they have chosen to share very little, thus far."

"They're silver-rankers. That isn't a choice they get to make. I'll have them brought in and—"

"I would hold off on that, Director Vinaros. If Asano has the backing that I suspect, he needs to be treated carefully. Not only will that mean there are powerful forces behind him but also that he has an important role to play."

"Then perhaps you should go to him personally. The attention of a diamond-ranker, especially one as prestigious as you will be flattering and get him onside."

"I have already met Mr Asano, but it turns out that he's grown tired of dealing with people far more powerful than he. Rather than impressed, he was annoyed and angry. Because of the way he seems to have been treated in the past, I believe that he will respond very positively to forthright honesty and plain dealing."

"Is that what your portal request is related to?"

"Yes. I want his team brought here to join him."

"Vitesse wants him there."

"We need him here. My understanding is that Asano himself found the means to return to our world, but the Builder had his people use the beacon to determine his arrival point. As for why they weren't waiting for them, I'm not sure."

"If the Builder wants him here, isn't sending him out of the Storm Kingdom the best option?"

"I believe the Builder's intention in bringing him here was to have him killed. The Builder has apparently agreed to some kind of restriction on how he attempts to do so and so has made concessions to his church of Purity allies to have them do it instead. One attempt has already been made. The Builder response unit is already working to interrogate the Purity loyalists we captured in the process."

"One of the church's more extreme orders has been operating in this part of the world for many years," Gil said. "It's unsurprising that they remained loyal. But what makes Asano worth all this attention?"

“Asano has already foiled the Builder’s plans more than once, and I believe is now affiliated with the Builder’s greater antagonist. What part Asano has left to play is unclear, but even before his death, he demonstrated an effect on those who wield the Builder’s power. He is, in fact, responsible for the very first live capture of someone with a star seed.”

“That’s all well and good,” Gil said, “but I’m not sure that my Vitesse counterpart will be willing to accommodate you. The information I’m getting is still unclear but they’ve had some unusual events that somehow this Asano is connected to.”

Soramir nodded.

“I would appreciate that report, Director, once your people have completed it.”

“They should have it to me within the day, depending on what information we can get out of Vitesse. I think the best solution, for the moment, is to wait for more information before making any firm decisions. There may be something you are overlooking, however.”

“Oh?” Soramir asked.

“Asano himself. We can ask him to go to Vitesse, not tell him. While the Adventure Society can ask quite firmly, he always has the option to refuse. If you can convince him to stay, my office will support the decision. We can make him available to the Vitesse branch via water link, which is exactly why we monopolise the links in the first place.”

Soramir nodded, stood up and offered his hand to Gil over the desk.

“Thank you, Director Vinaros.”

Gil shook Soramir’s hand a little nervously.

“I’ll do my best to accommodate you, your majesty, but my first loyalty must be to my position.”

“Of course.”

Jason returned to Sensual Attire for the Sensual Gentleman, Alejandro Albericci’s tailor shop. Rufus was sitting in the café courtyard, sipping on a cup of tea.

“You took your time,” Rufus said as Jason sat down. “You didn’t kill the boy and bury him in the jungle did you?”

“What has Farrah been telling you?”

“Just wanted to make sure.”

“We just had a little talk,” Jason said. “I told him to go home and not make any trouble. That’s the only thing I did. I definitely didn’t stop for shopping on the way back.”

Rufus looked at him from under raised eyebrows.

"I mean, there was a whole shop for skill books. How could I not buy some for cooking magic? I don't have time to learn all about the magical ingredients and how to handle them without diverting time from training. You know how often people try to kill me."

"Have you heard anything about the people who were caught making the last attempt?"

"I've been told I'll be kept updated, although how reliable that assurance is remains to be seen. Liara said they'll probably want to involve me in the questioning."

"You really know how to get caught up in messes, don't you?"

"You said it was normal for outworlders to get caught up in stuff. You told me that the day we met."

"There's caught up and then there's you, Jason. I don't suppose you'd like to explain what this latest thing is? If that was Kasper Irios, then is this about—"

"Yeah, but no details, here. Back home, with Farrah. No point explaining it twice."

"Right."

"Did Alejandro set you up with some good clothes?"

"He measured me up while you were off on your latest debacle. I didn't have any good hot weather clothes, so once my new outfits are finished I'll be appreciative."

"Haven't you been living in Greenstone? That place is half desert, half sweltering delta. How did you not pick up any warm-weather outfits?"

"You know what the clothes are like there. It's as if someone threw up a rainbow of loose fabric and people just draped it over themselves. You know, Gary still dresses like that. Although, given what most leonids wear, anything is a step up."

"I didn't realise you were such a slave to fashion."

"The problem with Mr Remore," Alejandro said, approaching their table "is that for him, fashion is pointless. Look at the man: you could put him in a brown sack and he'd still be a work of art."

"Tell me about it," Jason said, standing to shake Alejandro's hand.

"Mr Asano, I apologise for my part in whatever political imbroglio you have been caught up in."

"You get used to it," Jason said. "At least with politics they only stab you in the back. It's a nice change from being stabbed in the everything."

They left Rufus to his tea and Alejandro led Jason to his measuring room.

"I have been directed to take your outfits in a certain direction," Alejandro explained as they walked. "That puts me in a slightly complicated position as while I always strive to

meet the needs of my client, the person wearing the clothes and the person paying for them is usually the same."

"Wait, she already paid you?"

"Payment has been promised in full."

"Forget that," Jason said. "I'm the client, I'm paying you and the only needs you have to meet are mine."

Alejandro opened a door, ushered Jason inside and then followed, closing it behind them.

"That simplifies things for me a great deal," Alejandro said. "I especially do not like serving a client that attempts to employ me as a means to scheme against my clientele."

"It won't be an issue to push back against the royal family?"

"Political favour is for today, Mr Asano. Integrity is forever. If you would be so kind as to go into the measuring stall."

There was what looked like a changing room that Jason stepped into, closing the door behind him.

"Please disrobe down to your underwear for the most accurate measurements," Alejandro said through the door. "Do you have any shape or size-changing powers we need to accommodate?"

"Just some conjured shadow arms," Jason said. "Nothing a normal fit can't handle."

"Excellent. We will have a full range of fabric and cut selection, then. Just let me know when you are ready for measurement, Mr Asano."

"Go ahead, Mr Albericci."

"Please do call me Al."

"Only if you call me Jason."

"It's a deal. You're going to experience some slight tingling."

Light started emitting from the walls of the stall around Jason, starting with cool green, going through blue, purple and then into warm red, yellow and orange before fading away.

"All done, Mr Asano. Jason. Please put your clothes on and come back out."

A few moments later, Jason was back out in the room, which was lined in wall-to-ceiling fabric racks.

"Now there is the matter of what you are looking for," Alejandro said. "What can I do for you today?"

"I'm looking for a full silver-rank wardrobe refresh. I need everything, with plenty of options across the board. Formal, casual, the lot."

“And what kind of budget are we looking at?”

“Whatever it costs.”

“Jason, I think you and I are going to get on very well.”

Chapter 503

How Deep a Hole

Jason went down into the waterfall cave beneath his cloud house. The natural stone was hidden behind walls, floor and ceiling made from cloud stuff, leaving only the cave mouth with the water rushing past. Sunshine sparkled through it like a spray of diamonds, dancing into the room. The space was otherwise lit by soft, ambient light coming from the cloud-stuff.

The room was mostly empty, aside from boards formed out of cloud-stuff on the walls. Jason could write or draw on them with only a thought, and they were already full of sophisticated magical diagrams and formulas. While his understanding of astral forces was instinctive and powerful, his knowledge of astral magic theory lagged behind. It had made great leaps, especially over the last year, but it was still not at the level required to finalise his special project.

"I need Clive," he muttered as he glanced across his work. Then he put it out of his mind and a crystal recording projector rose from the middle of the floor. Jason took out a recording crystal and set it in place before stepping back. He sat, a cloud chair emerging from the floor to meet him.

Jason started the projector with a mental command. The projection showed Dawn in the cloud house in Venice, at a point where Jason was in the first transformation zone. Jason had only seen her one time since, shortly before the transformation zone's collapse that had been the only time he saw her true form instead of a weakened avatar.

"Jason," the projected Dawn said. "My dimensional vessel has detected the approach of a similar vessel, belonging to my counterpart within the Builder's people. This is a man I know and, based on my knowledge of him and you, I have some idea of how that is going to go. I'm not sure how far you will end up pushing him, but like so many beings of great power, that power has made him prideful."

Dawn paused as Emi came into the room.

"Dawn, do you want to come play El Grande?"

"I'm a little busy."

"Okay."

Dawn turned back to the recording crystal she was speaking into.

"This man I suspect you are about to meet is going to make a mistake. I could probably stop him, but the concessions we can get from him if I don't are worth more than

preventing him from acting, even if the cost is high. I'll explain the terms I will extract from him now, since we likely won't have long to talk the next time we meet."

Jason listened again as Dawn explained the terms about the Builder not attacking Jason with overwhelming numbers or high-rankers. That he would not send anyone at all unless Jason interfered in their affairs first.

"I did remember right," Jason murmured to himself.

"Since I won't have a lot of time to explain when I see you, I'm going to leave this recording with Farrah. She'll give it to you before you travel once more to the other world. I have no doubt that you'll succeed in saving your world and returning."

The recording ended and Jason got up, returning the crystal to his inventory.

Like most major organisations in Vitesse, the Adventure Society branch was located in one of the city's iconic garden towers; massive spires draped in greenery. In a meeting room that opened onto a balcony that let in the fresh air, Clive was sitting opposite a high-ranking Magic Society official. Various functionaries were standing behind the official, while Clive was flanked by his team.

"Mr Standish, you are one of the most talented young astral magic specialists we have."

"You don't have me," Clive said. "I left the Magic Society. Definitively."

"It's time to come home. You can accomplish more in research than you ever could as an adventurer."

"I beg to differ," Humphrey said. "Clive was the mastermind behind both finding the Purity enclave and the attack that disrupted their grand summoning."

"And how did he find them?" the official shot back. "By tracing them through a network of dimensional gates that he discovered while cloistered in research at the Magic Society."

"That's an awfully nice way of saying locked up," Sophie said.

"Mistakes were made," the official acknowledged. "We apologise for your previous treatment, Mr Standish."

"Oh, we know how sorry you are," Neil said. "You think we haven't been paying attention?"

"We have been following the career of the woman that exploited Clive," Humphrey said. "Her next promotion got delayed. By months. She got it eventually."

"You Magic Society guys really know how to bring down the hammer," Neil said.

“Mr Standish, this mass-arrival of outworlders represents an unprecedented chance to study astral forces, which is more critical now than ever. We still don’t know if the messengers that were summoned represent an isolated event or part of a widespread program.”

“You wouldn’t even know to ask if Clive wasn’t an adventurer,” Belinda said.

“And that’s the way I’m staying,” Clive added. “Not only did the Magic Society treat me with flagrant indecency but your response in the aftermath was to hush it all up.”

“Whatever unfortunate matters are in the past,” the official said, “we need to look to the future. You are more valuable researching the Builder and Purity’s methods than getting killed fighting some irrelevant monster.”

“I don’t know how to be more explicit,” Clive said. “I’m not returning to the Magic Society. Not ever.”

“You burned that bridge,” Sophie told the official. “Then you took the ashes, put them in a big trough and got a bunch of your Magic Society friends to whiz in it. Then you used the resulting paste to write ‘we gave Clive the hard shaft’ in letters so big that you need to fly to read them.”

Everyone turned to Sophie.

“What she said,” Belinda agreed, throwing an arm around Sophie’s shoulder.

The increasingly disgruntled official was about to speak when he noticed something approaching through the air, directly towards the balcony. It was an elf standing on the back of a giant, white-feathered duck, gliding through the sky. As it reached the balcony, the duck transformed into motes of light that sank into the elf’s hair, turning it from a sandy blond to stark white.

Ken dropped lightly onto the balcony and strode into the room.

“Well?” Humphrey asked.

“It is done.”

Grins crossed the faces of Humphrey and his team.

“What’s done?” the official asked.

“I daresay you shall learn soon enough,” Ken said. “Soon indeed, if the man I hear running down the hall outside is one of yours.”

True to Ken’s word, the meeting room door burst open to admit a harried-looking man in Magic Society robes. He moved up to the official and activated a privacy screen. The team then watched the anxious man rapidly speak, unable to hear his words but seeing the official’s explosive but equally silent reaction. The man shot up from his chair and turned to glare daggers at Humphrey. He didn’t bother to address the team before

storming out of the privacy screen, the startling functionaries trailing like ducklings. They heard him yelling as they moved down the hallway.

“What are Geller Pirates?”

Warehouse District Three was one of the least lucrative on the island of Livaros. Being the furthest from both the sea and sky docks, it was the closest thing to a criminal district on the very security-conscious island of adventurers. One of the warehouses looked like any other from the outside, although the interior was entirely different, having been converted into an opulent home. Along with the plush furniture and smooth marble, it was further enhanced with magical infrastructure offering a formidable balance of protection and discretion. Only the most powerful senses would notice any difference between the building and the identical-looking ones around it.

Havi Estos was the owner of the building, although it would take an adept bureaucrat to trace it back to him. Pallimustus had nothing on Earth in terms of complex legalities and internecine paperwork, which made those with the knowledge and inclination to use them especially dangerous. Havi was a celestine man of striking appearance. His large physique and onyx-black skin were set off by his hair and eyes of matching gold. He looked well into middle age, despite the anti-aging effects of his silver rank. His aura was free of cores; the legacy of a long-finished adventuring career.

Contrary to his arresting appearance, he was not a man who liked to draw attention. Even so, he did his part during the monster surge, making sure that his activity quota was met. On returning from a contract, he was given a package that had been delivered to one of his public offices. It was from a friend from the old days, Mordant Kerr, who was now living somewhere in the western reaches of the Storm Kingdom.

Inside his office, Havi watched the recording crystal included in the package while reading the letter, his eyes moving back and forth from one to the other. The projection gave a bird’s eye view of a river canyon where a shadowy figure fought monsters swarming over the ground like ants. He watched the projection to the end, his expression unchanging.

“Affliction skirmisher,” he muttered to himself. “Haven’t seen one of those in a long time.”

He called his assistant, Jono, into the room. Jono was also his great-nephew, although Havi tried not to hold it against him.

“Yes, boss?”

“I need you to give Warnock a name.”

“Boss, she wasn’t happy after last time. She’s going to want extra.”

“So pay her extra.”

“Yes, boss. What’s the name?”

“Jason Asano.”

The capital city of the nation of Estercost was Cyrion, home to the Adventure Society’s continental council. It was closer than Vitesse to the site of the operation that turned into a debacle of magical explosions, summoned messengers and unexpected outworlders. Since the operation had been launched out of Vitesse, that branch of the Adventure Society had been undertaking the initial management. In the aftermath, they were handing off control of the site to the Cyrion branch.

Operations were shifting to Cyrion for two reasons, of which one was simple geography. It had taken place in their backyard and they were better located to handle what was looking like an ongoing operation. The other reason was that the continental council was taking an interest as it turned out to be much more critical than originally thought.

What was initially thought to be a sweep-up operation on low and mid-rank Purity loyalists was revealed to be a grand summoning. Only made possible by the weakened dimensional protection the world suffered during the monster surge, it didn’t take a lot of imagination to consider that it might only be the beginning. If there were more it would have to take place during the monster surge, and after the Adventure Society’s operation forced an early launch, any other locations were likely pressing to do the same. Aggressive investigations were already being set into motion.

The Magic Society had taken charge of the outworlders, more than a hundred of them in total. They were being transported to Cyrion via airship when several other airships moved into formation around them. A single woman with dark olive skin, black hair and a gold-rank aura leapt onto the surrounded airship alone.

A less than satisfied Magic Society official listened to her explain that the Geller family would be providing the accommodation to the outworlders at their fortified estate outside Cyrion. The official did not like the idea.

“While you may be disinclined to go along with this,” Danielle told him, “if you refuse to cooperate, I am going to have to insist. You aren’t going to make me insist, are you?”

Trenchant Moore was reading through the Adventure Society file of Jason Asano that he hadn’t been given before meeting the man in order to assess him without bias.

Vesper Rimaros was already in the meeting room with him and they were joined by Liara and her team members, Ledev and Jana. Trenchant stood up as Liara entered and she waved him back to his seat. Ledev and Jana politely greeted the other princess.

Rimaros high society thrived on hierarchy. While Vesper and Liara were close friends in private, in public their behaviour was dictated by station. This was restricted to the Rimaros high society, as foreign adventurers and those risen from humble beginnings were hardly expected to understand the sophisticated etiquette protocols.

This inevitably did not stop some from looking down on those not raised in that world. This especially plagued those in the middle rungs who saw people that should be below them not sharing their deference to those above.

When a group was entirely made up of Rimaros locals, things could get complex, even in a simple meeting. The hierarchy of the room was determined by rank and the roles individuals were serving in during any given interaction. As gold rankers, Trenchant, Jana and Ledev stood above the silver-rank Vesper in the social hierarchy but she was also a princess. Liara was a gold-rank princess and nominally held eminence, but Vesper was from a higher branch of the royal family. Trenchant was an explicit servant of the royal family, being a member of the royal guard. He was not on duty, however, and was acting in his capacity as a gold-rank adventurer. Further, he was the oldest and most experienced adventurer in the room.

There was a familiar awkwardness as the people in the room took seats according to their relative positions. Even the fact that most people in the meeting didn't know its purpose affected their standing. Outside of a formal setting, most people defaulted to a respectful politeness of vague equality when the specific protocols were murky.

"If I may ask, your highnesses," Ledev said to Vesper, "why are we here?"

"I need an assessment of Jason Asano's capabilities as an adventurer," Vesper said. "In short, I need to know how far he can be pushed as an adventurer."

"This boy again," Ledev complained, earning him a glare from his sister. He immediately looked contrite.

"I apologise, your highness," he said to Vesper. "I simply fail to see why one silver rank adventurer warrants this much attention. Just look at the people in this room. We represent a powerful, prestigious and valuable force in dangerous and important times. What makes him worth having us gather like this? He's not even in a guild."

"The man himself doesn't matter," Vesper said. "If someone else was in his position, we would be looking at them instead. In fairness to Asano, he never asked or attempted to be in the position he finds himself."

“Quite the opposite, in fact,” Liara said. “While many young adventurers might relish the attention of high-rankers and royalty, he is aggravated by it. He’s had to deal with enough powerful people in the past that the sheen has most certainly worn away. Constantly dealing with those who significantly outmatch you would engender a sense of powerlessness.”

“He certainly isn’t intimidated by gold-rankers,” Trenchant said. “I’m not often spoken to like I’m someone’s flunky. The fact that he immediately saw why I was there and clearly knew more than I only made it worse.”

“He’s arrogant,” Ledev said.

“You said it yourself, Ledev,” Jana told her brother. “Look at the people in this room. If meetings like this were being held about me, I’d be arrogant too.”

“Why are we having this meeting?” Trenchant asked.

“I need an assessment of Asano’s abilities as an adventurer,” Vesper said. “We need to know how far we can push him.”

“Why?” Trenchant asked. “You said he is in some position without actually explaining what that position was.”

“It’s complicated,” Vesper said. “And political.”

“And it’s only made worse because Asano is a valuable asset against the Builder, unrelated to anything else,” Liara added. “His experiences against the Builder and his cult have left him with some unique capabilities.”

“Suffice to say,” Vesper said, “that a very annoying man is at the crux of certain events. Who he is doesn’t matter, only whether he makes a mess or helps us clear it up. What we need right now is to highlight Asano’s capability with some contracts that will get him noticed. Which means knowing how deep a hole we can throw him in with a reasonable expectation of his climbing back out.”

Chapter 504

The Part That Knows How to Quit

Princesses Vesper and Liara were in a room with Trenchant Moore and Liara's teammates, Jana and Ledev.

"Let's start with you, Ledev," Liara said. "What is your assessment of Asano?"

"He's capable enough. Guild-level, and strong alone. His aura is... formidable. He excels in solitary action but would be harder to incorporate into a team. His methods are unconventional, for an affliction user."

Trenchant Moore tossed the folder containing Jason's file onto the table.

"This assessment is wrong," he said. "It lists Asano as an affliction-using generalist. He's a specialist."

"You consider him focused enough to be considered an affliction specialist?" Vesper asked.

"He's not an affliction specialist," Trenchant said. "Not as that term is commonly used. What is now called an affliction specialist used to be known as an affliction mage or affliction spellcaster. This is the commonly known approach of standing behind a wall of allies or summons and blanketing the enemy with afflictions from a safe distance."

"That isn't anything like what Asano does," Jana said. "We saw him go through several encounters and while he does use familiars, it's never to put them between himself and the enemy."

"He's an affliction skirmisher," Trenchant said. "Hit and run tactics, high mobility, high efficiency. It's a specialisation that rarely appears and those that have it tend to die early, so it's one you don't often see. Affliction skirmishers have a low margin of error and their survival is all about how well they expand that margin."

"How do they compare to traditional affliction specialists?" Vesper asked. "Are they better? Worse?"

"Like every specialisation, it's a matter of circumstance. The right tool for the job. Since the job is usually standing there and killing a bunch of monsters, I'd judge Skirmisher to be the less useful specialisation. Affliction spellcasters employ much safer strategies and, unless someone takes them out, are obnoxiously effective. They need a team built around them, but they're worth building around. You keep a good affliction spellcaster safe and it doesn't matter what or how much you're up against. They'll take it down eventually. The lead-in time hurts but their efficiency and overall damage output is unparalleled."

“The skirmisher can’t match that?”

“Partially, yes, but they need a broader array of powers, which leaves them with shortfalls. This is why Asano was pegged as a generalist. The biggest weaknesses of a skirmisher are being less effective against large numbers and the need to get in close. That is a high-risk proposition when you aren’t quickly dropping targets like an assassination specialist. That’s the low margin of error I mentioned.”

“There have to be advantages,” Jana said.

“Of course,” Trenchant said. “When what you need are skirmish tactics, a skirmisher is obviously better. A caster is better in standing fights, but not every enemy is so accommodating. Also, solitary hard targets. In the higher ranks, any monster that spawns alone is a significant threat. An affliction caster’s team needs to stand their ground, but dragon or garuda will take them apart before the afflictions do their job.”

There were nods around the table. Rimaros adventurer culture was centred on specialist teams and they all knew the results of sending the wrong team against the wrong threat.

“An affliction skirmisher is fine – and perhaps even best – operating alone,” Trenchant continued. “They can work in teams but are a bad fit for conventional ones and are a bad choice to build a team around. They do best in misfit groups that focus on versatility; the exact opposite of the team-building ethos in Rimaros.”

“Then, their main advantage is survivability?” Vesper asked.

“Yes, although it’s not just about the kind of powers they have. Mentality is key. Affliction skirmishers are used to balancing on a sharp edge, so when things go wrong, they know how to handle it. Everyone at this table knows what to do if you find yourself up against a traditional affliction specialist.”

“You get past the team and hit them,” Ledev said. “Then they’re done.”

“Exactly,” Trenchant agreed. “You know what I’d do if I was up against an affliction skirmisher? I’d run like the goddess of Pain was chasing me. I wouldn’t stand and fight unless I had a full team with me and, even then, I’d want a damn good reason. It’s common knowledge that you have to kill an affliction specialist before they dose you or you’ll die even after you kill them. Skirmishers don’t die easy.”

“So, in short,” Vesper said, “they’re evil bastards.”

“Yes,” Trenchant chuckled. “If you ask me which affliction specialty is more useful, I’ll pick caster every time. It’s low-skill, which means reliable. Just churn through your abilities in the right order and don’t go further forward than the guy with the shield. Affliction skirmishers are like evasion-type defenders. It’s all about judgement, skill and margins of

error, and if they get it wrong, they die. The ones that make it into the higher rank are very, very hard to kill.”

“I believe that,” Ledev said. “I do not like Asano. I don’t like his arrogance and I don’t like his disrespect. But when they made that man, they forgot the part that knows how to quit. We watched him in a fight he couldn’t win. A fight we set him up for, so they knew his powers and they were ready, but he never stopped struggling. Not for a single moment. It wasn’t just blind stubbornness, either. He looked for every edge, seized every advantage that would keep him alive for even a moment longer. I have to respect that kind of determination and resolve. If he fixed his attitude, he could be a fine adventurer.”

“A lot of things have tried to kill Jason Asano,” Liara said. “You can see it in the way he fights. In his aura and his scars.”

“You’ve seen his fully unleashed aura?” Trenchant asked.

“We saw him disable someone just with his aura,” Jana said. “It wasn’t just shock from aura suppression, either. It was like some kind of soul attack. I’ve never felt anything like it.”

“I know the phenomenon you’re describing,” Trenchant said. “Have any of you worked with Amos Pensinata?”

They all shook their heads, although they had all heard of the prominent gold-ranker.

“He’s also suffered soul damage, and he can do things with his aura that other people can’t.”

“Like what?” vesper asked.

“If there’s nothing in Asano’s file about it, I’m not going to say,” Trenchant said. “It’s not my place to tell you other people’s secrets. All this holds true to what I know about affliction skirmishers, though. Traditional training methods hurt them more than help. I’ve only seen a couple of great affliction skirmishers, and that was a long time ago. Both of them fought their way up from humble beginnings, with not much more training than a few months mentored under another adventurer.”

He tapped the file in front of him on the desk.

“That’s what Asano had. Some bronze-rank adventurers showing him the ropes before he got plunged into deep water.”

“In your assessment, then,” Vesper said, “Asano can handle some high-profile contracts?”

“With respect, your highness, you’ve held a politician’s meeting to assess an adventurer. If you want to know if he can handle a contract, give him one. And I’d

recommend that you take one or two yourself. There's a monster surge on and I think you could use the perspective."

On his way to the Adventure Society campus to see Liara, Jason accidentally opened a portal to the market district teleportation square, instead of the one on campus.

"Oops. Still, I need a few minutes before my portal is available again. I guess I'll have to go check out the local cheeses."

"I am uncertain of who that statement is directed at, Mr Asano," Shade's voice came from Jason's shadow. "You know that you are lying, I certainly don't believe you and even if anyone else were paying attention, I very much doubt they would care."

"Someone's cranky today."

"Gordon made me watch *Gymkata* again."

"Did you lose another bet?"

"I still think he's using those eye orbs to look at my cards, somehow."

"Then you should stop wagering. I thought you learned your lesson after he made you read the novelisation of *Kazaam*."

"Mr Asano, your world has dark and terrible things."

A short while later, Jason was feeding little chunks of fresh meat to the little leech on his shoulder as he moved through the market stalls.

"I want to do a baked brie," Jason said. "I don't know if they have an equivalent here, so I guess I'll just have to buy all the local cheeses I can find and see what I can do with them."

"Shouldn't you restrict yourself to the cheeses that seem the most like brie?" Shade asked.

"Absolutely not. It's a magical world, full of surprises and wonder. What might look like dried figs could actually be some kind of magical brie. I'd best buy anything that looks like dried figs too, I guess. Or fresh figs. You can never be too careful."

"Mr Asano, what happened to going and seeing Princess Liara?"

"We'll get there."

"At the risk of screaming futilely into the void, Mr Asano, you are not being very sensible."

Jason stopped.

"Shade, you're totally right."

"I am?"

“Shade, I’ve been a fool. I’m completely ignoring cheesemongers. I need to go to that boutique shop district where Alejandro’s tailor shop is.”

“This sucks,” Travis said. “They have flying ships but their long-distance communication is this bad? Don’t they have crystal balls or something?”

“Bro, maybe you could invent a magic phone. Could probably make some money out of it.”

Travis Noble and Taika Williams were on the porch of a guest cottage on a sprawling country estate. The rest of the group were in dormitories that normally held young Gellers in training, but their connection to Jason had earned Taika and Travis preferential treatment.

“I’m not going to be developing anything any time soon,” Travis said. “Most magitech is heavy on the tech and light on the magic because there was always so little magic to work with. Magic was always rough on tech-based comms, which is why people with communication powers were always so useful in proto-spaces. I didn’t expect it to affect purely magical communication as well.”

“Long-distance communication has been the dream of artificers for a long time,” a female voice said. They looked up to see a young woman with a swarthy complexion and short-cropped hair approaching them.

“If you do ever manage to pry open that nut,” she said, “your friend isn’t wrong. You’d earn yourself a fortune. In the meantime, we’re trying to arrange a time where you can talk to Jason using the water-link system. We have our own chambers here on the estate, but we aren’t allowed to use them without permission from the Adventure Society. Too many people use the system all at once and the whole thing fails.”

“Thanks, Henri,” Taika said. “Did you know Jason well?”

“Not very well,” Henrietta said. “He’s on my brother’s team and I did a short training tour with them once. It was long enough to see him do something insane, but that’s never a lengthy wait.”

“What did he do?” Travis asked.

“You ever see that big scar running from his hip and across his abdomen?”

“No,” Travis said.

“Yep,” Taika added.

“He decided to fight a silver-rank monster when he was still iron-rank, the idiot.”

“I’ve heard about this,” Taika said. “He talked about it in his recording crystals. The monster was attacking some village, yeah?”

“That’s right. That was when I learned that guy’s hero fixation was going to get him killed. Didn’t expect him to come back from it, but he always was a bit odd. After him, I thought all you outworlders would be strange, but you’re a pretty normal bunch.”

Jason was stepping out of a cheesemonger’s when he paused, tilting his head as if trying to hear a faint sound.

“Mr Asano?” Shade asked.

“I felt something,” Jason said. “A gold-ranker, maybe. They tried to take a rummage through my aura but backed off when they sensed me sense them.”

“Should I investigate?”

“If you didn’t sense them, you probably won’t find anything without an aura to track, but go ahead. If you find anyone shady, let me know, but don’t make trouble. That’s my role in this relationship.”

Several dark shapes slipped out of Jason’s shadow and disappeared into the shadows around him.

“Really, Mr Asano?” Shade asked, as several of his bodies discretely moved off.

“Anyone shady?”

“I wasn’t trying to make a pun. If I was, I’d have done better.”

“There is no better with puns, Mr Asano. There is only worse.”

Chapter 505

Bad Apples

Jason made his way through the basement levels of the Adventure Society complex until he reached the restricted areas. From there he was escorted to the Builder response unit's area; a series of securely sealed rooms surrounded by powerful aura containment. His escorts led him to Liara's office, where she was sitting behind her desk. She looked up from the report she was reading.

"You can leave him, thank you."

The escorts left them alone, closing the door behind them. She looked Jason over.

"Still no wardrobe update?" she asked.

"Quality takes time. I needed a full wardrobe refresh, after all. Also, I don't think Alejandro appreciated being used for Vesper's games. I can sympathise with his position."

"I was expecting you earlier, Mr Asano. When I ask people to attend me, I am used to them being prompt."

"I'll bet you are. You didn't specify a time and I had work to do."

"Work? You've already been to the jobs hall? There's a contract waiting for you, which is what I called you in to tell you."

"No, not that," Jason said with a dismissive gesture. "I'm a whole new part of a whole new world. Do you have any idea what it's like trying to learn an entirely new spice palate? And that's before you even look at magical ingredients."

"Are you talking about cooking?"

"It's kind of my thing, and I've been locked out for a while. There have been severe food shortages in my world."

The mention of Jason's world arrested Liara's retort. On top of ordinary curiosity, whatever Jason had been involved in during his time away was clearly impacting events on his return. She knew that Soramir would not want her to miss any chance to learn more.

"Why were there food shortages?"

"I was looking at hosting a dinner party where we could talk all about my time away," Jason said. "I can't very well do that until I get a handle on the local ingredients, though. My cheese enchiladas went a bit wrong and they should have been nice and simple. But if I shouldn't be wasting my time on that kind of thing, I guess it'll have to wait."

She gave him a thin-lipped smile.

"You're very good at finding where to stick the dagger, aren't you, Mr Asano?"

"I've found that I need to be, Princess. I was getting ready to come see you when I got your message, by the way. I thought I might be able to help with your interrogation of the Purity loyalists."

"We will call on you at need. It's too early to put you in a room with them."

"You're not torturing them, are you?"

"Torture is unreliable. Other methods take longer, but get to the actual truth."

"Other methods?"

"We use alchemical methods and ritual magic to induce a trance-like state where they are more open to suggestion. It still takes time and care to get past wilful resistance, especially with zealots. It's a delicate process, which means no amateurs bumbling around. We'll only need you once we have what we want from trance interrogation and we're back to questioning them in their right minds."

"You don't get everything from this truth-hypnosis thing you've got going on?"

"The trance state is good for details, but not for interpretation. For that, it's just ordinary interrogation, which the trance questioning helps prepare for. That's when we can use you; to change things up. Unbalance them."

"I'm not looking to step on anyone's toes," Jason said. "Just let me know when you need me. I do have some information that I thought might be helpful, though."

"Then please share."

Liara gestured to a seat opposite her desk and Jason sat.

"I was just checking my own records about the restrictions the Builder was placed under in terms of having me killed off."

"You have records?"

"A crystal recording left by a benefactor."

"I don't suppose...?"

"No."

"Worth a try. Checking the details is a good idea, though, and I appreciate it. There has been an order of the Purity church in this region for many years, but knowing everything we can about why your presence has made them active will no doubt be helpful."

"That's the thing," Jason said. "I don't think I am the reason they're active. I know it seems like everything is about me, but that's just a trap people fall into because of my wild charisma, rakish charm and dashing good looks."

Liara gave him a flat look and he flashed an impish grin.

"I think when you leaked the information about my delivery run," he continued, "I was just a target of opportunity. I think Purity's henchfolk are up to something bigger than just handling me."

"Why is that?"

"One of the requirements that have to be met before the Builder's lackeys can come after me is that I have to interfere in their affairs before they're allowed to take their shot."

Liara leaned back in her chair, tapping her chin thoughtfully.

"But they ambushed you. Is it that they're Purity followers and not the Builder's own people, so the restrictions are lesser?"

"I don't think the person that set the terms would leave that big a loophole. Otherwise, he'd just throw a squillion bucks at some gold-ranker with no scruples to come and off me. And you were there. The Purity people made a point of how they were adhering to the stipulations."

"They did," Liara said, tapping her chin thoughtfully. "But they didn't mention anything about this interference clause."

"Exactly, which is why I went and double-checked. I think they were able to come after me because I was interfering with their business."

"You were on a delivery contract. How is that interfering in their business?"

"There's been some attrition with the adventurers on supply contracts, right? The non-guild adventurers are competitive, but they also look out for one another. I'm new at this and I've already heard the talk."

"Everything is stretched thin," Liara said. "People, assets, resources. We've been in a state of semi-readiness for so long that it's all strained. Plus, this monster surge is already showing itself to be heavier than normal. The whole region will usually see one, maybe two diamond-rank monsters in an entire surge. The first week we had one attack Rimaros and another to the south, just inland of the Storm Kingdom's borders."

"I thought the same thing," Jason said. "Not enough people, too much danger. But what if that's not all there is? What if Purity is using the fact that things are slipping through the cracks to enact some plot? If they were already intercepting adventurers on delivery contracts, then ambushing me wasn't a violation of the restrictions. It was me getting involved in what they were already up to."

Liara frowned and Jason waited in silence while she considered what he'd told her. Then she opened a drawer in her desk and took out a file, setting it in front of Jason.

"Your team," she said, "is apparently just as good at locating themselves in the middle of a huge mess as you. They also had a run-in with the Purity church."

Jason took the file and started reading it over while Liara waited. He finished, setting the file back on the desk.

“Messengers, outworlders... the Adventure Society is going to want me to go there.”

“The Adventure Society branches in Vitesse and Cyrion have already requested you be sent, yes,” Liara said. “The Adventure Society Director here has declined, instead requesting that your team be brought to you. Along with Miss Hurin's parents, as a courtesy.”

“Why bring all them here when events are taking place there? Please tell me it isn't just because of the politics.”

“His ancestral majesty feels that—”

“Are you talking about Soramir?”

“I am speaking of him, yes. With respect.”

“It's a funny thing, respect. It's a word that a lot of people – people on the higher end of the social strata – use because it sounds better than subservience. Even when you're talking about actual respect, why do you get to tell me what's respectful? I come from a whole other world and a much lower social class. In my culture, friendliness is respectful and being impersonal is cold and hostile. I get it; this is your town, so your rules. But if you and Soramir came to my town, would you follow my rules? My etiquette?”

“He is a diamond-ranker, Mr Asano. He was a king. The first king of this nation and founder of the Rimaros dynasty.”

“And I'm a child of farmers and immigrants. Does that make me any less worthy of respect? Anecdotal evidence says yes because your family has not treated me with respect. You've used me and exploited me. You act like Zara's actions were an embarrassment but you've treated me the exact same way she did, and at least she thought she wasn't hurting anyone. Your family dragged me into this, and what have you done since? Dangled me like a fish on a hook, leaving me oblivious. Calling me to heel? Telling me how to act and how to dress? I'm not your child, I'm not your dog and I'm not your bait, Princess.”

Jason stood up from his chair.

“Perhaps you should calm down, Mr Asano, before you say something you regret.”

“Remember that time you sold me out to the Purity church and I told you that I'd get some rest and then say something stupid? Well, this is it, Princess, so buckle in. What did I do to deserve the way I've been treated by you and yours? Not be powerful enough to tell you all to bugger off? I met one of you once, so now you get to own me? Unless I'm not making it clear, if I get one more of you royal pricks making off-hand comments about

respect while showing me none at all, then you are going to find out exactly why there are diamond-rankers, gods and great astral beings on my big list of enemies, yet I'm still here. The Builder came for my soul, then he killed me, in person, but I'm still here and he's still trying. You think I'm scared of royalty? You've got it arse-backwards, Princess. You should be scared of me."

"You're a silver ranker threatening one of the greatest powers in the world. You sound like a child throwing a tantrum. Is that how you think you'll get respect?"

"I am a child, by your standards and I'm way past anticipating respect from the likes of you. Why would it suddenly start now? All I ever seem to deal with are people more powerful than me and I can count the ones who showed me respect without running out of fingers. Why are you the one asking for respect when I'm the one pulled into this mess by your family? All you've ever treated me as is a tool. A tool that you need to handle. Well, guess what, Princess? The handle on this tool just got very slippery, so you need to be careful next time you go to grab it."

Liara didn't say anything, knowing it would just provoke another tirade. She waited in silence for his mood to calm as they stared at each other over the desk. There were undulations in his aura as it radiated pent-up fury. She could sense the festering nature of it, long-predating his arrival in Rimaros. She could tell that his eruption had been building up for some time and he needed to get it out. If anything, the release would make him easier to work with for having vented his frustration, so long as she let his outburst slide and didn't provoke him further.

"You're right, Mr Asano. My family has not treated you with the respect due to an innocent person drawn into our problems through no fault of their own. I apologise for that. Perhaps, if you sit back down, we can discuss rectifying that."

Jason stared at her a long time before retaking his seat.

"That... wasn't entirely directed at you," Jason said softly. "Don't get me wrong; some of it definitely was, but that ship had a lot of momentum. You just happened to be in the way."

"I don't know what you've been through, Mr Asano. You do deserve respect, if for no better reason than I'm certain that one day you are going to be gold rank, perhaps even diamond. His ancestral... Soramir believes that you have spent your entire adventuring career up against forces that you have no business facing, but perhaps had no choice but to face. I don't know what he saw in your aura because he does respect your privacy enough to not tell me."

“But not enough to not take a look. Your family is just one more in a long line of enemies.”

“We aren’t your enemies, Mr Asano, and we don’t want to be.”

“You’re not the first enemy to tell me that. You’re not the first group to screw me over and then say ‘hey, that was just a few bad apples, not the whole organisation.’ Then they shaft me again. And again. It never goes quite the way they want and they always say the same thing, over and over. I know who you are. You’re the reasonable person standing at the front while the people behind you sharpen their knives.”

“What can we do to earn your trust, Mr Asano?”

“Try a big wooden horse full of soldiers.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“It means that it doesn’t matter what you do. Even if it’s an earnest gesture, all I’ll ever see is another attempt to manipulate me. I’ve been burned too many times to find new people to trust. You want to do something for me, Princess, then do what Soramir said he would in the first place. Bring the people I already trust to here or send me to them.”

“If you want to go to Vitesse or Cyrion, you can. We’ll make that happen for you. But, as I was saying, his ancestral majesty believes that it’s better for you and us if you’re free and active. If you go, you’ll be put in a room with the Magic Society’s astral researchers and spend your days answering questions about outworlders. Danielle Geller has already snatched up the outworlders and spirited them off to one of the Geller estates, so her political capital is spent right now. She can’t protect you from that. But here, you’ll be given the freedom to act.”

“Within the bounds set by your family.”

"My family rule this kingdom. What do you want, Asano? To be above the law?"

“You are.”

"The walls around me may be different from the ones around you, but they are no less real. Don't pretend you're too stupid to know that's true."

Jason nodded, acknowledging the point.

“You’re saying that if I leave the Storm Kingdom, I’ll still have powerful people jerking me around. But here I have some leverage because you need my active participation.”

“Exactly. If you can’t trust us, trust that we’ll act in our own best interests. Right now, our interests require your cooperation, not your capitulation.”

“And here I thought Vesper was the politically adroit one.”

"I was raised with the same tutoring she was. It's just that she actually likes politics. I don't like the compromises. I don't like looking someone in the eye and telling them a lie that will hurt them. I like knowing who the bad people are and that it's not me."

Jason nodded again, and then spoke, his voice soft and gentle.

"It doesn't feel good to be great at something you don't want to do, but have to."

"No, it doesn't," she agreed. "How about this, Mr Asano? I'll try to do more asking and less telling. I'll talk to Vesper, but no promises, there. It's not much, but perhaps it can be a start. The first step on a path towards mutual respect."

Jason nodded.

"We'll see."

He tapped the file on the desk in front of him.

"I have questions."

"Go ahead."

"You requested my team be sent here. Was that approved?"

"The request is pending. The actions of the Geller family have complicated things."

"The outworlders. They're all from my world?"

"That appears to be the case. They all seem to know you."

"Do I know any of them?"

"I believe so. We're trying to get a list of names to answer that exact question, but things are complicated with the Geller family placing them under protection. It seems there is some contention between your team and the Magic Society. The Gellers intervened to prevent the outworlders being used for research."

"Good. I heard how the Magic Society treated one of my team members from Rufus Remore, although maybe the whole organisation isn't so bad. Maybe it was just a few bad apples."

"I suggest reaching out to the Geller family here in Rimaros. Perhaps they might provide a better line to the outworlders."

"There are Gellers here in Rimaros?"

"There are Gellers everywhere, Mr Asano. You'd have to ask the church of Fertility about that."

Chapter 506

Idiot Plan

Farrah and Rufus watched Jason slump into the cloud house like a beaten dog. He didn't even use the doors, the walls opening in front of him and closing behind as he trudged in a straight line. They shared a look and got up, using the actual doorways to get to his room where they stood outside, knowing he would be aware of their presence. They waited, but there was no reaction. Rufus was about to call out to him but Farrah shook her head.

"Shade," she said quietly. "What happened?"

Shade answered, his voice coming from Farrah's shadow.

"Mr Asano regressed. Fell into old habits he had told himself that he wouldn't."

"That's hardly new," Rufus said. "He's kind of all bad habits. It's part of his charm."

Farrah looked at Rufus, then gestured with her head. They had a brief exchange using only expressions until Rufus shrugged and wandered off.

"Can you open the door, Shade?" Farrah asked.

"Mr Asano has given me a measure of control over the cloud house in case it is necessary during his absence."

"Then open it."

"He is not absent now, Miss Hurin."

"But it is necessary. Open the door, Shade."

The cloud house always radiated Jason's aura inside. As a mobile spirit domain, it wasn't just a soul-bound object but an extension of his soul. It didn't reflect his condition at any given moment, however, being a reflection of his aura in a neutral state. It was a stark contrast to the aura that flooded out when the door to Jason's room dissipated, no longer holding back the aura of Jason himself.

Farrah took a step back as an aura so thick it almost felt tangible washed out of the room. Although it wasn't visible to the eye, Farrah felt like she was caught in a sweltering bog, thick and heavy humidity turning the air into foul soup. She waded in to where Jason was sitting on the end of his bed, head bowed, and sat next to him. Her arm pressed into his as she leaned gently against him, not saying anything. Jason's aura subsided but neither spoke, Farrah waiting for Jason to talk when he was ready. It took a very long time.

"Why do I keep making the same mistakes?" he asked.

"Because you keep facing the same problems," she told him. "You're surrounded by people with too much power whose interests converge on you. We could just walk away. If

you want to turn this house into a boat, say screw the Adventure Society, screw the royal family, screw the Builder and sail off into the sunrise, Rufus and I will stand right beside you.”

She reached out and gave his hand a gentle squeeze.

“But we both know you won’t,” she continued. “You put up with it on Earth because of the people that would get hurt if you didn’t. I won’t pretend to know what it’s like to have a whole world of people whose life and death are in my hands. Now there are so many people hiding behind the walls this Irios family built, and if their political rivals start interfering with their affairs...”

Under her hand, Jason’s clenched into a fist.

“That’s why you’re doing it here too. I won’t say that the way you handle things is always the best. Or ever the best, really, and I don’t know what mad thing you did today. But if that’s what it takes to get you through, then do it. Be who you are and forget about everything else.”

“I wasn’t meant to be who I am. I was meant to be better, but they won’t... It wasn’t meant to be like this. It can’t just be Earth all over again. Not here.”

His voiced cracked, coming out as almost a sob.

“I won’t make it through that again, Farrah.”

His head hung lower and he held it in his hands, not saying any more. His aura was leaking out again and, to Farrah, it felt like being inside a wound.

“Okay,” she said and stood up.

“I need to go to Livaros. Open me a door?”

Jason flicked his hand and a portal rose from the floor in front of her. She squeezed his shoulder and stepped through. After a few moments, he reached out to close it with a gesture when Shade rose from his shadow.

“You may wish to leave it open, Mr Asano. A messenger construct arrived a short while ago to notify you that a contract is awaiting you at the jobs hall. It is a group contract and the group will be assembling at first light in the morning. You are requested to confirm or decline your participation by the end of the day.”

“Thank you,” he said, his voice barely a whisper. After a long while, he pushed himself to his feet as he was shrouded in dark mist. It swiftly dissipated, revealing his tropical attire to have been replaced by a combat robe in shades of dried blood. He stepped through the portal.

Every sky island in Rimaros shared a feature: a column of water, a dozen metres across, rising from the sea to connect with the underside of the island. A solid stream, it was like the trunk of a tree, with the island as the branches. The column was the traditional pathway to enter a sky island, with only insiders allowed to move directly through the protective dome magic. For this reason, Farrah was on a boat that moved across the water towards the column beneath the royal sky island. It was a small boat with only eight seats, all filled.

The boat pushed into the column, water engulfing the force dome that sprang up to keep the occupants dry. The column carried the boat up through the air, the water pushing into a hole in the bottom of the island. With so much water going in, Farrah absently wondered where it went. A few small streams were spilling off at various points around the sides, but far from enough to offset the huge amounts pushed up by the column.

Reaching the underside of the island, the column of water carried them into a shaft that bored right through the island and up into a lake at the centre of the royal palace. This was a common design for sky islands, where buildings were constructed around a large pond or small lake that served as the entrance. The Irios-designed defences completely encapsulated the lake, invisible to the eye but overbearing to magical senses.

The royal palace was set out in a ring, which was a dominant style in Rimaros architecture spawned by the design practicalities of the signature sky islands. The areas around the lake were the relatively low-security areas in which foreign dignitaries and other visitors were hosted. The palace was designed in a series of rings, with the outer and innermost rings having the least security, while the middle rings had the most.

The boat surfaced in the lake and docked at a smaller example of the piers and marinas dotted around the lake. Moving from the boat to the pier meant going through the oppressive magical defences, which even a gold ranker would be a rash fool to attempt. Farrah was an expert in formation magic but the royal palace's defences were at a level of power and sophistication that she only touched on any understanding of.

Leaving the palace through the barriers was a much easier proposition, the air shimmering around several royal guards as they stepped from the pier to the boat and started checking the passengers. The passengers were silver-rank at most, as were the guards sent to check on them. The guards were thorough, checking documentation and testing everyone with magical devices for shape-changing or dangerous objects hidden in dimensional spaces. One of the guards arrived in front of Farrah.

"I need your entry documentation, ma'am."

"I don't have any."

“Then you will have to go back with the boat, ma’am. No documentation means no entry.”

“I don’t need any. If a certain diamond-ranker doesn’t send someone to come get me, he’s going to regret it.”

All the guards turned on Farrah, either drawing or conjuring weapons that were levelled at her throat.

“If you don’t have documents, you have to leave,” the guard said. “If you make threats, you don’t get to.”

A man moved along the pier with gold-rank swiftness and stepped onto the boat. He wasn’t in a royal guard uniform but the guards stood at attention as he boarded.

“Commander Moore. I didn’t realise you were on duty, sir.”

“Special assignment,” the gold-ranker said.

He had pale skin, jet black hair and eyes like clear fragments of ice. His gaze fell on Farrah as he handed a document to the leader of the guards.

“My name is Trenchant Moore. You will come with me.”

The guards checked the document, then swept Farrah with various devices.

“You’ll need to leave your dimensional bag, ma’am.”

Farrah unhooked the heavy pouch from her belt and handed it over, not taking her eyes from Trenchant.

“Lead the way,” she told him.

Liara came to an unremarkable door in the royal palace and stood waiting until it opened and she walked through. Inside was a balcony lounge that looked out over the palace rooftops to the lake at the heart of the palace. Soramir was standing on the balcony, hands clasped behind his back as he looked out. Liara moved behind him, maintaining a respectful distance, and bowed her head.

“Ancestral majesty, I may have made a mistake with Asano.”

“A level of hostility was inevitable,” Soramir said. “Aura reading is not mind reading but I have seen the volatile frustration that has been building inside Asano since long before he came here. I already knew he was a pot ready to boil over.”

“He did. I’m not sure how willing he will be to accommodate our needs, now. I think I have made Vesper’s job a lot harder.”

“Why do you think he agreed to help us?” Soramir asked. “I’m sure you understand by now that he doesn’t care about the royal family or its authority.”

“We promised to bring his team here.”

“That is what he asked for, but he would have helped us anyway.”

“Why?”

“I have my suspicions, but we have a guest who I believe can hand us definitive answers.”

Trenchant led Farrah through the royal palace.

“You are here about Jason Asano,” he said.

“You met him, right? They had you playing nursemaid on his airship ride.”

“Silver-rankers do not make demands of Soramir Rimaros, Miss Hurin.”

“You don’t know Jason well, then. I’m just doing what he would do. If he was in better condition.”

“Something happened?”

“Something has been happening as long as I’ve known him. What did you think of Jason?”

“He wasn’t intimidated by my rank.”

“He isn’t intimidated by gods. Do you know what a person has to go through to get to that place? He’s been in over his head as long as I’ve known him, burying the fear and panic under snark and mad bravado. This was meant to be his chance to stop dealing with diamond-rankers and great astral beings, but now he’s neck-deep in the royal family’s mess, with a whole fresh set of people way more powerful than him to deal with.”

They reached a door that opened itself to let them in. Inside were Liara and Soramir Rimaros, standing out on an opulently appointed balcony lounge. They turned to face Trenchant and Farrah as they entered, Trenchant dropping to one knee.

“Ancestral majesty,” he said solemnly.

“Please stand, Commander Moore,” Soramir instructed.

Trenchant stood up, mirroring Soramir’s stance with his hands clasped behind his back.

Farrah did not have Jason’s experience in dealing with diamond rankers. She had met them, most notably Rufus’ grandfather, Roland, but confronting them was an entirely different matter. She steeled her resolve in the full knowledge that everyone in the room would sense her struggles by reading her aura.

“Perhaps you could explain why you have come, Miss Hurin,” Soramir said.

Farrah clenched her fists at her side.

“I’m not here to explain myself,” she said, drawing raised eyebrows from Trenchant and Liara. “I’m here to tell you that you are going to give Jason what you promised him.”

“You don’t come to our home and make demands,” Liara said.

“He came to ours,” Farrah said, still staring at Soramir. “If a diamond-ranker comes to people like us and asks for something, it’s always a demand. But you’re just the latest in a very long line of people and things who want something from him and he doesn’t have anything left. He’s ready to crack like an egg, so if you want to get what you need from him, you’re the ones putting up first.”

“It’s not that simple,” Liara said. “You might have noticed that there’s a monster surge on.”

“Noticed it? I started it. Jason and I set it off in the first place and you think we care about your family’s reputation? You look down on us and think we’re small, but we’re looking right back, thinking the exact same thing about you.”

Soramir stepped forward, his aura spreading out a feeling of calm that oppressed the agitated Farrah and Liara.

“I will keep my promise to Jason Asano,” Soramir said. “We are working on that.”

“You don’t work on things,” she told him. “You do things. If you want something enough, how many people in this world can stop you from getting it?”

“Everything has a price, Miss Hurin.”

“Yes, it does. And it’s time to pay the price for Jason’s help or you won’t be getting it.”

“That’s Asano’s decision to make,” Liara said.

“You’ve looked into Jason’s aura,” Farrah said to Soramir. “You might know him better than anyone other than me.”

“As I told Princess Liara shortly before you arrived, aura reading is not mind reading.”

“But do you know what he’ll say if I go to Jason and tell him to stop helping you without asking me why?”

“He’ll say yes,” Soramir said.

“You’re damn right, but that doesn’t even matter. You people found a beaten dog and started kicking it. Now you expect it to do tricks. We all need to do something or he won’t be in any kind of state to help you, which means you have two options: Forget about Jason, or do what it takes to bring his friends here and hope that’s enough that he doesn’t walk into the ocean and not come back out or just start murdering everyone.”

Liara was agog at Farrah’s brazenness but took her cues from Soramir and remained silent. She could feel Farrah’s aura tremble under Soramir’s, but her face was unflinching as she stared at the diamond-ranker. Liara was unsurprised that Farrah and Jason were close, both willing to stand in the face of significantly greater power and rail wildly against it. Even with Soramir’s aura pressing down with a sense of calm that bordered on mind

control, the air was tense. Farrah's fierce gaze was returned by Soramir's unreadable expression as silence extended between them.

"Before you came in here," Soramir said finally, "the princess and I were discussing why your friend Jason chose to help us. It is undeniable that we have dragged Jason Asano into events he never asked for and I know this has poked a wound he came here to heal. My family is used to getting our way because of our power, authority, and the respect people have for them, but these are the very things that aggravate Asano the most. Would you do me the favour of explaining why?"

Farrah frowned.

"When I met Jason, he was doing something insane to help a bunch of strangers, because that's what he does. Jason has god-awful flaws, makes god-awful mistakes and is way too slow to learn from either. But from the day we met, he's been putting everything on the line to protect people with no power – like the ones your political mess will hurt – from people with power – like you. As far as I'm concerned, you can all burn. But he'll keep stepping up until it breaks him and that's the point he's just about reached."

"You think we don't want to keep people safe?" Liara asked.

"I'm sure you do, so long as it doesn't cost you too much. Jason doesn't want to protect people; he just does it. He pays the price every time because people like you won't, but he's running out of things to pay. It's cost him his family, his life more than once and it's on the edge of costing his sanity. I spent the last two years watching every hope he had turn to ash because of the things he had to do and the things he had to become. I'm not letting that happen again. If that means walking into a royal palace and yelling at a diamond-ranker the way he would, then that's what I'm going to do."

Farrah had been stuck outside two transformation zones on Earth, knowing what he was up against and the price of failure, but unable to help. She had watched him come back each time, victorious but a little more broken. She was done waiting and watching, so she'd chosen to do the exact thing he would do: go somewhere she shouldn't to yell at someone she shouldn't and hope that by some miracle it accomplished something.

Farrah and Soramir continued to lock eyes. Finally, Soramir gave a small nod.

"I'll do as you say," he said. "I will see to it that Asano's team is here within the next few days. In the meantime, Princess Liara, please go and take Mr Asano's name from the list of participants of the contract he's been assigned."

"Ancestral majesty," Trenchant said. "That contract has already begun. Scouts reported that the target aperture was sealed and the expedition was sent early. I took a

message for Princess Liara and was bringing it to her when Miss Hurin arrived and you directed me to bring her.”

“Was Asano with the expedition?” Liara asked.

“Unknown, your highness. The message was directed to you in your capacity as a member of the Builder response unit. Asano was not mentioned either way, but Princesses Vesper and Zara were both noted as having departed with the expedition.”

“What?” Farrah asked. “Who came up with that idiot plan?”

Chapter 507

The Days They Sing Songs About

Trenchant returned to Soramir's balcony lounge after escorting Farrah away, finding the diamond-ranker mid-conversation with Princess Liara. He stood at attention, remaining quiet.

"I would have liked to ask more on what she said about starting the monster surge," Liara asked. "I didn't sense any lie from her, but is that even possible?"

"I had already suspected something along those lines," Soramir told her. "There has been speculation of interference in the natural process of the monster surge for some time. A possible scenario is that Asano and Hurin found a means to negate that interference. I would very much like to know more about their absence from our world, but I'm sure you'll agree that this was not the moment to push."

"I do, ancestral majesty."

"Commander Moore, what is your opinion of Miss Hurin?"

Trenchant spent a moment collecting his thoughts.

"She is passionate. Loyal. Brave. She was terrified to come here and confront all of us but she did so unflinchingly, knowing we could feel her fear and see through any lies. She has steel running through her."

"Do you think it was a sensible move, coming here and talking to us like that?" Liara asked him.

"They don't write songs about sensible, your highness."

A smile crossed Soramir's face as he turned to gaze out over the palace rooftops.

"These are exciting times," he said. "The days they sing songs about. Such days belong to the bold and the courageous."

"And the lucky," Liara said. "Most of the bold and courageous die early and easy."

"Yes," Soramir said. "But Asano has already done that. Let's see where he goes from here."

"What will you do about his team?" Liara asked. "We've committed to bringing them here as quickly as we can, now. Will you push the Adventure Society? I don't think Vesper wants things escalated to the point of your intervention becoming widely known. It will also burn some of the family's goodwill with the Adventure Society."

"One of the reasons I agreed was that Miss Hurin all but confirmed a suspicion of mine that may help us in that regard. It requires my owing a favour, but that can be an

advantage in and of itself. A favour owed to the right person can help you establish a valuable connection.”

“You founded the Rimaros dynasty,” Liara said. “Who is qualified to even be owed a favour by you? And what connection can't you make just by turning up?”

“Both Jason Asano and Farrah Hurin have been telling us that there are larger interests in play than those of our dynasty. I think, perhaps, it is time we started to listen.”

Jason was striding across the Adventure Society campus in his blood robes, heading for the jobs hall. Shade's voice spoke from Jason's shadow.

“Mr Asano, another messenger bird has arrived at the cloud house.”

Adventure Society messenger birds were small construct creatures, the written messages they carried were unlocked by the aura of the intended recipient, or destroyed if the bird was tampered with. For people like Jason, impervious to the bird's tracking magic, they were less efficient and had to be sent to fixed destination points. Jason has his destination assigned to the cloud house, where the Shade body left to manage the building could contact him at need.

“The timetable for your contract has been moved up,” Shade continued. “You have been directed to attend the jobs hall by the turn of the hour or you will be deemed non-participatory in the contract waiting for you. The message directs you to the Jobs hall's priority contract office instead of the main centre.”

Jason didn't respond other than to change the direction in which he was walking.

“Perhaps you should decline this contract, Mr Asano.”

Jason still didn't respond.

“Mr Asano, I feel obligated to point out that you can sometimes enter a certain frame of mind where the choices you make are ones you ultimately come to regret.”

“What's one more regret?” Jason snarled, then his expression softened. “Thank you for your concern, Shade. But that is concern enough.”

Jason found the priority contracts office within the jobs hall, where he didn't have to wait long.

“Sorry for the last-moment change, Mr Asano,” the Adventure Society functionary told Jason as she handed over his documentation. “If you head out that door, past Trade Hall C and turn left, you'll come to Marshalling Yard H. It's the smaller one on the right; there are signs posted.”

Jason nodded, stowed the documents in his inventory and left.

Unlike Greenstone and its single marshalling yard, the Rimaros Adventuring Society had many. It was functionally no different, just a gathering place for adventurers about to head on contracts. Marshalling Yard H was one of the smaller ones, set amongst the gardens that spread through most of the campus. There were benches around the edges, although only two of the gathered expedition members were using them.

The gold-rank expedition leader, Jeni Kavaloa, was checking her pocket watch. The guild team had arrived, along with the bulk of the independents. She wasn't happy about being saddled with the mixed group, especially since the late inclusion of two princesses told her that the reasons behind it were political. She detested people playing games with Adventure Society activities, which were life and death affairs.

There were still three people who still hadn't arrived, presumably missing the notification of the time change. The eleven they had, plus Jeni herself, were enough that they didn't need to call on supplementary forces. There was also a little time until the portal specialist arrived at the turn of the hour for more people to arrive.

The six-person guild team were standing easy and relaxed. They were typical of their kind. Young and at the low end of silver-rank, they were still flush with their team's first successes independent of gold-rank supervision. Being back under a gold-ranker for this expedition had them chafing at the bit and looking for a fight.

Stuck waiting, the place they had to look was with the loose adventurers assigned to the expedition. It was unusual to mix guild and non-guild except for large operations or specific reasons. The fact that two of the other adventurers were royalty made the political games being played even more obvious.

The guild members were not fool enough to mess with a pair of princesses, who were the only expedition members sitting on the available benches. Instead, the guild people were harassing the other three for fun.

The unaffiliated expedition members were not gullible enough to let themselves be provoked. They had their own ambitions of guild membership and, without family or political connections, that meant showing their professionalism. It wasn't the brash young guild members they wanted to impress but the gold-ranker and the two princesses.

One member of the guild group stood out from the others, standing impassively aside while his fellow guilders teased the independents. Jeni noted that he seemed to know one of the princesses, at least in passing, having nodded greetings on their arrival.

Jeni wasn't happy with this strange soup she had been assigned to supervise. It was a volatile mix that reeked of politics, leaving her with a sense of another shoe, waiting to drop. When she sensed the approach of a strange aura, she felt that it was about to. A

man in dark red robes entered the marshalling yard. His eyes weren't normal, blue and orange with black sclera, and he had scars on his face.

For a silver-ranker, his aura was hard to make out. She was certain that none of the other silver-rankers could see past its façade. Even Jeni herself could barely sense what lay within, but even that disturbed her. Trapped behind the rigid control, it was a maniac in a cage, howling into the dark.

Jeni felt reactions from some of the other adventurers as he appeared. The two princesses recognised him, as did the quiet guild adventurer. She read curiosity and surprise from the guild adventurer, while one of the princesses was wary. The other was an odd mix of trepidation and shame, standing up and staring as the man arrived. This did not go unnoticed by the other adventurers.

The man didn't so much as glance at any of them as he strode up to Jeni. He plucked his contract documentation from a dimensional space and held it out for her inspection. She took it and read it over.

"You only confirmed your participation a few minutes ago."

He met her gaze evenly, not intimidated by her rank.

"At least you aren't late," she said. "Barely. I would recommend that you be more prompt when it comes to contracts, Mr Asano. When you are not, it makes things more difficult for the administration. They have enough problems to deal with already without unnecessarily adding more."

Jason nodded, moving to an empty bench away from everyone else and sat, gazing down at the ground in front of him. One of the guild members, deciding that the other trio were no sport, sauntered in Jason's direction.

"What about you, new guy? Think you've got what it takes to—"

The guild member skittered back like he'd touched a hot stove when Jason raised his head to meet the guild member's gaze. Only the man himself and the gold-rank Jeni had felt the spike of aura lance through the man's aura defences, although everyone felt the result. The man lost his composure as his aura was popped like a soap bubble. It immediately snapped back up, radiating shock, shame and the anger of a man startled by an unexpected moth flying in front of his face.

"Weak," Jason mumbled, his voice gravel as he turned his eyes back to the ground.

Fury covered the man's face and Jeni was about to step in when someone beat her to it. The guild member who recognised Jason stepped forward and placed a restraining hand on his companion's shoulder. The quiet man's aura was calm and stable, helping the angry man settle.

“You know this guy, Orin?” the angry man asked.

“Complications,” Orin said. “Best left alone.”

The leader of the guild team, Korinne, moved up to them.

“That guy spiked one of ours, Orin,” she said. “We’re going to need more than that before we let that pass.”

Orin looked from Jason to Zara, then back to Jason.

“He’s like my uncle.”

Apparently deciding that was enough, Orin walked back to his original position. The other two looked a little pale as they gave Jason another glance.

“Let it go,” Korinne said to her still-angry team member. “You don’t want to make an enemy of the next Amos Pensinata.”

Jeni was glowering at the exchange. Whoever had assembled the expedition roster was like a mad alchemist, throwing volatile ingredients in a pot to see what happened. She narrowed her eyes on Vesper Rimaros, suspecting her of being the alchemist in question.

“Oh yeah,” she muttered to herself. “This is going to go great.”

The hour came and the last two members didn’t arrive before the gold-rank portal specialist. Jeni knew the man in passing but, also knew how in-demand his time was at the moment, so they didn’t exchange more than quick nods before he opened a portal and she ushered the group through. The portal user was not tasked to follow them, so the group would need to make its own way back.

The small expedition emerged from the portal into an abandoned village, surrounded by jungle. The population had been evacuated to a fortress, the livestock they were forced to abandon left behind now mostly-devoured carcasses. The quadrupedal lizard creatures were similar to cows in nature, used for milk and meat. Common practice was to set them loose, to draw monsters away from the empty village, but these had wandered into the township instead of the wilderness. Whichever monsters had roamed through and killed them hadn't done much damage to the buildings, so the residents would return to largely intact homes.

The town’s emptiness reminded Jason of the rural towns of Earth, abandoned during the monster waves. He had seen plenty of them as he roamed around, hunting for the right nodes to recalibrate the link between worlds. That task was not entirely complete, but until the monster surge was over the dimensional forces at play would make any attempt to modify the link on this side pointless.

Jeni gathered the group together to update them on the contract.

“As you know, we were going to investigate potential Builder cult activity around an astral space aperture. The scouts monitoring the target site sent updated information that a group of Builder cultists did, indeed move in on it, which is why they backed off and sent work back. The timeline was stepped up and here we are. Unfortunately, the cult has had that intervening time to get in, start whatever they are up to and fortify against people like us coming to stop them.”

An icy cloud formed at her feet.

“We are going to be moving fast as we can without risking drawing monster attention,” she announced. “Asano, I’m told you have communications and scouting abilities.”

➤ [You have received a party invitation from \[Jason Asano\]. Accept Y/N?](#)

Seven Shade bodies rose from Jason’s shadow and dashed off into the jungle. The guild team’s leader, Korinne, spoke up.

“Ma’am, our team scout is reliable. Perhaps we should use her instead of relying on an independent’s familiars.”

Jeni didn’t let her unhappiness show. She had seen that the stoic Orin held an amount of respect within the guild team and she’d been hoping his influence would keep a lid on things. Korinne, however, was unwilling to let Jason’s blow to the pride of her team member slide. Jeni looked at Korinne, then turned to the woman she knew to be the guild team’s scout.

“Rosa Liselos, isn’t it? What do you say, Liselos? Can you do better than Asano’s shadows?”

Liselos glanced at Orin, then flashed an apologetic look at Korinne before turning back Jeni.

“No, ma’am. My senses are sharper than most and I’ve already lost track of them. I can’t hide any better than that.”

Jeni turned back to Korinne.

“Anything else to say about how I’m commanding this expedition?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Correct.”

Jeni then addressed the group at large.

“We’re moving out,” she ordered. “Keep those auras restrained; no point letting them see us coming until we have to. We’ll rely on scouting to keep us secure. Liselos, you’ll sweep our wake to make sure nothing is stalking us.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The expedition members took out various means of personal transport, from powers like Jeni’s floating ice cloud to construct creatures kept in dimensional storage. Shade took the form of a saddled panther-like creature with a long body and eight legs. It had glowing white fangs, claws and eyes. Jason slid into the saddle on its back and the group moved out.

Chapter 508

The Source of the Madness

Jason knew from his map that the expedition had been portalled to somewhere in the north of Colombia, which in this world was in the southwest of the Storm Kingdom. They headed south, on the same wide, well-maintained roads Jason had travelled on during his delivery contract.

The group experimented with the chat features of Jason's party interface, the guild team clearly having used similar abilities before. They explained them to the unaffiliated after some basic functionality tests, so Jason remained silent and let them.

➤ Party member [Zara Rimaros] wishes to open a private chat channel. Accept Y/N?

Jason declined, not so much as casting a glance at the princesses. Zara was on a cloud, similar to that of Jeni, but instead of ice, hers was a volatile roiling of air and water. It looked like she was standing in a small, very contained tropical storm. Vesper rode a construct version of a heidel that looked like a two-headed horse made of sapphires. Of all the transportation modes, it was the most eye-catching. Some of the others didn't bother with transport, using movement powers to keep up on foot.

Others in the group, especially the guild members who had been watching the royal members of the expedition, noticed her looking at him. Jason noted the resulting hostility in their auras but offered no more reaction than he did to the princess. The only one that interested him at all was Orin. As well as being the most steadfast of the group, he was fresh from a rank up. All of the guild team were in the earliest part of silver-rank, but Jason had met Orin just days earlier when he'd been at the peak of bronze. Orin was one of Kasper Irios' friends, being the quiet member of that group as well.

It was typical of adventurers to push themselves to the peak of their current rank before a monster surge. Using the surge itself to cross the threshold and get a jump on the next rank was a practice Jason had been told about during his earliest days as an adventurer. With how delayed the surge was, he had no doubt that many people were prepared and either had or were about to join Orin in crossing the line. Vesper Rimaros, for example, was at the very high end of silver rank.

A dozen people moving through the jungle at a goodly speed did not go unnoticed and the expedition was attacked by a large pack of silver-rank monsters. They came from the rear but the expedition was ready, having been alerted by the guild scout trailing the

main group. Jason had already sensed their approach when the warning came and was certain that the gold-rank expedition leader had as well. More than forty flying snakes with flickering insect wings came over the jungle canopy and into the open space above the road. With darting movements, like giant dragonflies, they spat poison globules before diving in to try and land venomous bites.

Auras erupted out from the dozen adventurers, an overlapping slew of powerful effects. Not all of them were useful to every person, like one that enhanced lightning-based damage, which did nothing for Jason. But there were also speed and strength enhancements, damage reduction effects and boosts to sensory powers; a cornucopia of augmentations demonstrating the advantage of essence users acting in concert.

Jason didn't bother to act, sitting on his mount and watching the others. Jeni did the same, observing the team in action. Whenever a monster targeted either, they responded with a savage aura spike that persuaded the beast to move on to other targets.

The three unaffiliated adventurers were capable, acting quickly and decisively, but were outclassed by the others. Vesper was moving like a dancer, sword in hand as she chanted a sonorous song that disoriented the monsters. The effect was slight but telling, even the minimal advantage something the expert adventurers could capitalise on.

Zara used a combination of wind and water powers to attack the monsters and control the environment. She conjured walls and blades of water and slammed the snakes through trees with focused blasts of wind. With so many adventurers around, she left the monsters for more damaged-oriented allies to finish off while she set up the next monster for slaughter.

Most impressive was the guild team, their six members a chorus of power and synergy. When they all fired off abilities at once it was almost simultaneous, staggered just enough to land in the optimal sequence. Jason was forced to acknowledge that the famous arrogance of the guilds was not without basis as they took the monsters apart. The guild team was a well-oiled machine, and that machine was a meat grinder.

Jason might have it all over them in terms of adventuring experience, but their training regimens had started before they got their first essence and continued through iron and bronze rank. The results of that were playing out in front of Jason as he watched. If things went wrong, that's when experience like Jason's was valuable. In their element, though, even a relatively inexperienced guild team showed Jason adventurers as he'd never seen them.

Korinne, the team's leader, sent orders swiftly, her efficiency only enhanced by Jason's communication power. There was no sign of the unruliness she had demonstrated

earlier as her training kicked in and she relayed orders that were followed to the letter. Once the fight started, her whole team showed the discipline that had been lacking as they fooled around back in the marshalling yard.

Monsters were pinned by control abilities, weakened by debuffs and hammered with a flurry of damaging powers. There was a clockwork precision to the process that had the guild demolishing the enemy at an incredible pace. Jason had never seen silver-rank monsters slaughtered with such speed and efficiency.

As the fight played out, Shade notified Jason that his long-deployed scouts had found the target site. As Shade relayed that information, Jason slowly and carefully diminished his aura, so as not to alert the gold ranker.

Once the last of the monsters were finished off, Jeni realised that someone was missing. She had seen Jason staying out of the fight at the start, but hadn't pushed him. She was worried enough about his stability that she might have even preferred if he did nothing during the whole expedition. This was reinforced when she realised that he had slipped away during the latter part of the battle. Despite her gold-rank senses, in the mess of overlapping auras, Asano's had smoothly vanished. He and his mount had disappeared with it.

"Did anyone see Asano go?" she asked.

The rest of the group all looked around, blank-faced. Jeni closed her eyes and winced.

"I knew I was going to hate this job."

She spoke to Jason through voice chat.

"Mr Asano, what are you doing?"

➤ **Party leader [Jason Asano] has set his incoming voice chats to mute.**

She shot a flat glare in Vesper's direction.

"I hate politics so much."

Shade, scouting ahead, had found the aperture and the Builder cult force guarding it. Jason had shadow-jumped directly to his familiar and was now observing the cultists from hiding, crouched in the thick jungle growth.

The aperture was inside a small cave, little more than a deep indent in a stone outcropping. Outside the cave, the cultists had cleared a huge section of jungle. The resulting fallen trees and scrub was still in the process of being burned away. The tools

being used were whirling saw blades and flamethrowers incorporated into the bodies of hulking construct creatures and people converted into half-construct abominations.

The constructs were a wild mismatch of designs, from crabs to centaurs to humanoids. The centaur constructs had two heads, despite the top half being humanoid and Jason realised they were based on half-heidels instead of half-horses. The semi-construct converted were downright disturbing, with much of their bodies replaced with artificial parts like magical cyborgs.

There were centaur variants among the converted as well, although these were single-headed because the top halves were all living celestine torsos. They were grafted onto construct bodies for the lower halves and not just heidel bodies. Others were in the form of large cats, scorpions and spiders.

Other flesh abominations had artificial limbs replacing or in addition to their own, emerging from almost any part of the body. It would have been comical if it hadn't been so grotesque, filling Jason with revulsion. These weren't prosthetics used to help people overcome injury or disability. These people had been butchered to create monsters, many quite likely against their will. That was how the Builder had done it when Jason and his team fought them in the astral space and there was no reason he wouldn't do it again.

The constructs and the magic cyborg converted were the bulk of the force, some eighty at bronze rank and another twenty at silver. Although their numbers were high, they needed to be, as individually they were no match for an essence user. That might be less true in Greenstone, but the guild team Jason had just observed would land on them like artillery fire.

The key to creating both the construct creatures and the converted were the clockwork cores inside them. The purpose of the clockwork cores was to rapidly expand the Builder's forces, producing constructs and converted at a greater pace than any equivalent power could be assembled. As invaders, the ability to rapidly expand their initial forces was of incredible value.

The sources of the cores were clockwork kings, which Jason had only seen one of. It was an ancient and crippled one, dug up on Earth by the Engineers of Ascension. They had used the damaged cores it could still produce as part of their human augmentation project.

Before his death, the EOA leader, Noreth, had given Jason access to a vault filled with EOA secrets and resources. The clockwork king counted as both and Jason had destroyed it himself, making sure no one would be able to use it again.

Clockwork kings were gold rank and Jason didn't sense any auras on that level. The kings weren't built for stealth and, even if they were, it was very hard for the Builder's power to escape Jason's attention. As such, any clockwork king in the vicinity would have to be on the other side of the aperture, inside the astral space. Jason turned his attention to the forces he was certain of.

Leading the small army of constructs and abominations was a cadre of essence users. Jason could sense the star seeds worming through their bodies and souls. There were five silver-rankers and a dozen bronze.

"Mr Asano," Shade said, next to Jason in the undergrowth. "While I fear the answer is obvious, I am obligated to ask if this is truly the approach you wish to take. I know you wish to assess the effectiveness of your ability to influence objects related to the Builder. My concern is that, in another state of mind, perhaps, you might come to regret using people – even these people – as subjects of weapon experimentation."

Jason turned his head to look at the shadow creature beside him, then back out at the enemy.

"At this point, what's one more regret?"

Clockwork cores and star seeds were the two kinds of artefacts the Builder used to invest power into its minions. Clockwork cores were the lesser, being produced by other minions rather than the Builder itself and not direct conduits to the Builder. Because they were not, it was even possible to use them outside of the Builder's influence.

Jason had already tested his power against the damaged, modified variants that the EOA salvaged. The effects there had been extreme and lethal. Now, he was going to test his influence over the undamaged, unmodified variant.

He didn't bother to hide, stepping out of the jungle, shrouded in his starlight cloak. His aura washed out like a flood over the Builder's minions and Jason used it to reach into the constructs and abominations.

Jason had hoped his influence over the clockwork cores would allow him to shut them down entirely. What he found was that he could do far more than that, at least with the weaker bronze-rank enemies. He had experience erasing the Builder's imprint from the dimensional door and absorbing it for his own, plus the power the door gave him in influencing other Builder artefacts with his aura. This allowed him to seize control of the bronze-rank constructs entirely, erasing their Builder's imprint and making them his own.

As for the silver-rank constructs, he lacked the strength to take them over. The best he could do was impede their coordination and speed while directing the bronze-rank ones to attack them.

The results with the cyborg-like converted were different and much more horrific. Seizing control of the artificial parts of their bodies through the cores inside them left the flesh fighting the steel. The abominations started ripping themselves apart, the artificial parts yanking themselves off the flesh to which they were macabrely welded. Whirling saw-blade limbs and flame-spitting orifices turned on the very bodies they were attached to.

Like their construct equivalents, the silver-rank abominations were more resistant to control than the bronze-rankers. The fleshly part of them resisted Jason's efforts, but that flesh also made them vulnerable. The freakish bodies of the abominations were kept alive by the magic of their artificial parts. Rather than try and take full control, Jason focused on shutting off the magic in the artificial parts that kept the living parts alive. The converted were soon gasping for air and bleeding from their eyes and the points where flesh met steel.

Within moments of his appearance, and without so much as raising a hand, Jason had turned the construct army into a gruesome and chaotic spectacle of death. He walked slowly across the torched clearing, stepping over smouldering logs and around still-burning brush that threw smoke up and out over the jungle.

The essence users escaped the sudden and gruesome chaos, fighting their way free of the army that, moments ago, had been under their control. Their attention locked on Jason, whose aura was unhidden and obviously the source of the madness. As the essence users moved towards him, the five silver-rankers tried exerting suppressive force with their own auras to negate Jason's influence on their army. The attempt was a miserable failure as their auras shrunk back from Jason's as if stung.

The auras of the essence users were thick with the Builder's energy, shaped by the star seeds in their souls. Jason knew that power, which was scored onto his soul in the Builder's attempts to torture Jason into accepting a star seed. As a result, there was no power that Jason knew better how to fight back against.

Jason poured his rage onto the essence users, smashing their auras to nothing. He didn't stop there, attacking their very souls the way their master had once attacked him. In doing so, the Builder had invested in Jason the very same ability, effectively handing a powerful weapon to his enemy.

Their souls were as inviolable to Jason as his own had been to the Builder. Unless they opened themselves up to him, which they never would, he could only do what their master did to him and scour their souls, inflicting a pain that transcended the physical.

Pain, as it turned out, was enough.

The bodies of the bronze rankers were unable to handle it, collapsing to the ground. The silver-rankers were stronger, but not strong enough, stopping dead in their tracks. That was when the Builder stepped in personally.

Star seeds had two elements: the physical element in the body and the spiritual element in the soul. Jason felt the Builder's power flood through the spiritual element and into the physical element, allowing it to take control of their bodies, bolstering them with power. Jason had once fought such a vessel and knew how strong they were, but to become one was a death sentence.

Any unprepared vessel could only embody a greater astral being for minutes before burning out. The vessels Jason had seen in the past, like Thadwick, had gone through weeks of preparation and even they lasted only so long. The vessels also embodied the Builder's power, meaning they were no longer allowed to take action. Even before Dawn had gained concessions from Shako, The Builder had conceded to the World-Phoenix and the Reaper that it would no longer use vessels on Pallimustus. By embodying the essence users through their star seeds, he had rendered them unable to act. Like Dawn representing the World-Phoenix, Builder vessels could do no more than talk.

The bronze-rankers got to their feet and the silver rankers moved forward, forming a line in front of Jason. Their synchronized voices were cold and mechanical as they spoke in a perfect chorus.

“Asano.”

Chapter 509

A Fair Fight

Jason looked at the vessels of the Builder arrayed in front of him. Yet again, the Builder was pushing the boundaries of its agreement with the other great astral beings, reinforcing their unreliability. It reminded him all over again that none of them cared about the welfare of one mortal. Their only concern was how he could impact their agenda or, perhaps, their pride as higher beings as they looked down on mortals.

Once again, Jason found himself in front of some vastly more powerful entity, and he was tired. Tired of ranting. Tired of anger. Tired of challenging powers he had no business standing in front of. He wondered what the Builder even wanted from him, this time. What did it get out of talking?

Jason looked towards the shallow cave with the aperture inside.

What the Builder got from talking to Jason was Jason talking back. While Jason made another speech full of threats he couldn't possibly carry out, the Builder would have time to direct his forces within the astral space and converge on the aperture, waiting for Jason's arrival.

Jason didn't say anything to the Builder's vessels, instead, sinking into his own shadow and reappearing in the dark mouth of the cave. The aperture was a glowing, circular portal, flickering like a television with bad reception.

"Keep an eye on it," Jason said as a Shade body left Jason's shadow and Jason stepped into the portal. Astral spaces were too stable for him to enter from anywhere, the way he could with a proto-space, but his power did allow him to ignore the seals on apertures.

The Builder's vessels turned in unison as Jason vanished from in front of them and reappeared in the cave, moving directly into the aperture. A shadowy figure moved out of the cave, slipping from shadow to shadow through the still-fighting constructs and semi-construct flesh abominations. It exited the melee unaccosted and approached the Builder's vessels. They were already showing signs of breaking down, their skin turning stony and starting to flake.

"Reaper spawn," the vessels chorused in perfect unity with cold, mechanical voices.

"Great being," Shade greeted respectfully. "I have spent some time on Mr Asano's homeworld, as you know. They do not have any gods that I am aware of, yet it is a world rife with stories of them. The gods in most of these mythologies are very mortal in their

failings. They have story after story of petty, vain and cruel deities, using mortals as proxies in their conflicts, always to the suffering of the mortals. I had thought this a reflection of their own inadequacies; a collective social assertion of higher beings just as flawed as they, thus excusing their own shortcomings. Now I find myself wondering if I was incorrect. Many of these myths stem from a period in which one of your clockwork kings was entombed. I do not know what it was doing there, but perhaps whatever your involvement in that world inspired the pettiness, cruelty and vanity of their mythological deities.”

“You are impudent, spawn.”

“And you are thirteen billion years old, yet somehow the same sixteen-year-old boy who was ascended to his position. I do not know how you were chosen, but the great astral beings have made enough other mistakes that I know their decisions are not infallible.”

“You are limited, spawn. Measuring me by the time reference of this petty world only makes it plain.”

“Yes, that is what limits me,” Shade said. “The arbitrary value by which I chose to account for time. I shall take it as a lesson learned and consider myself appropriately admonished.”

Jeni Kavaloa was moving swiftly, rushing towards the aperture with the rest of the expedition. They had spotted the smoke in the distance and left the road, heading through the jungle towards it. Jeni had given up on any kind of delicate process, sending out a wild storm of ice blades to open a path. The fast-moving and razor-sharp cloud annihilated every obstacle in the group’s path as they dashed behind it on their various means of transport. Trees were smashed to splinters and undergrowth was sliced to confetti. The ice blades even went through a rock the size of a house, the group riding through a dust cloud as pebbles rained down on them.

Jeni was not straining her senses, since the aura projection required to do so could alert monsters at even greater range than the noise her demolition cloud was making. Even so, her gold-rank perception picked up what was happening in the clearing well before they reached it, although none of it made any sense. She had fought the Builder’s forces before and recognised the auras of their construct creatures and macabre converted. What she had not seen before was them fighting each other.

That barely entered her attention, however, compared to the other auras on the scene. Most were bronze-rank with a handful of silvers but there was something inside all

of them that was more dangerous than their rank. It was a power like that of a manifested god, but also different and alien. She could only assume this was the presence of the Builder, as she had heard of it taking vessels, but none had been seen since the early days of the cultist conflict. Whatever the power was, she could sense it rapidly eating the people containing it from the inside out.

What she could not sense was Jason Asano.

Jason was moving before he had time to even sense his surroundings as he emerged from the portal. Even so, he was riddled with attacks. His cloak intercepted the weaker ones, but a flaming projectile seared through his robes to scorch his torso and a spear pierced through his gut and out the other side.

The astral space was some kind of sweltering, subterranean space and Jason easily disappeared into the shadows, even with a spear still lodged in him. He didn't bother to look back, moving fast but silently through what turned out to be an ants' nest of volcanic tunnels, complete with lava-spitting ants.

Jason lost his pursuers in a vast cavern containing a lake of magma. He was grateful that he didn't need to breathe the scorching air because he wasn't sure he could have. He could move stealthily past the many ants, and since they went after any Builder minions that encroached, he had time to stop and remove the spear impaling him. The corrosive lava spit of the ants was highly effective against the metal constructs, making them trouble for the minions. The only light came from the glowing magma lake, an orange-tinted gloom, like being inside a smouldering ember. Jason moved through undetected, his cloak was dimmed to void black as he used it to fly over the lake.

There was something inside the lake, submerged in lava. It was bigger than the ants, or perhaps their queen, if they had one. It was still only silver rank, although definitely in the upper range. Jason stayed high, near the ceiling, so as to not tempt fate.

Jason didn't extend his senses far but could feel the unhidden auras of the Builder minions as they rushed in the direction of the aperture. After coming through the aperture to the expected ambush, Jason had been forced to dash off and take stock, but the cultists waiting had chosen not to chase after him for long once he disappeared into the magma cavern. Instead, they gravitated to the place they knew he would need to go eventually. At some point, he would have to go back to the aperture.

Unfortunately for the Builder's minions, Jason had inadvertent allies in the ants. Jason could easily hide from them as their aura senses were poor and Shade could deceive their insect vibrational sense. There was also the issue of the entire astral space

being a lava tunnel maze. Jason's map ability was a boon, helping navigate a path and track the enemies along it. As he made his way back towards the aperture, he took every chance to bait the ants in the direction of cultists with pinpoint bursts of aura.

The cultists were right in thinking Jason would return to the aperture. His advantage was that he could scout it out instead of walking in blind, but time was against him. The Builder had been sending his cultists in the direction of the aperture since Jason's arrival in the clearing. Fortunately, the constructs and semi-construct flesh abominations were more liability than asset.

Jason's ability to hijack their clockwork cores made them worse than useless when fighting him, so they had been sent back. Jason spotted them engaging ants to clear a path for essence-using cultists more than once, but resisted the temptation to take some over. The cultists were connected to the Builder through their star seeds, which linked them in a similar fashion to Jason's party interface. Once any of them found where he was, they all would, so every time he was spotted they would get closer to boxing him in. Jason did not want to give up the strategic advantages of speed and stealth, returning to the chamber containing the aperture within minutes of leaving it.

Five silver-rank essence users were waiting near the aperture. Jason had hoped for less but expected more, but lower-rankers with construct and converted to help them had been left to watch the sealed aperture. They had all been sent away at the Builder's warning after Jason's display outside. They knew that only silver-rank essence users posed any kind of threat, at least amongst the forces at hand.

The cavern in which the aperture was located was not large compared to the magma lake chamber. Light came from natural orange crystals growing out of every surface of the natural cavern. Walls, floor and ceiling, if the uneven chamber could truly be said to have the distinctions, all featured them. So did the stalagmites and stalactites. The uneven cave floor and pervasive shadows meant that anyone without enhanced agility, reflexes and perception would quickly break a leg. The only place the floor had been worked flat was directly under the aperture, where a sealing ritual had been set up. That was what Jason needed to undo to give the rest of the expedition access.

The terrain was ideal for Jason to skirmish through if it came to a fight, but with five silver-rank enemies, he would prefer it didn't come to that. It was not Greenstone and five-on-one odds were something he'd rather avoid, even if the environment was favourable and he could overwhelm their auras. If just one or two of them was at a guild level, their numerical advantage could easily spell death.

Following his defeat at the hands of the Purity priests, Jason has made additional purchases while restocking his equipment. At the top of that list was a set of the most powerful cleansing potions his body could handle, having learned his lesson about being too reliant on his resistances.

Another purchase was something he made after considering the fights in his future. Most of Jason's battles had been against monsters and he needed new strategies that prepared him to face essence users. This was especially true when he was outnumbered, which seemed to be most of the time.

After considering his options and advantages, Jason had devised a tactic using one of his strongest tools and a set of items he had picked up quite a lot of over the years. He only had a few that were as strong as he needed, but a few was enough. Because the items were on the Adventure Society's controlled list, Jason's one-star rank did not allow him to buy more.

Familiars were unable to join Jason's party chat, but Jason and Shade could still converse safely. Shade could hide Jason from various senses, including masking his sound, but that sound was not masked from Shade himself.

"Time to try the new strategy," Jason told his familiar. "Get into position."

Five Shade bodies slipped away, moving through the dark to hide in the shadows of the five essence users. Once they were in place, Jason's aura dropped on the cultists like a bomb. Without the Builder actively boosting them, which would just make more pointless vessels, Jason's aura suppression was especially effective.

In the same moment that Jason suppressed their auras, a Shade body rose from each of their shadows, pulling silver-rank suppression collars from within Shade's storage space. Only with suppressed auras would the suppression collars be able to take effect, which was why they weren't often used in combat. Only with the rank or numerical disparity for powerful aura suppression was it a viable method for shutting down the powers of opponents. Unfortunately for the cultists, their master was the primary factor in Jason turning into a one-man force multiplier.

Shade acted quickly and four collars snapped around four necks. Only one of the essence users reacted quickly enough to prevent the sneak attack, sending out a wave of force that knocked back Shade's body, even though it was intangible, along with the man's collared fellows. That left one cultist facing off against Jason. The others weren't helpless, but locked out of their powers, their impact would be limited. It was, ostensibly, a fair fight.

Jeni hesitated in her mind with what she sensed waiting in the clearing but didn't slow as she led the expedition group onward. They reached the clearing and surveyed what was on display, which was bizarre on every front. The Builder's forces were fighting one another, constructs and flesh abominations in a wildly destructive melee where they attacked not just each other but even themselves at times.

The other scene in the clearing was very different in its stillness, yet no less strange. One of Asano's shadow familiars was facing a plumb-straight line of Builder cultists who were visibly in the process of dying as their bodies broke down around them. Even so, the cultists didn't react to their own conditions, standing like troops at inspection.

Every member of the expedition sensed the power inside the cultists and how dangerous it was. Every member of the expedition had seen gods appear in worship squares and religious ceremonies and knew the feel of divinity. This was similar, but like a mannequin that was both a little too human and not quite human enough, there was a disturbing, uncanny valley aspect to that power that put them all on alert.

The bodies of the essence users were drying out and crumbling away. Cracked and desiccated like the mud of a long-dry riverbed, it was falling off in flakes, dust and bloodless clumps. The bronze-rank cultists were nearing the end of their endurance even as the expedition arrived, one of them collapsing to the ground. None of the others showed any reaction, turning their attention to the newcomers with eerily uniform precision.

"Adventurers of Rimaros," the vessels addressed them in impassive harmony. "I am the Builder and I have a proposal for you."

Chapter 510

Put the Mask Back On

The collared cultists were effectively non-threats without powers, but Jason wasn't taking chances. Holding a hand out to the side, blood spilled out to take the form of Colin in his blood clone form.

"Watch the packaged meat," Jason instructed. "If it starts going bad, eat it fast."

The cultist still free didn't try to look out for his fellows. He did just the opposite moving out of the way as the familiar approached them with slow, methodical steps. The cultist never took his eyes from Jason as he sidestepped out of the apocalypse beast's path, remaining alert to attack.

The collared cultists tried to run, only for blood-soaked leather straps to shoot out from Colin. They grabbed the disempowered cultists and dragged them back to the familiar's feet. Jason felt the surge of power from the star seeds within them as they tried to self-detonate and locked them down with his aura.

This was a trick Jason had instinctively picked up after ejecting the star seed placed in his own body. He hadn't understood how the ability truly worked when he first used it back in Greenstone, but he had changed a lot since then. Jason was no longer a dual entity of body and soul, the way most physical beings were. For him, body and soul was the same thing.

This was extremely unusual, even on a cosmic scale. While the specific components of different physical beings varied, the underlying pattern that made them up was the same. Be it a normal person or an essence user, monster or familiar, physical beings were comprised of a physical component that served as a vessel for a spiritual component. Exceptions to this, where the body and spirit did not exist in a state of duality but in a unified, physical and spiritual gestalt were extremely rare. This was what made entities like the messengers and the vorger so extraordinary.

Jason's adoption of that state had given him significant insights into the way the connection between body and spirit functioned. It helped him understand the underlying mechanisms of things he'd been doing by instinct, like using his aura to prevent star seed detonation.

The soul of any being was inviolable unless it opened itself to penetration. If a being like the Builder, with practically infinite power, could not overcome this limitation, then Jason certainly couldn't. This made a star seed inside someone's soul untouchable,

however strong his ability to influence the Builder's artefacts. Not all of a star seed was held within the soul, however.

While each great astral being used its own kind of star seed, they were all, by necessity, a reflection of the basic patterns of physical beings. They were made up of both physical and spiritual components, which lodged themselves in the physical and spiritual aspects of living beings. For this reason, messengers and similar beings, which now included Jason, were immune to star seed implantation.

Jason was unable to do a lot with the physical aspect of a star seed, as the protected spiritual component was the part that controlled it. The most he could do was lock down the physical component and prevent it from enacting commands sent from within the soul.

Jason's understanding of the dual nature of most physical beings wasn't generally useful. The two aspects were like perfect halves of a sphere, seamlessly sealed together, with nowhere to take purchase. When Jason used his ability to attack a soul, all he was doing was scratching at the exterior or squeezing it like a ball. There was nothing to grab hold of and really go to work, but a star seed changed that considerably.

Jason locked down the physical aspects of the cultist's star seeds, so as to stop their self-detonation. It was something he hadn't done in years, during which time he had gone through considerable changes. This led to a revelation as he grabbed at the star seeds: the physical aspect of a star seed was like a handle sticking out a cultist's soul. A handle that he could grab.

Looking at the uncollared cultist through a new lens, Jason didn't see a man. He saw a sphere with a great big handle poking out the side. Half of that sphere was untouchable, but what if he grabbed that handle and used it to wrench off that half that wasn't? He couldn't rip the man's soul out of his body, but maybe he could tear the body off the soul.

The cultist and Jason were still in a standoff, staring one another down. Neither had moved since Colin tied up the other cultists, who were now bound up in wet red leather straps like insects in a web. From the cultist's perspective that was fine, buying time for reinforcements to arrive. For Jason, it allowed him to concentrate on forging a new weapon in his soul arsenal.

Jason projected his aura in twin talons that dug through the cultist's aura. One gripped the man's soul while the other gripped the physical element of the star seed. Then, Jason started to twist. The man froze, eyes wide as he felt something try to wrench apart the very foundation of his being. For Jason, it also felt like a physical struggle, as if he were trying to yank the man's soul from his body with brute strength. The difference in soul strength between the two silver-rankers was like a bodybuilder fighting a child.

Jason was certain that unless the Builder stepped in and turned the cultist into a vessel, he could not be stopped. Since doing so would go far beyond simply using some vessels to talk, Jason didn't think that he would. The two men struggled while standing dead still, staring at one another. The other cultists lay where they were tied up, watching in fear and confusion. Despite having their aura senses being sealed, the collared cultists were able to sense the powerful aura reactions coming from within the cultist Jason was spiritually attacking. Even people without magic and the aura senses that come with it would have felt it. It was not enough that they were clear as to what was befalling their companion, but they could tell that it was happening on a level that no wound should be able to reach.

"Mr Asano, I recommend against this course of action."

Jason ignored Shade, his face warped with hate as he felt the strain he was placing on the bond between the cultist's body and soul. The man wasn't even resisting anymore, swaying and starting to twitch. Shade rose up from Jason's shadow.

"Mr Asano, I *strongly* recommend against this course of action."

Jason continued to twist and wrench, feeling the cultist's spiritual foundation beginning to tear.

"JASON, STOP IT!"

Shade never yelled. Shade never told when he could suggest and Shade never used Jason's first name. Doing all three at once had finally broken through. The cultist dropped to the ground, frothing at the mouth as Jason released him and turned to his shadowy familiar.

"Mr Asano," Shade said, his composure restored. "If I ask you to do something, will you do it?"

"Anything."

"Then I will ask you not to do what you were about to do. Ever. Because—"

"Why doesn't matter," Jason cut in, his voice soft. "If you want it, that's all the why I need."

Jason's shoulder's slumped. Shade had shaken the twisted rage from his expression he suddenly looked exhausted. Something festering inside him had finally rotted through and collapsed. He looked over at the cultists. The free one was having a seizure, the foam in his mouth tainted red. The others showed an expression Jason wasn't familiar with on the face of a Builder cultist. He'd seen arrogance and disdain. He'd seen fury, madness and the slack-jawed blankness of a puppet. Fear was new. Even collared, they felt what

Jason had been doing to their companion and it chilled them to a depth only the star seeds within them had ever reached before.

“I almost crossed a line there, didn’t I?” Jason asked.

“Yes, Mr Asano.”

“Or maybe I already did. If you hadn’t stopped me, I’d have torn that man’s soul out.”

“But you didn’t. There is still a path home for you.”

“And where’s that? I don’t think I know anymore.”

“It’s the same place it’s always been, Mr Asano. The place where people are waiting for you.”

The exterior of the aperture changed, the rainbow portal stopped flickering as the seal on the other side was broken. Figures started emerging from it; first the collared cultists, then Jason, who immediately locked down their star seeds again. He wasn’t able to maintain the suppression while passing through the portal. Following them was Colin, who looked like a blood-red copy of Jason and had the last cultist slung over his shoulder, still unconscious. Colin’s bloody straps shot out to wrap around the cultists again and he walked them behind Jason like dogs on a leash.

As he arrived from the astral space, Jason immediately sensed the presence of the expedition. They were arrayed in front of the Builder’s vessels, who had broken down considerably in the short time he’d been gone. Jason arrived as the vessels were using their cold, mechanical harmony to address the wary expedition members.

“...have a proposal for you.”

“Not interested,” the expedition leader, Jeni Kavaloa, told the vessels.

“If Jason Asano dies,” the Builder continued, “my forces shall abandon the Storm Kingdom, never to return. The underwater city will depart. Everyone and everything that serves me will either leave or destroy itself outright. All it will cost you is one silver-rank head. It must be the silver-rankers amongst you who take it, however. The gold-ranker cannot intervene herself.”

The words arrested Jason’s attention and he stopped inside the mouth of the cave. How many times had he been thrown under the bus by someone in power that was ostensibly an ally? Lucian Lamprey of the Magic Society. Elspeth Arella of the Adventure Society. The Network more than anyone. They had turned on him over and over, with the gall to ask for things in between, passing the blame onto rogue elements and hostile factions. Jason didn’t think he could be surprised anymore, only to be proven immediately wrong.

“Stick it up your ass,” the guild team leader, Korinne, yelled. “Asano might be an asshole that takes himself way too seriously, but he's our asshole, and we don't turn on our own assholes.”

Even with the Builder's vessels arrayed right in front of them, the expedition members all turned to look at her.

“Shut up,” she barked defensively. “I'm not good at speeches, alright?”

The Builder ignored her.

“What say you, gold-ranker?” the vessels asked. “You are the foremost representative of the Adventure Society here and command these silver-rankers. You do not even need to spill the blood on your own hands. How many lives can be spared in return for one silver-rank head? Are you willing to pay the blood price of war when I offer you peace?”

“We're not handing anyone over to you,” Jeni said.

“And what of you, Princesses? The monster surge will be long and when it is gone, and I with it, a new storm will come. Will your kingdom be rested and ready to weather it or battered and tired when the time comes to face it?”

Vesper stepped forward, panning her gaze across the row of crumbling vessels.

“If having Asano dead is worth more to you than our entire kingdom,” she declared, “then the most important thing our kingdom can do is make sure he stays alive.”

“That may be harder than you think,” the vessels announced. “You may know that Asano has come back from the dead more than once. What he has hidden is that he cannot do it anymore. Until he reaches gold-rank, no power in the cosmos can revive him again.”

Taking the last word, the vessels died as the power inside them vanished and they collapsed to the ground. Jason left the cave with an unfamiliar sense of gratitude to the members of the expedition. He walked through the still-fighting constructs and abominations, those he controlled pushing those he didn't out of his path to open the way.

The expedition watched Jason and his entourage of bound cultists pass through the still-fighting Builder minions. Jason looked at the dead vessels as he walked past them. Because they hadn't been properly prepared as vessels, they had collapsed entirely into piles of dry dirt. At least it meant they were too broken to revive as magic-sucking ghouls, the way vessels had in the past.

Jeni looked at Asano, whose aura was now a closed book to her. She hoped that it was because he had gotten a handle of the madness that had been bubbling out of him

and not just that he'd gotten better at hiding it. Whatever he had been up to, the look of restrained anger on his face since she had met him had been replaced with a sunken weariness.

"Mr Asano, you and I need to have a discussion."

Jason nodded.

"I don't make a very good subordinate," he acknowledged. "It's not a new failing."

"When you chose to join this expedition, there was an expectation that you would follow directions."

Jason looked from Jeni to Vesper and then back to Jeni.

"I apologise for that. In my defence, I was following directions."

Jeni took her turn looking to Vesper, then back to Jason.

"Politics," she said, making a dirty word of it.

"Tell me about it," Jason sympathised. "Silent and brooding was what you said, wasn't it, Vesper? Oh, and Zara, if you're still looking to get married, we'll have to talk about that later. I shut down the sealing ritual on the other side of the aperture but there's still plenty of bad guys in there and we should get going before they close it off again."

Jason turned and wandered back in the direction of the cave.

"Okay," Korinne said. "Who was that guy and what happened to the other guy?"

"Same guy," Vesper said happily as she set off after Jason. "He just put the mask back on."

Chapter 511

I Don't Think You're Angry

"I still say we should have fished whatever that thing was out of that fire lake," one of the guild team members said.

"We weren't there to kill monsters," said Korinne, the team leader. "We were there to stop the Builder cult from prying the astral space off the side of our world and blasting this whole region apart in the process."

The expedition had just emerged from the astral space and the expedition leader, Jeni, was setting up a device that would seal the astral space aperture. She had roped Jason, who was an astral magic specialist, into helping.

"If the Builder sends more people, this will only slow them down, not stop them," Jason assessed.

"We can't permanently assign a protective detail with everything else going on," Jeni explained. "We don't have the people. There are scout patrols that check on the astral space apertures, but this is the first line of defence. As you said, it will slow them down if they come back, plus send out a signal if it gets interfered with. It will buy us time to formulate a response."

They finished up and the expedition got ready to move out. The prisoners had been implanted with rune-covered spiked rods, buried in the flesh of their arms, legs and torso. The rods had a similar suppressive effect on star seeds as Jason's abilities, preventing self-detonation.

"They gave me the rods, but we weren't anticipating prisoners," Jeni said, looking at them. "Normally it's hard to catch them before they self detonate, so you only get prisoners when you plan the operation around it."

Four of the five prisoners were sitting on the ground in a cluster, fearful eyes locked on Jason. The last was still unconscious from what Jason had done to him.

"Want me to transport them?" Jason asked.

"If you have something that will work," Jeni said.

"Shade, what have you got?"

Darkness spilled out of Jason's shadow and took the form of a giant black beetle, the size of a bread van. Along its sides were thin, vertical gaps in the chitinous exterior, revealing the insect's interior to be mostly hollow. The hard, interior shell made for a secure space with room for half-a-dozen people at a squeeze. The top and bottom halves

of almost the entire carapace opened up like a set of enormous jaws, make a gap through which the prisoners could be shoved.

“Tartarian beetle,” Jeni said, moving around the beetle as she looked it over. “They capture prey and carry it around with them, keeping it alive for days before eating it. Never seen a black one before.”

“That does not look comfortable,” Jason said. “Will it do?”

“I can live with not comfortable. Is it going to eat them?”

“I don’t know. Shade, are you going to eat them?”

“Mr Asano, I shall refrain from dignifying that with a response.”

Jason and Jeni loaded the prisoners into the maw of the beetle, which was oddly like pushing them into the back of a van. Jason reflected that it was a mundane feeling for such a bizarre experience as shoving a bunch of people into a giant insect. While they were doing that, the rest of the group continued to talk amongst themselves, with the self-confident guild team being the loudest.

“It wasn’t much of a force,” team scout Rosa said. “They didn’t even have a gold ranker.”

“This is a minor astral space, which is why it’s in a cave in the middle of the jungle,” said the team leader, Korinne. “If there was anything worth harvesting out of it, there’d be a village here and we wouldn’t have to make our own road. If it wouldn’t be so destructive, they’d probably let the Builder have the damn thing. It’s probably not worth much more to him than to us.”

“You think that was really the Builder talking through those creepy people?” Rosa asked.

“I don’t see why not,” Korinne told her. “Gods show up in worship squares every day, and he’s some kind of weird god, right?”

“No way that was the real thing. Probably some local cult leader using a weird power to speak through his troops. He just claimed to be the Builder to impress us. That deal he offered was a steaming pile.”

“I don’t know. You felt that aura, right? That was divine.”

“It wasn’t divine,” Orin said, which drew the group’s attention. As with most people who spoke rarely, people listened when he did.

“They were silver and bronze-rank auras,” Orin said. “The power didn’t change. They just had something inside them that made them feel like that. Asano has it too, but nowhere near as much.”

“You got a good look at Asano’s aura?” Korinne asked.

The others had only sensed Jason's aura unleashed in the midst of battle when there had been many other auras overlapping. He also hadn't pushed it out with the oppressive strength he was capable of, blending it in so that he could leave the fight unnoticed.

"He showed it to me so I'd know to not make trouble," Orin said.

"You think that's how he makes those things fight each other? He's got some Builder in him?"

"It wasn't Builder in him," Orin said. "Not alien like those people. It was gods. I've seen it before. When gods touch your soul, they leave a mark."

The group all looked to Asano, shoving people into a giant insect.

"Who is that guy?" Korrine said, voicing the question they were all thinking.

The two princesses, meanwhile, were talking within a privacy screen as they stood side by side. Zara's eyes were on Jason while Vesper was watching the guild team.

"This couldn't have gone better," she said, rubbing her hands together. "The Builder showing up in person? Kind of, at least. I'm not clear on how Asano got those things fighting one another or got into that astral space, which means no one else is, either. Plus, that new, dark side to him? Yes, please."

"I don't think this is as good an outcome as you seem to think," Zara told her.

"This has gone beyond my most optimistic expectations for this expedition. Now you just have to get him to talk to you before we get back. Just make sure people see you and that you use a privacy screen. Keep it mysterious; we want people wondering."

"Aunt Vesper, it's clear that he's not in a good place right now."

"It's good for me."

"Aunt Vesper," Zara admonished.

"Just look at the way the expedition is grouped. The guild members over there, us here, unaffiliated off to the side. Asano should be with them, but he's not. He's with the gold-ranker, talking like an equal. Even if people don't think about it, they notice it. It places him within a hierarchy of importance in their minds without them even realising."

"I think Asano might be volatile."

"Volatile is working out."

"Aunt Vesper..."

"Fine. It's not like I was serious about having him murdered."

"About having him *what*?"

"Look, if you want to listen to him talk about his feelings or whatever, that's your business. Just do it behind a privacy screen, as I said. Remember why we're here."

"I know why I'm here," Zara said. "I'm still not sure why you are."

"I needed to keep an eye on things."

"Liara said it was because Trenchant Moore teased you."

"Liara has a big mouth."

As the group pulled out their various means of transport, Jason looked at the pathway the expedition had opened up through the jungle. It was a trail of destruction leading off into the distance.

"I assume that was you," he said to Jeni.

"One of my expedition subordinates went off against orders to provoke the enemy, so I didn't want to tarry."

Jason winced.

"Sorry about that. I'm kind of working through some stuff."

"You'll forgive me if I try to avoid working with you again. Whether it's grim murder mode or whatever cheerful front you're putting up now, you're neither honest nor stable."

"That seems a little harsh."

"Harsh? Do you think killing a lot of enemies by yourself gets you anything? I could let the guild team loose like a dog in a butcher shop and they'd tear through anything you found here. All you mean to me are questions you won't answer, orders you won't follow and running off alone to mess up the group's plans. Do you think my assessment of your performance on this contract will be anything but scathing? I was specifically asked to assess you for potential promotion to two stars, but I'll be arguing against it in the strongest possible terms."

Jason nodded.

"That's fair," he said. "Star rating is based on judgement, and even I don't trust mine right now."

Jeni gave him a concerned look.

"I don't know what you have going on Asano, but go to the church of the Healer. Get some help."

An ice cloud appeared at Jeni's feet and she headed off. Jason took another look at the path of destruction, which was quite thorough.

"I reckon a regular skimmer could manage that. What do you think, Shade?"

"I could manage a small airship, rather than the group needing to rendezvous with one."

"I think we've shown quite enough of the rabbits in our hat for one day," Jason said. "Let's stick with a skimmer."

Shade took the form of a skimmer, parked next to the giant beetle, while Jason walked over to the princesses. The rest of the expedition pretended they weren't watching. Vesper was on her Sapphire heidel, while Zara was standing on what looked like a miniature hurricane.

"Give you a ride, Princess?" Jason asked Zara. "It's past time you and I had a little talk."

"She'd love to," Vesper said, setting off on her construct creature steed.

The small storm at Zara's feet dissipated and she followed Jason to the skimmer. It was a heavy skimmer with comfortable seating for four, much like he had used for most of his delivery contract. He opened the side door and got in the back, Zara doing the same to sit next to him. Jason pulled the privacy screen pin from his inventory and pinned it to his chest before tapping it to activate.

The expedition was taking off, following Jeni. The skimmer moved forward smoothly on its own as Jason and Zara sat in silence, unsure of what to say.

"When you came stumbling into my tent, those years ago," Zara said finally, "I never imagined we'd end up here."

Jason turned to look at her. Even at iron-rank, she'd been as stunningly beautiful as anyone he'd ever seen. It had driven him to flirt with her at the time, but that inclination was dead.

"I was going to haul off on you," he said. "I was going to tell you all about why I'm running around so angry."

"I don't think you're angry, Mr Asano. I don't see rage when I look at you. I see a tiredness that will take more than rest to recover from."

Jason looked away from the princess.

"You're very different," he said wearily.

"You too. I am sorry for getting you involved in my mess."

"There's no changing it now. All we can do is move forward".

"You must hate me."

"I don't hate you, Princess. I understand knowing that you'll have to shake the tree if you want anything to fall out. I've made those choices, willing to pay the price, only for the people around me to do the paying."

Zara nodded.

"Learn faster than I did, Princess. Shade, stop the skimmer."

The skimmer slowed to a halt.

“You have something that you need to do,” Jason said, then tapped his pin to drop the privacy shield. She got out of the skimmer and turned to look at him.

“This isn’t three years ago, Asano,” she said coldly, “and this isn’t some provincial backwater on the far side of the globe. I have responsibilities as a member of the Rimaros family and I won’t let you get in the way of that.”

Her travel cloud appeared at her feet and she took off after the still-moving expedition.

“Let’s get going, Shade.”

Chapter 512

Staying with Friends

Autumn Leal was tired. In the course of what she had thought was an ordinary delivery run, she was ambushed by a team of Purity loyalists. Outnumbered and outmatched, she had thought she was done for until the guild team she hadn't known were trailing her in stealth appeared. They captured and took away the loyalists that survived the resulting ambush, leaving Autumn to complete her supply contract.

She didn't like being bait, but she did like coming home alive, so she called the whole thing even, completed her deliveries and returned to the airship for the trip back. The airship was diverted slightly to pick up an expedition of adventurers operating in the wilderness, who proved to be an unusual bunch. There was a guild team, some unaffiliated adventurers and prisoners who turned out to be some of the Builder cultists that people had been talking about for so long. The magic rods sticking out of their flesh seemed to be triggering strange aura reaction, making them seem alien and bizarre.

More unusual still, at least to her, was the member of the group she recognised. The final trio of the expedition's membership was made up of Jason Asano, along with two women with the iconic blue hair of the Rimaros family. They were talking inside a privacy screen when Jason spotted her and left the screen to approach her across the deck.

"G'day," he said to her, his words accompanied by a smile that looked as weary as she felt. "Another delivery contract?"

"Yes," she said warily, nodding in the direction of the blue-haired women. "Are they...?"

"Yeah."

The skyship Jason was riding in was an unusual design. It looked like an ordinary ship suspended from three hot air balloons by huge brass chains, except that the balloons were massive, pale blue crystals. Looking for some solitude, Jason slipped over the side and under the ship, conjuring his cloak to keep him aloft. A shadow arm emerged from his back to grip the keel of the ship, forming a tether that pulled Jason along as he watched the landscape pass below.

"Look at this," he said happily. "This is how it's meant to be. Magic and wonders."

Shade emerged from Jason's shadowy cloak to float alongside Jason.

“Loath as I am to interrupt your moment of peace, Mr Asano, Miss Hurin has requested to speak with you. Again. She is becoming increasingly concerned at my repeated refusals. I normally wouldn’t bring it up, but it is Miss Hurin.”

“Quite right,” Jason said.

As much as he was enjoying drifting through the air, he owed Farrah too much to leave her hanging any longer. He’d already brushed her off too many times during his recent emo rampage. He closed his eyes, felt for the connection to Shade and expanded his senses. He saw through the body Shade had left in the cloud house, where Farrah was pacing back and forth in agitation.

“I’m fine,” Jason said through the familiar.

“Fine nothing,” she said, wheeling on Shade. “I’d reach through Shade and choke you if I could. What were you thinking, running off in that frame of mind?”

“It wasn’t the best choice,” Jason acknowledged. “At least that’s on-brand for me.”

“You think cracking jokes will make me forget that you’re one self-impressed aristocrat away from murdering someone that will get you in real trouble?”

“It’s alright, Farrah. Shade pulled me back from the precipice.”

“The precipice of what?”

“Maybe we can talk about this when I’m not hanging from the underside of a skyship.”

“Why are you doing that?”

“Why isn’t everyone? It’s awesome. I just... I needed something fun, Farrah. Something simple and joyous. It’s easy to forget that’s a thing, you know?”

In the cloud house, Farrah dropped into a chair as if the rage propping her up had just run out, leaving only tiredness and concern.

“Jason, I don’t like you being out there alone. Not when you’re running the ragged edge.”

“I’m not alone. And these Rimaros people aren’t so bad, as it turns out. I mean, the royal family dragging me into their mess was a dick move, but they did think I wasn’t around to get hurt. They might have their own agendas, but they seem pretty decent. It’s a little sad that came as a surprise.”

“Are you at least on the way back?”

“Yeah, but I’m not going to portal.”

Farrah nodded.

“You don’t break up the expedition until the contract is done,” she said. “During the monster surge, that means when everyone is home safe.”

The airship descended through the skies of Rimaros. As it headed for the sky dock towers on the island of Livaros, they entered a rapidly increasing level of air traffic. One vehicle stood out, both for its design and the fact that it was heading for the royal sky island and not Livaros.

“Is that a flying cottage?” Zara asked.

A rustic garden cottage, complete with garden, was moving through the air within a shimmering orb. Jason took his eyes from the orb to peer at Vesper’s feet. Vesper noticed his gaze.

“What are you looking at?” she asked.

“I was just wondering if you had ruby slippers.”

“Why?”

“Do you?”

“No.”

Jason pointed up at the cottage.

“You should be careful it doesn’t fall on you anyway. I’ve seen that happen before.”

“You’ve seen that vessel before?” Zara asked.

“Not in person, but there’s a famous story about something similar where I come from. If I recall correctly, isn’t the main road connecting the towns on Arnote made of yellow bricks?”

“What in the world are you talking about?” Vesper asked.

Soramir and Liara were waiting on a landing platform on top of the royal palace. Trenchant Moore was standing silently behind them.

“Do not speak unless addressed directly,” Soramir instructed Liara. “She’s not known for being tolerant of mortals. When I bow, you don’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re a Rimaros. Never bow unless you know exactly why you’re doing it. You can bow, Commander Moore.”

“As you will it, Ancestral Majesty.”

Soramir's behaviour gave Liara far more effective warning than his words. For her entire life he had been a legend; an unseen figure representing the pinnacle of power and authority. He had been far more approachable in his sensibilities than she had expected on finally meeting him, but still radiated power that placed him second in her mind only to the gods. To see him almost nervous was an unsettling revelation.

The cottage orb paused at the invisible magic barrier, where even the most prestigious visitors went through rigorous checks. The diamond-rank Zila Rimaros oversaw the checks, going into the cottage for a time before emerging and flying off. The vehicle moved through the magical barrier and floated down to settle on the platform, the orb vanishing to leave a cottage garden incongruously sitting on the roof of the royal palace. The door opened and a woman emerged.

She was a celestine with ruby hair and alabaster skin; a fiery contrast to the cool, sapphire blue of the three Rimaros royals. She wore a white summer dress with embellishments of yellow and orange. The dress swayed gently as she made her way down the path to stand before the trio, greeting them with a slight nod. Soramir responded with a bow as Trenchant Moore behind him echoed the gesture.

“First Sister, we are honoured by your visit,” Soramir said in greeting.

“I have passed the position of First Sister along,” Dawn said.

“My apologies, Hierophant.”

“I see that you are not unschooled in the disposition of the wider cosmos.”

“Yes, Hierophant. I have spent some time travelling beyond my world. I have only returned in these times of trouble. I must thank you for accepting my request and visiting us. I am in your debt, both for bringing your knowledge and grace to our kingdom and for accepting my request to bring certain people with you.”

“Actually, Lord Rimaros, there was a problem with your request.”

Liara felt Soramir go tense next to her.

“Problem, Hierophant?”

A slight smile teased the corner of Dawn’s lips.

“The list of names you wished me to bring along was incomplete. A failure of communication, perhaps. I took it upon myself to add the appropriate names and bring them with me.”

Soramir relaxed.

“Thank you for correcting my oversight, Hierophant. I am in your debt over again. We have prepared accommodations for you, or will you perhaps be staying with friends?”

“Your accommodations will no doubt be sufficient to my needs,” Dawn said.

“Then please come with me. My descendent, Liara, and the highly capable Commander Moore will see to the disposition of the people you have brought with you.”

Dawn turned to look at the cottage and eleven people emerged, looking around. A half-dozen were silver rank, along with four bronze-rankers and one gold. Most were human but there was a leonid, an elf and a celestine amongst them. There were also two

outworlders, both bronze-rank. One had clearly been a human originally, and while the other one was as well, in poor lighting he could be confused for a leonid or even a life-like golem. She had never seen a human standing next to a leonid without being dwarfed before.

Soramir's attention was drawn to the sword the leonid was carrying loosely by the scabbard. The scabbard was suppressing the aura within, but his powerful senses saw through it. The aura was identical to that of Jason Asano, to the point of Soramir almost felt like Asano was standing in front of him. Part of that was the sword had a profound soul bond to its owner, and part was the nature of Asano himself. Soramir knew what a gestalt being was and that this nature was responsible for Asano's aura feeling almost tangible. His soul was not separate from his physical being, giving a substantive feeling to the projection of that soul, his aura.

Dawn followed Soramir's gaze and reached out to touch the pommel of the weapon. It disappeared from his senses as completely as if it had been teleported away. Soramir recognised that it was not any kind of essence ability that hid it but pure aura manipulation. He wondered if Dawn had been responsible for Jason's aura control, which was as formidable for his rank as his aura's strength. He was not fool enough to ask the question, however.

Once the people had walked off the cottage garden and onto the large landing pad, the cottage floated into the air. The globe once more appeared around it as the cottage rapidly shrank. Once it was small enough to fly into Dawn's hand, she set it at the point where her dress cinched at the waist, the globe hanging like an ornament despite not being attached to anything.

Soramir led Dawn away, leaving the gaggle of people to Liara and Trenchant. Trenchant moved up to stand beside Liara as one of the group stepped forward. To the surprise of Liara and Trenchant, it was not the gold-ranker, who stayed at the back, but one of the silvers. He was a large human with broad shoulders, olive complexion and dark hair. He bowed to a carefully measured depth to each of the gold-rankers, demonstrating his etiquette training.

"My name is Humphrey Geller, of Greenstone."

"Liara Rimaros. This is Commander Trenchant Moore of the royal guard."

"Greetings, your highness. Commander. On behalf of my companions, I thank you for your hospitality."

"That's a princess? This day's turning out pretty sweet."

"Taika! You're making Humphrey look bad."

"Sorry, Neil. Sorry Princess, bro. It's nice to meet you all."

The man-mountain's voice was friendly and surprisingly high-pitched. The celestine and another silver rank woman snorted out laughter while Humphrey took on a long-suffering expression.

"Lindy!"

"Clive, he called her Princess bro. How are you not laughing?"

"Time and place, Belinda," Clive said.

"Sophie's laughing too," Belinda pointed out.

"I don't think Clive's stupid enough to tell her off," Gary said. "She's too scary."

"That's sweet of you to say, Gary," Sophie told him, putting a hand on his forearm.

"I apologise for my companions, your highness," Humphrey said. "They're working adventurers and spent little time in high society."

"At least we won't need to double-check who they are," Trenchant said. "They're very obviously the companions of Jason Asano."

The auras of the group had been a mix of curiosity, wonder, eagerness, trepidation and nervousness. As soon as Jason Asano's name passed Trenchant's lips, that changed. Six auras locked onto Trenchant like snipers. The others reacted, but the six that were now raptor-focused on Trenchant were suddenly so sharp and alert that Liara felt her hackles rise. Even though she outranked them all and the attention wasn't directed at her, it was pointed enough that she was impressed at Trenchant's lack of reaction.

Of the visitors, only the unreadable gold ranker at the back maintained her equanimity at the mention of Asano. She stepped forward to defuse the situation.

"We are all acquaintances of Mr Asano," she said, with a short bow. "Arabelle Remore, of Vitesse. While we don't wish to be rude, we have travelled far to meet friends long thought lost to us. We do not wish to dismiss your hospitality but we would like to see Jason Asano and Farrah Hurin at the earliest opportunity. My son should be with them."

"Jason Asano is currently on a contract," Liara said. "It was moved up unexpectedly due to Builder activity, so he is expected back shortly. As far as I know, Miss Hurin and Mr Remore should be at their shared residence on Arnote, one of the main islands of Rimaros."

"If you will follow me," Trenchant Moore said, "I will take you there directly."

Chapter 513

Meanwhile, Two Weeks Ago in Vitesse...

Jason was disembarking from the airship that had just returned his expedition to Rimaros. He was moving with the group across the open-sided walkway stretching from the docking cradle to the port tower when he froze on the spot.

“Mr Asano?” asked the expedition leader, Jeni Kavaloa.

“We’re done, right?” Jason asked. “Expedition over?”

“The contract is complete, Mr Asano. I’ll be handing in the report but you can get a copy of...”

She stopped bothering when Jason leapt from the side of the walkway without another word. She shook her head.

“You’re not meant to do that.”

Unbeknownst to Jason, at the moment he had been leaving the airship, his friends had been leaving the royal sky island’s magic barrier under the escort of Trenchant Moore. As they left the island’s magical defences, which easily blocked his silver-rank powers, their presence was brought to his attention.

-
- Contact [Humphrey Geller] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Sophie Wexler] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Belinda Callahan] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Gareth Xandier] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [William Hurin] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Amelia Hurin] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Arabelle Remore] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Travis Noble] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Taika Williams] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Neil Davone] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Clive Standish] has entered communication range.
-

As he dropped through the air, Jason conjured his cloak to help him swerve around the walkways connected to ships docked further down the tower.

“Where are they?” Jason asked. “I can’t map their location without spreading my aura over the whole damn city, and I’d get into all sorts of trouble for projecting like that. Should I do it anyway?”

“Perhaps before doing anything drastic,” Shade suggested, “you could try asking them where they are.”

Jason landed at ground level, getting disapproving frowns from the people around him at the base of the busy docking tower.

“Asking them. That makes sense. I can do that because it’s a thing I can do.”

“I recommend you pause and take a breath, Mr Asano.”

“I don’t need to breathe, Shade.”

“Perhaps you should do it anyway.”

Unaware of Jason's proximity, his team and the others with them were moving down through a column of water in a boat shrouded by a force bubble. For the earthlings, Taika and Travis, the iconic local feature was a wonder. Even for those used to other great cities, like Vitesse, it was an impressive feat of magical engineering.

Sophie felt Humphrey go stiff at her side and he started talking to himself.

“Where are you?” he said.

The others noticed Humphrey acting strangely and listened to what was clearly one side of a conversation. It was something they all recognised but hadn’t seen in some time.

“With a man named Trenchant Moore,” Humphrey said. “Yes, Trenchant Moore. What? I don’t know.”

Humphrey turned to look Trenchant up and down.

“I guess he is,” Humphrey continued. “I suppose he has very piercing eyes. I don’t see why that... he’s taking us to Arnote. I think we’re switching to a larger boat on the big island.”

Humphrey turned to look at Trenchant again.

“Where are we transferring to the other boat?” he asked him.

“Essen Port,” Trenchant said. “A private terminal for a ferry called the *Blue Burden*.”

Humphrey repeated the details.

"How am I supposed to know that? Yes, it does kind of sound like the ferry is unhappy about carrying people about. What? No, it’s probably not a sentient boat. Even it is some kind of animated construct, I don’t think it will have feelings... what’s a danger boat? Tick, as in the parasite?"

Jason’s team were laughing at the very familiar expression on Humphrey’s face, and the very confused one on Trenchant’s.

"Look, are you going to meet us at the ferry terminal or not? Okay, thank you."

Humphrey slumped his shoulders, looking exhausted.

“And Jason... it’s good to hear your voice, Jason. That’s nice of you to say, but please don’t call me Hump.”

The only portal destination near the port was restricted to reduced port traffic congestion and Jason didn't have a permit. Nor did he have a permit for personal flight in the city. As for ground navigation via mount or vehicle, it would be slower than he wanted through the bustling streets.

Instead, Jason turned to his old techniques for travelling quickly on foot. Compared to the delta where he first developed them, the city was easier terrain, and Jason's abilities were so much stronger than when he was an iron-rank. His reflexes, perception and straight-line speed were all improved, as was his control over his abilities.

The techniques were a holistic combination of movement skills taken from the Order of the Reaper, precisely-toggled weight reduction and jumping through shadows in rapid sequence. It allowed him to navigate obstacles and go largely unnoticed as he raced through the city, a flickering shadow passing through market stalls and alleyways as he followed his map ability in the direction of the port.

Essen was one of the primary ports for traffic between Livaros and Arnote. It was where Jason and Farrah had been reunited with Rufus, and now where they would reunite with the rest of their friends. Jason found the ferry terminal, but the port authority guards would not permit him entry. What they would do was point out the dock where boats coming from the royal sky island usually moored.

Having been contacted by Jason while he was on the move, Rufus and Farrah were ready when Jason opened up a portal to the cloud house for them to come through. While the nearby terminal guards were watching him closely, he was opening a portal to somewhere else and not portalling in blindly, so it was permitted. Farrah was less forgiving than the guards as she marched out of the portal, into Jason space and started jabbing a finger at his face.

"What were you thinking, going off like that?"

She snatched him into a hug.

"If Shade wasn't with you, how stupid a thing would you have done?"

"It was pretty bad," Jason said.

She let him go, hands on his shoulders as she gave his face an interrogating look.

"What are we going to do with you?" she asked. "I wish Rufus' mother was here."

"She's on that boat," Jason said, pointing out at the water behind her.

"Mother came too?" Rufus asked.

Jason, Rufus and Farrah watched as the boat approached. It wasn't much more than an outsized skiff and they could see familiar faces on the deck. Gary's grin was so wide it threatened to split the top of his head right off as we waved. A falcon came darting over

the water from the boat, shooting at Jason like an arrow. Right before impact, it turned into a hairy dog the size of a tiger, bowling him over and crushing him under its weight.

“YAY!” the dog cheered with a child’s voice.

“Stash,” Jason croaked. “You got big.”

“I can get bigger. Want to see?”

“Nope.”

“Stash,” Humphrey admonished as he landed on the dock. “Get off him.”

The dragon wings that had carried Humphrey over the water in pursuit of his enthusiastic familiar vanished as he alighted on the dock.

Stash transformed into a small bird that started flapping around in the air over Jason as Humphrey helped him to his feet. Jason didn’t let go of his hand, pulling the big man into a hug.

“Good to see you, brother.”

“Good to see you alive,” Humphrey said. “We should have known that if anyone was going to treat the laws of life and death as rough guidelines it would be you.”

A portal appeared on the dock, a rainbow circle, edged in floating runes. Gary barrelled out of it and caught Farrah in a huge hug. The big man picked the small woman up entirely, spinning around in his joy.

“You realise that if I didn’t have a strength power,” she told him, laughing as he spun her around, “you’d have just crushed me to death.”

Sophie, Belinda and Clive followed Gary through the portal at a more sedate pace before it ran out of energy and closed. Jason approached them with a grin. He could sense the nervousness in Humphrey and especially Sophie, and the interplay between their auras. He chuckled to himself as he moved up to greet Clive.

There were handshakes and hugs all around as friends once thought gone forever came back together. Jason basked in their welcoming auras, without making a single eighties reference they didn’t understand. The boat arrived at the dock, allowing the rest of the group to disembark. Trenchant Moore brought up the rear, Jason noting how the man’s gaze went straight to Farrah. He couldn’t read the man’s aura and was left wondering why, but had far more important things to attend to.

Neil and Jason faced each other as Neil came off the gangplank.

“I see someone finally taught you how to dress,” Jason said.

“This coming from a guy wearing that,” Neil said, gesturing at Jason’s floral shirt and shorts. “I see you’ve been enjoying your time in the tropics. Meanwhile, two weeks ago in

Vitesse, we were working our butts off to get you back when a pile of your trouble gets dumped right on our heads.”

The hostile expression of the two men cracked and they laughed, shaking hands warmly. Jason then looked to his side.

“Speaking of trouble, what are you doing here, Travis?”

“That’s kind of a long story, Mr Asano.”

“You were sucked into a magic thing and fell out here?” Jason guessed.

“I guess it’s not that long,” Travis conceded.

“And how many times do I have to tell you to call me Jason?”

“Sorry, Mr Asano.”

Jason chuckled as he turned to Taika, sharing a grin with the big Māori.

“I got you here after all,” Jason said.

“It’s pretty crazy, bro. I’m kind of freaking out.”

“You and me both,” Jason said, throwing a look to Arabelle and exchanging a nod of greeting.

“I think we should stop obstructing the dock and make our way onto the ferry,” Trenchant suggested.

“When’s it scheduled to leave?” Jason asked.

“It belongs to the royal family,” Trenchant said. “I’m under direction from Princess Liara to bring them to your abode on Arnote.”

“Your boss was dragging his feet,” Jason said. “What changed?”

Trenchant’s gaze flicked briefly back to Farrah before returning to Jason.

“You have loyal friends, Mr Asano.”

Argy was overseeing the loading of a crate of the argy fruit for which he was nicknamed when something unusual appeared in front of him.

➤ You have received a voice chat request from [Jason Asano]. Accept Y/N?

“Uh... okay?”

“Argy,” Jason’s voice came directly into Argy’s head. “I’ve got friends in town and I’m looking to chuck a barbie. Help a bloke out with sourcing some food?”

“No problems, fella,” Argy said.

“Thanks, mate. I’ll have Shade swing by with some funding. It’s going to be an intimate affair, so maybe don’t invite the entire town this time? Try and keep it below a third?”

“I’ll do what I can,” Argy said, “but you know how people get to talking. You going to need drinks?”

“I think we might, yeah.”

Trenchant Moore escorted the group all the way to the cloud house before departing. He left quickly, finding something disconcerting yet unplaceable about the cloud construct, which was wholly impenetrable to his senses. Inside, an impromptu party started as the group started drinking and telling stories about all that had happened in their time apart.

Food and barbecues started to arrive and they moved outside as Jason started organising things. He was starting to get good at managing large-scale entertainment events, at least his particular brand of them.

After the celebratory gathering, the group split off for more intimate reunions over the course of the evening. Farrah and her parents, Rufus and his mother. Rufus, Gary and Farrah, reunited for the first time since the disastrous expedition that claimed the lives of many adventurers alongside her. Clive was chomping at the bit to ask Jason about every single aspect of every single thing that happened in his time away.

“Clive,” Jason said with a laugh as he set out tubs of marinade on the table. “We’ll have plenty of time to get to that. Just put in these meat strips, like I showed you. I’ll have to magic them up a bit since I can’t leave them in as long as I’d like.”

Jason took the time to speak with everyone at some point during the night’s revelry. Farrah’s parents were effusive in their gratitude for bringing their daughter home to them. Jason teased Clive mercilessly with hints of the astral magic he’d been involved with and traded good-natured barbs with Neil. Taika and Travis assured Jason that his family were safe and sound, although Jason had them save the full story for later.

It was late in the evening when Jason found himself on a balcony on the cloud house, overlooking his friends and neighbours as they enjoyed a night of not worrying about the monster surge. Not everyone had that chance. He’d seen for himself the conditions of people boxed into fortress towns like cattle, to the point of having the cattle penned right alongside them. The local equivalent of the cow was an awkward-looking, hexapedal lizard, which Jason found significantly less adorable, but equally delicious.

Jason felt the need to remind himself that for all the things piled on him, he had the power, money and resources to do something about it. For all his struggles, the world was

full of powerless people who would have traded places with him in an instant, given the chance. Now that he had his family back around him, it was time to stop worrying about his own problems so much and start thinking about the people who needed help more than he did.

“Which is easier said than done,” he murmured to himself.

Belinda came out of the house and joined him in leaning against the rail.

“Brooding and talking to yourself,” she said. “I think Sophie might have dodged an arrow with you.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “She probably did. So, her and Humphrey.”

“Yep. Sorry you gave up your chance?”

“No. She was looking for something in me she’ll actually find in him. Plus, he’s reliable. I think we both know I’m bit of a flake. She’s a smart woman, Humphrey’s mother.”

“What’s she got to do with anything?”

“You have to have realised he’s a mum’s boy by now. If she doesn’t approve, it doesn’t matter if Humphrey wants it. If she does approve, I think it still doesn’t matter if he wants it.”

“So, no hard feelings about Soph?”

"I had someone, while I was away. She helped me a lot. Helped me find Farrah. All I brought her in return was death. If I ever just become some adventurer instead of the eye of a giant crap-storm, maybe I'll look for someone new. I wouldn't inflict me on anyone at the moment. I'm kind of a mess right now."

“Except us.”

“No, you’re stuck with me,” Jason said. “I’m not letting you all get away from me again.”

Chapter 514

Hegemon's Will

As Belinda left Jason on the balcony of the cloud house, Humphrey came out to take her place, leaning against the railing next to Jason. Jason flashed him a smile before turning his gaze back out over the lagoon, shimmering with the light of twin moons.

"We've come a long way from that waiting room in Greenstone where we met," Humphrey said. "But I suppose you'd already been further to get that far."

"That was quite a week for me. I didn't even give notice at work. Also, cannibals."

"Jason what you did..."

"Bad thing I did or good thing I did? You'll have to narrow it down. I'm very heroic, but also kind of a disaster."

"You're not a disaster, Jason."

"I did set off the monster surge."

"Your friend Dawn told us you would. We made Clive promise not to pester you about it until at least the second day."

Jason snorted a laugh

"He must have had spasms after meeting Dawn."

"I didn't take him long to overcome the glow of diamond-rank and start interrogating her, no. She was surprisingly patient with him."

"She spent a year running around with me, so she's had the practice."

"We all want to hear about it. That recording crystal you sent left us with a lot of questions and not a lot of answers."

"You won't be able to get rid of me now," Jason said. "We'll have plenty of time for that."

"Good. Jason, by that thing you did, I meant taking the Builder's vessel with you off that tower. Did you know you would come back from that?"

"Didn't have a clue. How heroic was that? You should tell people about it all the time, by which I mean attractive women. Just maybe not princesses, even though, you know... damn. Have you seen the princesses they have here? I bet you've seen more princesses than me, but these ones seem frustratingly gorgeous."

Humphrey shook his head, having quickly built up his Jason tolerance again.

"Jason, what you did—"

"Is exactly what you would have done, so shut your handsome mouth right there, clobber. I know what I did, so stick to telling the ladies, yeah? Now that you're off the market, I might actually get a look in."

Humphrey went stiff.

"Belinda told you."

"Mate, I didn't need her to tell me. You and Sophie may not have been holding hands, but your auras were. The old senses are a lot sharper than they were back when we last met."

"It's new."

"No it's not," Jason said. "Let me guess: You two were circling each other for a while, but your dead, rakishly-charming friend was hanging over you like a ghost. Then hey, he's suddenly alive and you realise you don't want her getting confused because she used to have a thing for him, which finally got you to sack up."

"That's... not inaccurate."

Jason laughed.

"Who pushed you? Lindy or your mum?"

"Lindy," Humphrey grumbled.

Jason laughed again.

"Mate, you don't have to worry about me. Sophie was always looking for you; she just didn't know it. She thought I was a good guy because I'm the one that helped her first."

Jason slapped Humphrey on the back.

"But you're the good guy, Humphrey. The way she grew up, she needs that. And so do I. I've found that I tend to lose my way, left to my own devices. I need someone to keep me on the straight and narrow."

"You are a good man, Jason."

Jason gave him a sad smile.

"Over the next little while, you're going to hear about the things I've done. I made allies, intending from the start to betray and kill them – which I did. Yesterday I almost tore a man's soul out of his body because I was angry and I could. Shade pulled me back from that one."

Humphrey stood up straight, turning to face Jason.

"Jason, are you okay?"

Jason also pushed himself off the railing, giving Humphrey another sad smile.

"No, Humphrey. I'm not. But I will be, now that you're here."

Jason sensed Sophie wandering alone, along the trail leading down the cliff face to the main village. He masked his presence until he drew close, struck by her startling figure. With her delicate grace and the moonlight shining off her silver hair, she was a moon fairy in the night.

"You're too quiet," she said, turning around to face him.

"I've had to be," he said.

"Things go poorly for men who sneak up on me."

"Things have been going poorly for a while."

"Our team could use a stealth guy. If you're nice, we might let you back in."

"I probably won't be nice."

"I'm guessing we'll let you in anyway. Humphrey's a soft touch."

A smile teased at the corners of his lips.

"Is that so?"

She shook her head.

"I knew he'd tell you straight away."

"He didn't have to; I could see it right away. It's sweet."

"Are you making fun of me?"

"No," he said, giving her an honest smile instead of his trademark half-smirk. "I know sincerity isn't one of my many things, but I'm glad for you. At this point, I'll take happiness where I can find it."

He turned to look out over the lagoon and she moved to stand beside him.

"You're not doing so well, are you?" she asked.

"You know what it's like when the bad feels like it's never going to end."

"I do. But it does. I found the team, and now you have too."

Jason nodded.

She gave him a hesitant side glance.

"I... wasn't sure how I'd feel when I saw you," she said.

"And?"

"I was kind of a mess back when we knew each other."

"I'm kind of a mess now."

"I've known him longer than I ever knew you. Been with him every day. Helping people isn't a responsibility to him. He cares about people, genuinely. People he's never met. I never had that in my life, and I want it."

"So you should. I know I do. I'm probably not going to sleep with him, though."

She snorted a laugh.

“You’re still kind of a prick.”

“Yeah,” Jason said with a chuckle. “I kind of am. So, we’ve established I’m a garbage fire; how are you doing.”

“I’m good,” she said. “Great, really. And I wouldn’t be if you hadn’t put me on this path. I won’t forget that.”

“You may recall that I messed things up pretty badly.”

“You helped me when no one else would have even thought about it. Not even Humphrey, which is why he values you so much. I’m not sure if I ever properly thanked you. I’ll always owe you for that.”

“You’ll never owe me for that. Friends don’t count favours.”

“You say that, but your favours are kind of insane. Humphrey was angry at himself for a long time that he wasn’t the one to take the Builder off that tower.”

“Couldn’t he barely stand?”

“You think he takes that into consideration?”

Jason laughed, shaking his head.

“Of course he doesn’t. You know that you two will have obnoxiously good-looking babies.”

She blanched.

“It’s more than a little early to be talking about that.”

“So you say, but are you willing to bet Danielle Geller doesn’t have a timeline sketched out in a notebook somewhere?”

“Oh gods, his mother. She’s like you, except she keeps her ears open instead of her mouth, which is terrifying.”

“She’s probably already making plans for a brood of adorable chocolate babies with silver hair.”

Sophie let out a groan.

Late in the evening, after the barbecue was done, Jason was scrubbing grill plates in the yard. He smiled as someone let him sense her aura.

“It’s starting to feel like I can summon diamond-rankers by cleaning barbecues,” he said, handing the plate to Shade as he turned around. “Thank you for bringing them here.”

Dawn was standing in front of Jason, although her aura was completely invisible to him. She was in her true celestine form, with ruby eyes and matching hair that glimmered like gemstones in the moonlight. It seemed that all celestines looked good under the moon.

"I still don't want to overplay your importance," she told him. "Soramir Rimaros gave me a pretence to bring them here, but I suspect that was the idea when you let my name slip. He certainly does."

"I just wanted the option running around in his head. Not sure what gave him the push to bring you in already."

"No one told you? Farrah marched into the royal palace and gave him a talking to."

"Seriously? Good for her."

"That's the behaviour you want to encourage? Of course, you being a bad influence shouldn't surprise me. I know that from experience."

Jason pointed an accusing finger.

"I knew it! I knew you took the recording crystals with all my songs by Kenny Rogers and the First Edition."

"It was easy enough for you to make more. I was leaving the universe."

"You could have mentioned that in the recording you left me. I almost didn't realise they were missing in time to re-record them before we left as well."

"You wanted me to add a bit about Kenny Rogers to the message where I told you the rules a great astral being has to abide by when trying to kill you?"

"You need to get your priorities in order. I don't care about the Builder; that guy sucks. Kenny Rogers is an icon, and his stuff with First Edition before he went solo? That's the good stuff."

They both looked up at the balcony where Jason's house guests were all watching him argue with the diamond ranker about something they'd never heard of.

"Well, this is ridiculous," Neil said, turning to go back inside. "That didn't take long."

As Neil left, shaking his head, Farrah gave Dawn a casual wave.

"I thought everyone was asleep," Jason mumbled into Gary's chest. "What happened to the guy who wasn't a hugger?"

"I realised that you can't fight destiny," Gary said, letting Jason go.

"That's definitely not true," Jason said. "It's kind of my whole thing."

"Well," Gary said, "Maybe this will help with that."

He took a sword from a dimensional bag and held it out for Jason. The hilt was black with a bone handle and white embellishments. The scabbard was simple black lacquer with a dark metal tip and very minor patterning of white and dark red.

"I had some help with it. The scabbard is new but we incorporated it into the item. Magically, it's a part of the sword."

Jason took a hold of the sword by the scabbard.

- You have acquired the complete [Regalia of the Dark Hegemon]. All set effect bonuses to items within the set are restored.
 - Set Bonus (Item: [Amulet of the Dark Guardian]): For each instance of an affliction applied to an enemy, gain an instance of [Hegemon's Authority].
 - [Hegemon's Authority] (boon, holy, unholy, stacking): All allies within your aura have increased resistance to aura suppression. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Consume instances of this boon to enhance your aura suppression strength.
 - Set Bonus (Item: [Cloud Flask]): Shrouds the wearer in mist. Mist can be controlled through aura manipulation to condense into small cloud constructs. Cloud constructs created in this manner only maintain integrity against attacks lower than the rank of this item; attacks of its rank and above are minimally impeded. Shroud can be withdrawn into the flask.
 - Set Bonus (Item: [Hegemon's Will]): Enemies struck with this weapon are subjected to a mild mana drain effect and are inflicted with [Hegemon's Tribute].
 - [Hegemon's Tribute] (affliction, magic): Anyone affected by Hegemon's tribute is subject to a mild, ongoing mana drain effect by the wielder of [Hegemon's Will] so long as they remain within the wielder's aura. If this affliction is cleansed or the subject dies, a final burst of mana is drained.
-

Because he was holding the scabbard, it was the first item Jason was able to observe.

Item: [Hegemon's Dominion] (silver rank [growth], legendary)

The scabbard to Hegemon's Will, Hegemon's Dominion is the embodiment of hegemonic control, representing the hegemon's mastery of his domain (container, scabbard).

- This item is bound to [Jason Asano] and cannot be used by anyone else. This bond allows the weapon to share the wielder's ability to ignore rank disparity. This item is magically bound to [Hegemon's Will]; they are treated as the same item for all magical effects.
- Effect: Instances of afflictions affecting the wielder are periodically moved to this item, removing their effects from the wielder. This is not a cleansing effect. The rate of transfer is affected by the relative rank of the effects to the wielder. Suppressing the originator of the effect's aura increases the rate of transfer; the wielder being aura suppressed reduces the rate of transfer. If [Hegemon's Will] is sheathed, all afflictions are transferred to the weapon and affect the next enemy struck. Any

effects resisted or subject to immunity are negated and cannot be passed to an alternate target.

➤ Current rank: Silver.

Looking over the growth conditions, the weapon's growth was no longer capped by rank. The materials required for an upgrade, however, were all materials Jason had never heard of and were presumably gold-rank.

"It's going to be fairly rough to upgrade," Gary admitted. "It was a strange crafting process, to be honest. It's almost like the sword knew how it wanted to be reforged."

"That makes sense," Jason said. "Based on a fight I lost recently, this ability on the scabbard is exactly what I needed."

Jason looked up at Gary.

"You're amazing," he said, then grabbed the hilt.

Item: [Hegemon's Will] (silver rank [growth], legendary)

A precious gift, imbued with the soul of its owner and reforged with a renewed sense of purpose. The aid of a grandmaster craftsman in the reforging process has produced a flawless result (weapon, sword).

- This item is bound to [Jason Asano] and cannot be used by anyone else. This bond allows the weapon to share the wielder's ability to ignore rank disparity.
- Effect: You may invoke all effects of a conjured weapon into this blade for the normal mana cost of conjuring the weapon. Only one weapon's effects may be invoked at a time.
- Effect: While invoking a conjured weapon, you may inflict additional damage for an ongoing mana cost. Damage type is based on the invoked weapon and mana cost is based on the nature of the damage. Amount of damage is based on aura strength of the wielder. Damage is increased to the degree to which the enemy attacked has their aura suppressed and decreased by the degree to which the wielder has their aura suppressed.
- Available Invocation: [Ruin, the Blade of Tribulation].
- Ongoing Mana Cost: Low.
- Damage type: Corrosive. Inflicts [Corrosion].
- Available Invocation: [Penitent, the Blade of Sacrifice].
- Ongoing Mana Cost: Moderate.
- Damage type: Disruptive-Force.
- Effect: The wielder may cleanse all holy afflictions inflicted by the abilities and soul-bound items of the wielder from an enemy touched by [Hegemon's Will]. For each

affliction cleansed, the enemy suffers an instance of [Hegemon's Mercy] and the wielder gains an instance of [Benevolent Hegemon].

- Effect (Regalia of the Hegemon): Enemies struck with this weapon are subjected to a mild mana drain effect and are inflicted with [Hegemon's Tribute] and the wielder gains an instance of [Benevolent Hegemon].
- [Corrosion] (affliction, damage-over-time, elemental, stacking): Inflicts corrosive damage, which has increased effectiveness against inorganic substances. Additional instances have increased effect.
- [Hegemon's Mercy] (affliction, holy, stacking): The victim of this effect is subjected to a powerful suppressive force affecting all magical abilities. This affects essence abilities, innate abilities and item abilities. Abilities derived from external transcendent sources are affected more strongly. This affliction drops off rapidly when not within the area of the wielder of [Hegemon's Will]'s aura. Additional instances have increased effect.
- [Benevolent Hegemon] (boon, holy, stacking): The effect strength of allied auras overlapping your aura is increased. This does not affect suppressive strength or resistance to aura suppression. Additional instances have increased effect.
- [Hegemon's Tribute] (affliction, magic): Anyone affected by [Hegemon's Tribute] is subject to a mild, ongoing mana drain effect by the wielder of [Hegemon's Will] so long as they remain within the wielder's aura. If this affliction is cleansed or the subject dies, a final burst of mana is drained.

Jason drew the sword, running his gaze up and down the black blade with stark white sigils in awe. The white sigils on the blade started glowing life-force red.

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- You have invoked the effects of [Ruin, Blade of Tribulation]. All properties of that weapon have been imbued into [Hegemon's Will]. Necrotic damage will be inflicted in addition to physical damage.

The sigils then turned from red to a rich blue.

-
- You have stopped invoking the effects of [Ruin, Blade of Tribulation].
 - You have invoked the effects of [Penitent, the Blade of Sacrifice]. All properties of that weapon have been imbued into [Hegemon's Will]. Disruptive-force damage will be inflicted in addition to physical damage.

"Gary," Jason said reverently. "It's like finding a part of myself I didn't know was missing."

"You brought Farrah back to us," Gary said. "That part I knew was missing."

Chapter 515

A Story About a Magic Trowel

Jason and Farrah sat on the balcony of his cloud house in the morning sun. As Taika and Travis came from inside, chairs made of cloud stuff rose from the floor.

“It’s time for the long version of how you two arrived here,” Jason told them as they sat.

“No worries, bro. It started with that big standing-stone thing you two made on the footy field in that abandoned town. No one was stupid enough to go near it while you were still around, although I’m pretty sure every country with a satellite was pointing it your way. There were also people on the ground watching you from kilometres away.”

“We were aware of them,” Farrah said.

“Things changed when you left,” Travis said, picking up the explanation. “You went through one of Jason’s archways and then what we’re pretty sure was a big dimensional rift opened up. It looked like a portal, except that it covered the whole area of your standing stones, with only the outermost ones containing it.”

“It was stable?” Jason asked.

“Once it popped up, it was solid as a rock, bro.”

“And all the factions got curious,” Jason said.

“They were hesitant at first,” Travis said. “Once they were pretty sure you weren’t coming back out, though, they all swarmed the place like they used to do with Transformation zones.”

“The yanks were first,” Taika said. “They started throwing stuff in to see what happened. Even threw in some people.”

“They didn’t come back out,” Travis added.

“You wouldn’t catch me volunteering for that, bro.”

“And so you shouldn’t,” Farrah said. “If they didn’t go through at the same time as the rest of you, I doubt they survived. Unless they got caught up in whatever brought you here safely, those people are dead. Only someone like Jason could normally survive that passage, and even he had a limited window of viability.”

“Until I complete the bridge,” Jason said, “anything that tries to travel it will get dumped into the deep astral. Farrah and I got here riding the initial backwash from cutting off the magic pipeline to our world and riding that wave back as it triggered the monster surge here.”

“Then how did we survive?” Travis asked.

“We’ll get to that later,” Jason said. “You were talking about the Americans and their early testing?”

“Nothing anyone put in there came back,” Taika said, “so they stopped chucking stuff in and settled in to study it.”

“Earth doesn’t have any astral magic specialists,” Farrah said. “The grasp of magic theory there is quite limited and focused on magitech. They wouldn’t learn much from the rift.”

“Don’t underestimate the scientific method,” Travis said. “It might take years, even decades of careful study, but the potential gains from having access to it could accelerate our understanding of dimensional magic far beyond what it would otherwise reach. I don’t think they were wrong to study it. Knowledge for its own sake is a noble endeavour.”

“I know a goddess who will love you,” Jason said.

“A goddess?” Travis said.

“Oh yeah,” Taika said. “They turn up in person here, right?”

“Yep,” Jason said. “In fact, I’ll take Travis to the temple of Knowledge today. We need to know if she’s going to be wary of you introducing knowledge from our world. She was sketchy about me doing it, but I think now that was mostly an excuse for her to do other things. Plus, you actually know things instead of having just heard of them.”

“You’re talking like there’s no way of going home,” Taika said. “You did. Can’t we?”

“Not interested,” Travis said. “My family cut me off after I helped you steal that nuke and well... I never had a lot of friends.”

“There won’t be another chance to go back for a long time,” Jason said. “I am going to open a path, but it will be years before it’s ready to use. I’m sorry, Taika. I know you didn’t want to leave your family.”

“My mum will probably think I’m dead,” the big man said sadly. “Can’t Dawn take us back? She can move between universes, right?”

“Earth is too fragile for a dimensional vessel to enter without causing damage,” Farrah said. “The Dawn you met on Earth was just a projection, like a living phone call from another dimension.”

“It’s just one little flying cottage,” Taika said. “That won’t break a whole world, will it?”

“The tip of a needle is also very small,” Jason said. “It’s still very bad news for a balloon. Maybe – *maybe* – she can get word back to the families of the people who wound up here. We’ll have to ask her after we get a handle on who arrived here.”

“Which brings us back to the question of what happened to bring you all here,” Farrah said.

“With all the people poking around your big magic thing,” Taika said, “Jason’s grandmother decided to send some people from Clan Asano to check it out.”

“The clan doesn’t have a lot of people with strong magical theory knowledge,” Travis said. “Mostly Hiro and Emi, who were both taught by you, Farrah. Matriarch Yumi wouldn’t let either of them within a thousand kilometres of that place, though. Wouldn’t even let them go back to Australia and kept them in Jason’s cities. That left me, and Taika came along to help keep me safe.”

“I’m not up to facing some of those Network people,” Taika admitted, “but with you two gone, the clan’s silver-rankers were halved with just Akari and her old man left.”

“We weren’t getting too close to the rift or in anyone’s way,” Travis said. “We just wanted a general sense of what the factions were up to.”

“Didn’t matter,” Taika said. “One day, out of nowhere, the thing suddenly expands outwards. Sweeps over the camp. I know there were some gold-rakers I sensed moving out of the way, and I think the silvers that weren’t too close got away as well.”

“But we’re category two,” Travis said. “Taika is fast and maybe could have gotten away, because we were in the outer areas, but he was slowed down carrying me and didn’t get clear.”

“The rift swept over us, and that’s where things get funny,” Taika said. “I don’t really remember stuff after that until I woke up in a crater. Except that I kind of do remember stuff. It’s weird.”

“Like you remember emotions, but not when or why you felt them,” Jason said.

“Yeah, that’s exactly it,” Taika said, pointing.

“That’s because your soul experienced things that your body didn’t,” Jason said. “It’s happened to me enough times that I’ve become familiar.”

“What happened to our bodies?” Travis asked.

“They were annihilated,” Jason said. “You died and came back; welcome to the resurrection club. I’m the president, but it’s largely a ceremonial position.”

Jason went on to explain the concept of outworlders to Travis and Taika. As he did, Clive wandered out from inside, he and Farrah helping clarify things as Jason’s explanation wandered into tangents and confusingly elaborate analogies based around action-adventure television.

“...and that show was going to be called *Viper*, but there was another show coming out called *Viper* that had a Dodge Viper in it, so the car company sued the non-car show and they changed the name to *Cobra*. And that’s kind of how a human turns onto an outworlder.”

“The first thing you need to do,” Clive said, “is ignore everything Jason just said because it was nonsense.”

“That’s good advice in general,” Farrah added.

“Hey…” Jason complained.

“I liked *Viper*,” Taika said.

“Of course you did,” Jason told him. “It was crap *Knight Rider* again.”

“I suppose you preferred *Cobra*,” Taika said. “It didn’t even have a science-fiction car.”

“It had Michael Dudikoff,” Jason said. “He was the *American Ninja*!”

“Bro, that movie sucked.”

“Will you both please stop?” Farrah said. “I hate to break it to you, boys, but all of that stuff was terrible. All of it.”

“Coming from someone who thinks *Beyond Thunderdome* was the best Mad Max movie.”

“It was! Aunty Entity is an iconic character.”

Clive and Travis watched the three arguing and Clive shuffled closer, his cloud chair shifting with him.

“Did this kind of thing happen a lot over there?”

“Yep,” Travis said. “For someone who claims to not like television, Farrah borrowed DVDs from Jason’s dad a lot.”

“What are DVDs?”

Eventually, the conversation got back on track. Clive postulated an early hypothesis of what had triggered the rift expansion on Earth.

“Random dimensional events connecting worlds are a normal, if extremely rare thing,” Clive said. “Because there is a link between your world and ours, though, that frequency is increased. Even so, the right conditions for such an event to move someone from your world to ours are extremely rare. Jason, you were brought here because such an event just so happened to coincide with Landemere Vane trying to summon a clockwork king to this world.”

“That’s what he was doing in that basement?” Jason asked. “No wonder it went wrong. He didn’t have the power to stage that kind of ritual.”

“He had support,” Clive said. “The more we learn, the more we understand just how much more advanced than ours the Builder’s astral magic is. After we came back from the astral space – where you died, Jason – the old Vane estate was completely excavated. We’d discovered the cult was living underground in the cave system there.”

“Weren’t we right on top of that at one point?” Jason asked.

“We were,” Clive said.

“I should have had Shade go scout it out when Henrietta didn’t want us to go down there. I’d just gotten him as a familiar and I wasn’t thinking about all the awesome ways he could help me yet.”

“I should have suggested it,” Shade said from Jason’s shadow. “As you said, it was the start of our relationship and I did not want to overstep. I was yet to learn that sometimes you need to be pushed, Mr Asano. And that sometimes, you need to be thrown.”

“It was for the best,” Clive said. “There was a small army of them. If we found them, they would have killed us and decamped before anyone came looking. We should count ourselves lucky they didn’t want to be revealed and come after us.”

“What did they find when they excavated the place?” Farrah asked.

“Powerful Builder magic tools. Broken, after the failed summoning attempt, but very powerful.”

“There was a ritual circle set into the floor,” Jason said. “I remember that.”

“We think that was a device to hide the real tools from Landemere’s family,” Clive said. “You may remember that while he was a Builder cultist, the rest of his family belonged to a blood cult called the Red Table.”

“Oh, we remember,” Farrah said.

“Are they related to a great astral being as well?” Jason asked.

“No,” Farrah said. “They’re just a group that likes to explore the kinds of blood and death magic that get you hunted down by the Adventure Society.”

“Anyway,” Clive continued, “the point is that Landemere’s summoning went wrong. Maybe because he was trying to go beyond his ability, or maybe it was impacted by the dimensional event. Whatever the case, the result was that the summoning ritual was like a beacon, yanking Jason’s soul to the Vane estate.”

“And you think this grand summoning event in Vitesse did the same thing,” Farrah surmised.

“Yes,” Clive said, “but on a much larger scale. Instead of a natural dimensional event, we have this bridge you and Jason established using the link between worlds.”

“The bridge isn’t complete,” Jason said.

“Which is why anything that followed it would get annihilated,” Clive said. “But you can’t annihilate a soul. I think that your bridge and the massive summoning event might have converged after our team disrupted the summoning. It caused the right conditions on

your world to expand the rift and draw people in, and the summoning was the beacon that pulled the loose souls into our world, turning them into outworlders. Essentially, the same thing that happened to you, Jason, but on a massive scale.”

“And now there’s a hundred and something outworlders from Earth,” Jason said, running a hand over his face. “Do we know anything about who they are?”

“They’re a mix of factions,” Taika said. “Everyone but the vampires, because they’re kill-on-sight now. The handful that came over to team let’s-not-have-a-blood-apocalypse have to be careful about showing themselves because of friendly fire. After you left, they made their move.”

“Great,” Jason said. “Vampire war.”

“They aren’t stupid enough to touch your domains,” Travis said. “The clan and the transformation zones refugees they took in are hunkered down and safe. The reason the silver-rankers didn’t come to Australia with us was that we keep them on standby for anyone who needs to leave the domains and we were going out for too long to have them tied up.”

“Domains?” Clive asked.

“I’ll explain later,” Jason said. “And no one talks about them outside of this building, is that clear?”

“Why not?” Travis asked.

“Because I’m fairly confident we can’t be overheard here,” Jason said, “but out there is different. I have more than enough trouble to be going on with and I’m not looking for any more.”

“That doesn’t sound like you,” Clive said.

“I learn slow and it usually needs to get beaten into me a few times,” Jason told him, “but I do learn.”

“That sounds more like you,” Clive said.

“Tell me about the outworlder group,” Jason said to Taika and Travis. “Anyone else I know?”

“I’m pretty sure, yeah,” Taika confirmed. “I don’t think they told anyone they know you, though, which is why Travis and I were picked out from the bunch. The others are all scared of you now they don’t have their organisations to back them. A lot of groups didn’t treat you so well when they had all the power and thought they could get away with it.”

“And now they aren’t the hegemon anymore,” Jason said, resting a hand on the pommel of his sword. “I’ve even got the hegemonic hegemon sword of hegemony.”

“The what?” Clive asked.

Jason invited the group to his party and brought up the description of his sword for them to see.

“Oh yeah, that’s the stuff,” Clive said happily as a system box appeared in front of him.

“I somehow feel dirty,” Jason said. “Just read it. Without licking it, for preference.”

“This seems good,” Clive said, glancing over the description. “It’s very heavily reliant on aura strength. I know your aura’s strong, but is it strong enough to sustain this kind of weapon?”

“I think he’ll be fine,” Farrah said.

“What’s a hegemony?” Taika asked as he peered at the item description. “It’s like every fourth word, bro. Is it something to do with hedges?”

“Hedges?” Jason asked.

“Yeah, bro. I remember you telling us a story about a magic trowel. Is this a gardening sword?”

Chapter 516

What It Sent Us

Happy with his service to date, Soramir had Trenchant Moore assigned full-time to assist Liara and himself. While Trench could and would also assist Vesper, she remained a silver ranker and could not be given authority over a gold, even if she was a princess and he a royal guard. It was part of the complex hierarchical interplay between the royal family and their guard force of elite adventurers.

In the office he had been assigned, Moore was going over the reports of Asano's expedition. The expedition leader who made the report was unclear on how Asano turned the Builder's forces against themselves, while being very clear on the inadequacy of Asano's explanation.

"What does 'gots to get funky' mean?" he murmured to himself as he read.

It was yet another mystery surrounding the man. His connection to the diamond-ranker that even Soramir was deferential to was still unknown, as was his repeated returns from the grave, according to the church of Death. Soramir had told him it had something to do with a rival entity to the Builder and the unusual nature of the current monster surge. Their current best guess was that it was related to Asano's original world, which had been how someone of such low rank had been caught up in cosmic events.

Soramir had postulated that Asano had been caught up in events from the moment he arrived in their world the first time. Trenchant didn't envy Asano becoming entangled in the agenda of such powerful forces before he was even an iron ranker. Fighting through death over and over, facing down beings from beyond reality. And that was ignoring the relatively normal messes that surrounded him as an adventurer and an outworlder. He could see how someone wouldn't find a gold-ranker intimidating after all that, and even become quite unhinged.

It was clear that Asano had been profoundly affected by the forces pressuring him. Trenchant was still a little unnerved by Asano's cloud house. It reminded him of a still lake with a monster slumbering somewhere in the depths. He had no reason to feel that way yet he became more certain the more he thought about it.

Asano's aura was monstrous and Trenchant knew full well the kind of suffering it took to do that to a soul, as well as the time and struggle to recover from it. He was curious as to what his friend Amos would make of Asano, and he would find out soon enough. Trenchant had been directed, once Asano's team was registered for local activity, to deliver the team an invitation to a social event.

The idea of having a ball amidst a monster surge did not sit well with Trenchant but he understood the necessity. The wealthy and noble houses of Rimaros were an intricately threaded tapestry on which the Storm Kingdom rested. There could be no worse time for that tapestry to fray or develop holes.

There was also a more personal element to it that left Trenchant uncertain. Farrah Hurin was a fierce, passionate and courageous woman he had found immediately compelling, although there were many reasons not to pursue it. Her connection to Asano was certainly one and she had her own mysteries. She was also young, which would not matter at silver rank if she was forty or fifty, but she was twenty-seven. Twenty-six, discounting the year she had been dead, which would put her at less than a quarter of Trenchant's own age.

"Your aura is a little turbulent, Commander Moore."

Trenchant Moore's senses were sharp and his aura control was impeccable. It was not enough to prevent Soramir from seeing through him, however, or from entering his office unnoticed.

"I've been dwelling on Asano's cloud house," Trenchant said. He had been dealing with people stronger than him for decades and was an old hand at not revealing everything, even when his aura was being read. He knew well that saying true things was not the same as speaking the truth.

"Asano's cloud house is a curiosity," Soramir said. "If I hadn't seen its connection to him in his aura, I would have believed it belonged to someone else."

"Why?"

"Commander Moore, you have already encountered something similar, many times. The comparison has simply not occurred to you because it's a little outrageous."

"What do you mean?"

"How often do you think my senses encounter a location into which they are utterly unable to penetrate?"

"Very rarely. My understanding is that even the defences of the royal sky island are unable to block your perception."

"On the contrary, Commander, it is something my senses pass over every day, as do yours. Our city has many of them. Every major city does."

Trenchant frowned as his mind ticked over. What could shut out a perception as powerful as...

"Temples," he realised.

"Exactly," Soramir said. "The innermost thresholds of temples – their most sacred locations – are impervious to my senses. And I can tell that the rest could be as well, if the forces behind those temples wished it, but they do not obstruct their visitors. Only the most sacred locations are completely hidden away."

"You're saying Asano's cloud house is a temple?"

"The way it blocks senses is the same."

"You think his cloud house is empowered by this great astral being? The World-Phoenix?"

"It was my first thought, but I dismissed it immediately. I've seen the depths of Asano's soul reflected in his aura. While I don't understand or recognise everything I saw inside it, he could not hide anything from me. If there was a star seed of the World-Phoenix inside Asano, I would have seen it. In fact, he cannot be implanted with a star seed at all."

"Because he is a gestalt being, Trenchant surmised.

"You noticed."

"I have encountered a true messenger in the past, not just a summon. I know the feeling of an aura that feels almost physically substantial because the soul that projecting it is."

"Where did you encounter a true messenger?" Soramir asked.

"Heartsilver Mountain."

"Ah. You're a survivor of the Celestial Sword."

"Yes, sir."

Soramir paused to look over Trenchant with freshly assessing eyes.

"What are you doing, serving my family, Trenchant Moore?"

"My duty, sir. As my family has done since you founded this kingdom."

"Since the beginning? I'm sorry, Commander Moore, but I don't remember your ancestor."

"We were only a minor family in your service, Ancestral Majesty."

"But a loyal one, it would seem."

"We do our best. If this World-Phoenix is not responsible for the properties of Asano's cloud house, what is?"

"That is what troubles me," Soramir said. "I can't examine the cloud house, but I tell from Asano that it truly is bonded to him. Since he is not a vessel for the World-Phoenix's power, that means Asano himself is responsible."

"Unless it is a property of the house and not Asano."

"It is not. I contacted the woman who crafted it and she confirmed that the original item was an ordinary device, - if you can say that about any cloud flask. There is nothing you could feed it that would produce this effect except, perhaps, at diamond rank. She was certain that any effect on that level has to come from the person bonded to it and would require a deeper bond that was ordinary for the item."

"Then, either Asano or this great astral being has modified it, but the properties it exhibits somehow come from Asano."

"As I said, I have observed the depths of his aura thoroughly enough to examine his soul. He has magical bonds with some of his items, but also with some things not with him. I could not determine what, but I think that is where the secret lies."

"And what course of action will you be taking?" Trenchant asked.

Soramir didn't answer immediately, taking a piece of fruit from the dimensional pouch at his waist and biting into it. Trenchant waited for Soramir to unhurriedly chew and swallow.

"I've known from the beginning that Asano was unusual," Soramir eventually said. "The way he arrived in the Storm Kingdom made that clear enough. I was already investigating him when Liara and Vesper came looking for a diamond-ranker to examine his aura. I decided to take a closer look and test how strong his senses were. He sensed me much earlier than I anticipated."

"You did reveal yourself on purpose, then?"

"Yes. From everything I've managed to learn about Asano, he needs to be handled delicately. Too many mysteries and powerful forces orbit around him. The day will come when he is no longer outmatched by those forces and I don't want the Storm Kingdom to be on the list of his enemies due a reckoning when he hits gold and diamond."

"You think he will?"

"Oh, yes. There are two kinds of adventurers, Commander Moore. You are the first type: reliable, efficient and supremely capable. You advanced because of the way you conduct yourself. You are the kind of adventurer that everyone wants to work with. Asano is the other kind. Wild, erratic, improvisational. These are not the people you want to work with, but they are the ones who become legends. Usually by repeatedly surviving the kind of challenges that adventurers like you avoided in the first place."

"You think he'll reach diamond. If he lives long enough."

"Which is why I want to establish good relations now, but that's tricky with a man like him. He is highly averse to any kind of institutional power, so impressing him with our authority doesn't help. Nor can we be generous and accommodating because he wouldn't

trust it. Vesper is excellent because her hostility meets his expectations and I can stop her from going too far. Ironically, the pathway to the trust of a man like Jason Asano is to be self-serving, because it's what he expects. So long as we make the deal clear, he'll work with us."

"I've never cared for mind games of this kind," Trenchant said.

"Fortunately, that is not your role," Soramir told him. "You're our good example. A man of integrity outside of our political plots and schemes. Asano will respect that."

"Is this all really necessary just for some political problems with the Irios family?"

"That is important, but no. Asano's importance is unclear to me, but I don't think it lies with the Builder and what comes after. Not any more than tangentially, at least. The World-Phoenix wouldn't send us a silver-ranker to fight the Builder and what comes after."

"After?"

"The church of Knowledge has been building up fighting forces around the globe. Slowly but steadily, over the last fifteen years or so."

"The church of Knowledge? Why a military force?"

"The thing about the goddess of Knowledge," Soramir said, "is that she always knows something that you don't. The other churches weren't going to sit by while a bunch of librarians established a large military force. War and his subordinate gods have established response forces in those same regions, in anticipation of what Knowledge is up to."

"And what is she up to?"

"No one knows, for certain," Soramir said. "Not even the church of Knowledge's own people. But now we have a suspicion about the church of Purity and more grand summonings. Wouldn't it be a funny thing if all these messengers popped out to find the holy warriors of Knowledge, War, Soldier, Champion and Warrior all waiting for them, all over the world?"

"Wouldn't the Purity adherents move once they knew the churches were in the vicinity?"

"Some of the infrastructure in place that fuelled the one summoning we've seen was built into that dam at the time of its construction. This has been planned for a very long time and these undertakings are massive and not easily shifted. Doing so unnoticed would be impossible."

"Do you have any idea of Asano's role in all this?" Trenchant asked.

"I believe the Purity church is out there, preparing a messenger invasion to follow up once the Builder calls its forces back to the astral, at the end of the monster surge. The

summoning event we've seen was premature and halted, but what if it wasn't? What if those things could just keep coming through? What we will need is someone to shut the gate, and the World-Phoenix is the one in charge of closing that kind of gate. And what it sent us was Jason Asano."

Jason didn't end up being the one who took Travis to see the church of Knowledge. Farrah volunteered for that role while Jason led his team to the Adventure Society to register locally for monster surge duty. Neil and Belinda grumbled about going back to work the day after they arrived but Humphrey gave a speech about not shirking and the need to learn how to work together all over again until Neil got up and set out just so Humphrey would stop talking.

The Adventure Society administration building didn't have people lined up outside the doors this time but was still incredibly busy. They were forced into one of several queues inching towards the front. Finally, they reached the front where the reception staff were rushing people through as quickly as they could. The functionary they met at the front of the queue quickly scribbled down their details, a pencil in one hand and a large stamp in the other.

"Does your team have an operational name?" she asked.

"Team Biscuit!" Humphrey said cheerfully.

"No!" Another Humphrey said as he grabbed the moustachioed first one by the collar. The first Humphrey turned into a puppy dangling from the scruff of its neck, adorably waving helpless paws.

"That's not our team name," Humphrey told the functionary.

"Paperwork's been stamped, so it is now," she said, handing him the document.

"Maybe next time get your familiar under control. Now, please clear the line. You can take this to the jobs hall."

A dismayed Humphrey looked at the documentation in one hand and the puppy in the other as he let Jason push him out of the way.

Chapter 517

I Am Not Jason Asano

Jason and his team arrived back at the cloud house, exhausted in ways no stamina potion could fix after two weeks on the road. There were some kinds of tired only rest could fix, however potent your potion supply was. The monster surge was now in full swing, with monsters spawning faster than even the most pessimistic predictions had anticipated.

The abnormal rate of magical manifestations was not restricted to monsters, with a commensurate increase in the appearance of essences and awakening stones. This included a strangely high number of the ordinarily scarce dimension essence. One of the most valuable and sought-after essences in existence, for those that found them it was a massive jackpot.

At Humphrey's suggestion, Jason's team had done the same thing they had done after the first time they completed their roster, back in Greenstone. They volunteered to take a road contract as a shakedown cruise to help the team re-establish their teamwork. They had been operating separately for years, ranking up from bronze rank to silver in that time. Their operational dynamic would need to be rebuilt from the ground up.

Road contracts weren't usually something that happened in the Storm Kingdom. In low-magic regions like Greenstone, towns and villages had noticeboards where locals posted monster sightings for passing adventurers to deal with, only sending word directly to the Adventure Society when the threat level to civilians was high. A high-magic zone like Rimaros had a magical detection system that identified monster manifestations and allowed the closest Adventure Society office to mount a response.

From a practical perspective, it was similar to the grid on Earth, although it was very different magically. The Earth grid was a unified system operating over every landmass on the planet, with minimal energy and maintenance requirements. Earth's grid was less complex, yet its functionality was so much greater, which had staggered Farrah with the nuanced grasp of magic it implied.

Jason had gone to Liara with his proposed road contract and they negotiated the details. It used a supply contract, like the one Jason had already undertaken, as the basis. The team had moved between fortress towns and Fertility church agriculture towers, delivering supplies. The difference had been that they also took the time to thin out the increasing accumulation of monsters around fortress towns in the outlying regions.

After a good night's sleep, Humphrey had the team going over the extensive notes he had taken during the trip, hammering at their flaws and highlighting potential tactics and strategies for their current ability suites. With the intensity of the monster surge, it was like being back in the Order of the Reaper's astral space where they had spent half a year slogging through monsters.

Only Jason had been through anything like that intensity in the years since, with even the diligent Humphrey showing his weariness. Despite a few bantering gripes, however, the team had all actively participated in getting themselves back on track. They had each had chances to see proper guild teams in action and knew they had a lot of catching up to do, especially given the nature of their team.

Their team operated on a strategic doctrine starkly opposed to the Rimaros approach of specialisation and maximising effectiveness, where the core objective was to turn any situation into a best-case scenario for themselves. Jason's team was all about versatility and adaptation; about finding success in the worst-case scenario. They'd seen the pointy end of enough sticks to know that, sooner or later, they'd be seeing more.

Jason had recently watched a guild team in action, smoothly annihilating monsters with a speed and efficiency that his team would never equal, even at their best. But his team had no interest in being the best at normal. When adequate would get the job done, they were satisfied with adequate.

What mattered were the days when everything went wrong. When they were stranded in the dark, surrounded by enemies and with no one to rely on but each other. The days with no second chances, where they had to find a way, whatever it took. Those were the days when they needed to be the best.

After a full morning of strategising, the team went out onto the deck where Taika had set out a smorgasbord lunch on a picnic table. It was made up of Jason's cooking experiments with local ingredients that hadn't gone horribly wrong.

"Bro, I need something to do. Farrah and Travis have been cloistered away for weeks and you all ran off. Gary and Rufus have been helping me train when they aren't on mission but I'm spending most of my time sitting around the house."

"You're bronze-rank," Humphrey told him. "Without guild backing or at least a team around you, you're basically a civilian."

"I did help fight some of the monsters here on the island, at least," Taika said. "Most of the ones that spawned are too strong, though." I can sometimes take on a silver-rank one, but not two, let alone ten."

“Yep, that sucks,” Neil mumbled around a mouthful of cheese enchilada. “You know, I did miss meal times from when we were back in Greenstone. This tortilla is amazing.”

“They have a tropical crop here they turn into a weirdly fantastic flour,” Jason said. “It’s not even magical.”

“Tastes magical,” Neil said happily.

Shade rose up from Jason’s shadow.

“Mr Asano, a message arrived from the Adventure Society while you were in your strategy session. They would like your team to attend a meeting this afternoon to discuss several topics.”

“Any sense if it’s a good thing or a bad thing?” Jason asked.

“Princess Liara and Princess Vesper will both be in attendance.”

“So, bad then,” Jason said.

Vesper and Liara walked together through the halls of the Adventure Society complex, talking within the confines of a privacy screen.

“You shouldn’t have let them run off for two weeks,” Vesper said. “We missed the best window to introduce Jason to society in the wake of the expedition with the Builder and his team arriving with a diamond-ranker.”

“Asano has been separated from his team for years. I don’t know what he’s been through in the intervening years, but his Ancestral Majesty has intimated that it was extreme. I know you’re happy with how the expedition you went on turned out but you can’t argue that his behaviour on it was stable. A support network can bring him that, and maybe make him feel less like we’re the enemy.”

“I know,” Vesper grumbled. “I just don’t like missing a prime opportunity.”

“You’re not seriously going to tell me you have no way to stoke the smouldering embers?”

“Of course I do. Jacinda Irios has been looking to meet with the boy, after that run-in I engineered with Kasper. I will say this for Asano: while he is a pain to work with, he does have a knack for stirring up the right kind of trouble.”

Jason and his team filed into a meeting room within the Adventure Society administration complex, shown the way by a society functionary. The princesses were yet to arrive so Belinda conjured a deck of cards and started playing with Sophie and Neil at one end of the conference table. Humphrey and Jason went to the other end, Humphrey

sitting with good posture while Jason kicked back. Clive didn't sit at all, moving to examine the wall panel with an embedded crystal that activated the room's privacy screen.

Rather than one of the conference room's chairs, Jason was in a comfortable cloud chair. Now that his full item set was back in his possession, he was able to use the various set abilities again. For the cloud flask, this meant simple cloud constructs that could serve as a shield or a platform for movement but mostly ended up being chairs, hammocks and, in one case, a mud toboggan.

Jason looked over at Stash, sprawled in Sophie's lap in puppy form getting his tummy scratched.

"Stash doesn't seem to have changed from ranking up as much as I would have thought," Jason said to Humphrey.

"Oh, he's changed," Humphrey said. "He's a lot smarter, for one thing."

"I don't really see it," Jason said.

"That's because he's smart enough to know that if he keeps looking like a puppy and acting like an infant he can get away with a lot more."

"Is this still about the team name?" Jason asked. "Humphrey, it's fine. Everyone, tell Humphrey it's fine. Again."

"Yep," Belinda said, not looking up from her hand of cards.

"I don't care," Clive said as he peered into the now open wall panel, prodding the hole behind it with a crystal rod.

"I gave up on any appearance of dignity the moment I joined a team with Jason in it," Neil said.

"Hurtful, but thanks, I guess," Jason said.

"Not a problem," Neil said. "I'm happy to tell that to as many people as you like."

He glowered at the cards in his hand.

"Belinda, have you been rigging the deck again?"

"Don't blame your terrible luck on me," she told him.

"But it is a matter of dignity," Humphrey insisted to Jason. "It's how we present ourselves to the world. We can't change the name until the monster surge is done and administration reopens non-essential services. By that point, it's how we'll be known, for good or ill."

"Look at it this way, Humphrey," Jason said. "If we have a name like this, then the respect we get will be respect we've earned in spite of it. Unless you'd prefer our respect come from what we tell people about us instead of what we do as a team. You don't want our accomplishments to be superficial braggadocio do you?"

Humphrey groaned as he shook his head.

“I’d forgotten what it was like, talking to you.”

“It’s a treat, I know,” Jason said brightly.

Clive closed the wall panel and joined the others at the table shortly before Vesper and Liara arrived, Trenchant Moore with them. Liara and Trenchant sat down opposite Jason, Humphrey and Clive while Vesper moved to the control panel to activate the privacy screen. Neil, Sophie and Belinda moved up the table to sit with the others.

“There was a problem with the privacy screen,” Clive told Vesper, “so I took the liberty of fixing it. It seems like someone had tapped into it so that anything that went on in the room while the privacy screen was active would be recorded and sent to a remote location. Obviously, doing that without notifying all attendees of an official meeting in a privacy-secured Adventure Society meeting room is a breach of Adventure Society protocols.”

“It is?” Jason asked.

“It is,” Humphrey said, eyes locked on Vesper. She, in turn, was frowning at Clive.

“Thank you,” she told him flatly.

“You’re welcome,” Clive said.

“Naturally,” Jason added, “we’ll be reporting the issue to the Adventure Society administration. They’ll need to do a sweep through all the conference rooms and make sure it isn’t a widespread problem. Can’t be too careful in these uncertain times.”

“You needn’t bother yourselves,” Vesper said through a jaw-clenched smile. “I’ll take care of that.”

“Oh, no bother,” Jason said. “I can assure you we’ll take genuine delight in—”

“Jason,” Humphrey chided. “Don’t play with your food.”

“Sorry, boss,” Jason said.

“Princess Vesper,” Humphrey said. “My friend takes a perverse pleasure in political games but I do not. I am a straightforward man, so if you are straightforward with us, we will reciprocate. Won’t we, Jason?”

“If we have to,” Jason grumbled. Humphrey gave him a sharp look.

“Fine,” Jason said. “I’ll be good.”

“You can choose to go in another direction,” Humphrey told the princesses, turning back to face them. “You can bring us into an ostensibly private meeting and record us. You can send us on missions without telling us that we’re bait. You can play games but, as I said, I don’t like games. I’ll step away and you can go back to dealing with Jason, so if you’ve enjoyed doing so thus far, I’d appreciate you telling us now and saving me the time.”

“If I'm being honest, Mr Geller, dealing with either of you feels very similar,” Vesper said. “You both seem quite imperious when speaking to royalty.”

“It's not Mr Geller, Princess Vesper,” Humphrey said. “It's Young Master Geller. I understand that my aristocratic lineage, being from a provincial, low-magic city-state, is inconsequential to a princess from Rimaros. But while my friend doesn't care if you call him Mr Asano, Jason or Susan the flower girl, I take pride in my name and my house. Unless you wish to forgo formal decorum, I will thank you to respect them both.”

At Humphrey's use of the term 'formal decorum,' Liara and Vesper both flicked their eyes over Jason, lounging in a cloud chair with his feet up on a cloud footstool. Humphrey showed no indication of having noticed either their gazes or the incongruity of making his assertions made while sitting next to Jason's aggressive casualness.

Neither princess would be foolish enough to dismiss a Geller as inconsequential. Like the non-aristocratic Remore family, the source of their prestige was not their name but their generations of accomplishment. Both families had been offered prestigious titles over the centuries by powerful rulers, and all had been refused. The Gellers kept only their humble title linked to their original rise to prominence, while the Remores carried no title at all.

“I'm sorry if you feel that we've been hostile,” Liara said. “Our goal has always been to work with Mr Asano, not to treat him as an enemy.”

“Lady, that's a hard sell when he had to all but kill himself so you'd step in after dangling him on a hook while you fished for cultists,” Sophie said.

“Is it true that you didn't know what fishing was?” Belinda asked Neil.

“I know what fishing is!”

“Gary said you didn't.”

“Of course I know what fishing is. I just don't see the point of catching them one at a time with a string on a stick when you have fishing trawlers and magic explosions.”

“The point of going fishing isn't to catch fish,” Clive said.

“Why do people keep saying that?” Neil asked. “That sentence is insane.”

Liara and Vesper watched Humphrey, waiting for him to bring his unruly team into line. Instead, he sat patiently, watching the reactions of the two princesses.

“I thought you didn't like games, Young Master Geller,” Vesper told him.

“You do the best with what you have, Princess Vesper. What I have is my team and I don't like the way you've been treating one of its members.”

“We aren't looking to exploit anyone,” Liara said. “We want two things from Mr Asano. One is to help us with a local political problem in which Mr Asano has become

unfortunately involved. That is our fault and we are happy to compensate him for his assistance, starting with helping to reunite your team.”

“Which we are grateful for,” Humphrey acknowledged.

“Even if it was mostly Dawn,” Sophie muttered. Humphrey gave her a side glance and she leaned back, looking innocent.

“That is Vesper’s area,” Liara continued. “She represents the royal family in this. I am a member of the royal family but I represent the Adventure Society here. The society offers Mr Asano nothing beyond rewards commensurate to his efforts, as is true of any adventurer. He’s a member of the Adventure Society and has a responsibility to step forward and do what he can. We will assign him to tasks as a member of the Adventure Society as best fits our needs. The only reason he merits special attention is his connection to the Builder cult, which is my particular area of authority.”

Humphrey turned to Jason, who nodded. He then turned back to the princesses.

“We recognise that we are just one of many teams during an unprecedented event in the Adventure Society’s history,” Humphrey said. “Unfortunately, circumstances have not allowed us to be treated as such. Modesty aside, we are special, which you obviously are aware of due to the special treatment we’ve been given. I understand that there is a disparity between our rank and the importance that has been placed on us. All we ask is to be treated with respect.”

Vesper looked like she’d swallowed a peach pit but Liara put a restraining hand on her forearm. Vesper nodded, pausing before speaking in a controlled voice.

“Young Master Geller, one of the reasons we have called your team in here is the contract you just completed. The contract Princess Liara personally intervened with the Adventure Society to have you assigned. If you do not see a gold-rank princess who is also a high-ranking Adventure Society official allowing your team to hand-craft your own contract in the middle of the most potent monster surge in history during one and possibly two interdimensional invasions as a gesture of respect, I think we may have reached a point where our perspectives have irreconcilably diverged.”

“She’s not wrong,” Jason said, sitting up as his cloud chair remoulded under him.

“We do appreciate that,” Humphrey said. “And we are here to do what the Adventure Society requires of us. Your political agenda is inextricably entangled in that intention, however.”

“That is the unfortunate reality,” Liara acknowledged.

“We are not trying to be hostile either,” Humphrey continued, then turned to give Sophie a pointed look as she leaned forward to chime in. She leaned back again, giving him an unrepentant shrug.

“My priority is to protect my team,” Humphrey continued. “I do wish to approach our interactions with respect and in good faith. That said, I will be unambiguous about placing my team’s welfare – in every respect – over the political needs of your family. I recognise that those political needs have wider implications, but I am not Jason Asano. As long as I have known him, he has been concerned for the people affected by the decisions of the powerful and I have no doubt he agreed to help you for that reason. I, on the other hand, was raised to believe that those of us born to power have a duty to wield it responsibly. It should not fall on the head of my friend to protect the people under the rule of your royal family.”

Humphrey had been controlled for most of the meeting but there was fire in his eyes and his words as his force of will was palpable.

“You think it’s that simple?” Vesper shot back, unshaken.

“Yes,” Humphrey said, his voice cold as he locked away his anger. “But as my mother likes to say, simple is not the same thing as easy. My goal is to be clear on where each of us stands, so we can all move forward constructively.”

“I agree that’s best,” Liara said. “Perhaps, having established that, we can move on to the first topic for which this meeting was called?”

“Of course,” Humphrey said, his voice more diplomatically neutral. “We aren’t trying to be difficult.”

Vesper looked at him incredulously while he maintained a straight face.

Liara ignored them both as she took a file from a dimensional bag and placed it on the table.

“The first thing we want to talk about is the contract you just completed. The Adventure Society is very happy with how it went.”

“Really?” Jason asked, leaning forward. “I don’t hear that a lot.”

“Imagine my surprise,” Vesper said.

Chapter 518

That Powerful and That Old

Liara, Vesper and the thus-far silent Trenchant Moore were sitting across from Jason and his team in an Adventure Society conference room. Liara tapped a folder on the table in front of her.

“The reason the society gave me so much leeway with the contract you all just completed was that it was part of a wider test program. This monster surge is unlike anything that has come before. You're all aware of the specifics, so I won't waste time repeating what you already know. The Adventure Society had been trying out new approaches to handle new problems. One of those problems is the safety of the more remote fortress towns. They've been exposed and under-supplied to a greater degree than anticipated.”

“Our contract was a test for a potential response?” Humphrey asked.

“Exactly,” Liara said. “The Adventure Society is increasing the resource allocation to the outlying regions but things are tight on every front. Our use of those resources needs to be as efficient as possible. The idea is to take some of the less-critical guild teams and the more capable independent teams and send them out on similar contracts. Some were already sent out before you even returned, and the early results are very positive. More reliable supply routes. Fortress towns burning through fewer resources with their active defences. We've even managed to take out a few Purity adherents, although we've lost people to them as well.”

“We didn't encounter any during our contract,” Jason said. “To be honest, I'm a little disappointed. You weren't following me again were you, Liara?”

“I was not. You have your team, now.”

“This is all very gratifying,” Humphrey said, “but I don't think you called us in here to tell us we did a good job.”

“Your team is unusual,” Liara said. “Multiple portal or teleport powers, plus multiple, personal storage spaces. We want you to specialise in this kind of contract. We want to deploy you all over the Storm Kingdom so you have as many portal destinations as possible. Not only will this allow you to provide emergency supplies when regular supply runs fall short but you will be available for rapid-response to Builder activity. Given your aptitude in this area, Mr Asano, we want you at the forefront. Your team also has more experience than most at facing the Builder and winning.”

“We are at the disposal of the Adventure Society,” Humphrey said.

“Good,” Liara said. “This leaves us with the other topic for today’s meeting.”

She leaned back in her chair, looking to Vesper at her side.

“The political aspect,” Vesper said. “I’m sure you’ve explained everything to your team so, instead of rehashing details, I’ll move directly on to what comes next. Despite everything going on, social gatherings continue to be a part of Rimaros high society. These are not just indulgences of the privileged but important events that allow the powerful players of the kingdom to settle high-level affairs.”

“And you need me to parade around,” Jason said.

“Yes,” Vesper said. “The real power brokers won’t be taken in by our little charade, but the families to which they belong are the tools they use for negotiation. And to the noble houses, leverage and reputation is everything. The games must be played in the front rooms so the work can be done in the back. If the Irios family looks too weak, they have to divert resources from what they should be doing to protect themselves. I don’t have to explain why that is undesirable, especially now.”

“Can’t they just ignore the people nipping at their heels until the monster surge is over?” Neil asked.

“No,” Jason said. “If they get attacked and refuse to defend themselves, things just get worse faster.”

Vesper nodded at Jason appreciatively.

“Just so,” she said. “If they do not stand up for themselves, their detractors would only become emboldened and push harder and my family can only go so far to protect them. My family rule this kingdom, but we do not rule alone. The aristocratic houses form a delicate balance of forces that need to be managed. If we show too much favouritism, even now, it weakens us, which weakens the kingdom.”

“You don’t need to sell me on the reasons, Princess Vesper,” Jason said. “I told you I’m in and I rarely make an alliance specifically to murder all the people in it.”

“I wanted to get you in front of people following the expedition we went on together, but you’ve been away. We’re going to make it happen before you head out on another contract, and we need to get you ready for that. Etiquette. Dancing, general decorum. I have no doubt that you’ll go ahead and break the rules, but you should at least take the time to learn them first.”

“So, you and I will be spending some time together,” Jason said.

“There is still a monster surge happening,” Humphrey said. “I don’t want this taking too much time away from our Adventure Society duties.”

“Which is why we are starting right now,” Vesper said. “You need to come with me, Mr Asano.”

“Yes, Mistress.”

Vesper closed her eyes as she pressed her lips thinly together, managing to hold back a response. She got up, turned off the privacy screen and left. Jason waggled his eyebrows at his team as he got up and followed her out.

“She really doesn’t like him,” Neil said.

“Yep,” Belinda agreed.

“Think they’re going to...?”

“Definitely,” Belinda said. “They’re going to break a bed. Maybe even a wall.”

“That is a princess of the realm,” Humphrey admonished. “At least do her the respect of voicing those opinions behind closed doors.”

He turned to Liara and the still-silent Trenchant Moore.

“I apologise for the lack of decorum on the part of my team members,” he said.

“They’re mostly thieves and hooligans.”

The Purity enclave was underground in a cave system filled with luminescent crystals with a subterranean river. It had long ago been worked from natural stone into a temple and dormitory, in preparation for the days now at hand.

The Purity church’s Order of Redeeming Light had been making preparations in the Storm Kingdom for many years. When other wings of the church had grown impatient and revealed their hands early, it had brought about the public downfall of the church. Only the most diligent orders within the church, with the stomach for patience and the faith for obedience were left to carry out the mission that would turn recent history on its head and bring purification to the world.

For some orders, their task was to bring forth an army of pure beings to cleanse the filth from the world. The Order of Redeeming Light had another purpose. Theirs was to take that which was unclean and purify it, forging weapons redeemed from an unclean world.

Melody Jain was the leader of the enclave and her second in command, Sendira, was midway through reporting what their scouts had discovered. The order was largely comprised of holy warriors, but they also had a priest to serve as advisor and connection to the god. Their priest was a human named Laront, who was as young as his handsome face suggested, his silver rank not yet needed to stave off the ageing process.

“The Adventure Society is increasing their activity in the outlying reaches. They know we are out here and that we are acting. We should prepare to move before they understand why.”

Melody nodded.

“Agreed. Make preparations, but we must choose our moment well. Something is coming from the north that will draw all the attention away from us.”

“May I ask what is coming?”

“Our Lord has warned me of the unclean ally moving one of his great forces south,” the priest said. “The Storm Kingdom has angered it and it wished to make an example.”

“That is when we make our move,” Melody said.

“And what of Asano? Do we still need to capture him before we kill him for the ally?”

“No,” Melody said. “I wanted him captured so I could use him to lure my daughter here. Our informants in Rimaros have told us that she is here. Now, we can be reunited and she can be cleansed.”

“And if she is unwilling?”

“It does not matter,” Melody said. “I was unwilling, yet now I am pure. She can be forgiven her ignorance, once we have burned it out of her. I was once forced to leave my child behind and now my family shall be reunited.”

Liara and Trenchant were making their way back to the royal sky island, sitting opposite one another in a flying carriage.

“I’m concerned about Vesper,” Liara said. “She is being far too easily riled by Asano and his companions. They have the passion of youth but they’re children. She shouldn’t be letting them throw her off balance and I’m unsure why she is.”

“Her highness, Princess Vesper, has always held more administrative ambitions,” Trenchant explained. “Her adventuring has always been sporadic, only undertaken to advance her rank. It was never a calling. Monster surges are normally quiet, politically, so these have been the times she most actively pursues advancement.”

“You’re suggesting she’s upset because the politics is keeping her from going out and ranking up?”

“No,” Trenchant said. “My point is that Vesper is not like you and I. Her world is a political one where appearance is substance and trust goes only as far as mutual interest. When she adventured, her teams were fleeting and assembled from those whose ambitions were not centred on the mission. She has never experienced a team whose camaraderie was forged in fire, the ways ours were.”

“The way Asano’s was,” Liara said.

“Yes,” Trenchant said. “Asano’s aura may be a closed book to us, but you felt the others. You sensed the bond they have. The trust that comes from pulling each other back from the bloody edge. Not just them, either.”

“Farrah Hurin.”

“I don’t know everything they have been through,” Trenchant said, “but it gave her the passion and the loyalty to march into a royal palace to tear strips off a diamond-ranker. It’s brash and foolish, but also formidable.”

“You admire them.”

“Yes. I am a weapon of politicians but I do not care for politics. It is far too often the enemy of integrity. Asano and his team are young and foolish but they are adventurers to the bone. Vesper knows that. Her silver rank isn’t enough to read their auras but she’s felt the loyalty they have. The willingness to go all the way to the wall for someone doesn’t fit her world of compromise and benefits and it unnerves her.”

“Why?”

“Because she instinctively understands that they are willing to go further than she is. They flaunt it because they understand that Asano is not stable right now and are very protective of him. There is something inherently intimidating about absolute commitment. It’s part of what makes zealots such troubling enemies.”

“And politicians always leave room for compromise and always leave a way out.”

“I have seen exceptions, but they didn’t tend to be all that successful as politicians. To an adventurer, absolute commitment to your team is a strength. To a politician, that rigidity is a weakness. But Vesper is being forced to accept Asano and his people on their terms. This is not a good situation for her.”

“Asano is not an enemy we want in the future,” Liara said. “Antagonising him now is not good for us.”

“No, but we must also look to the needs of today, which is where Vesper excels. Unfortunately, she is being told no at every turn. The other major problem she faces is that she’s been instructed to play her own game, but by someone else’s rules.”

“How so?”

“Out of Asano’s circle, only Humphrey Geller and Rufus Remore are people she should even be aware of. Even then, only peripherally. They’re a group of silver-rankers, far from home and the central bases of their power. Yet they are moving in circles with gold and diamond-rankers. Higher still, if you consider some of what we’ve only surmised about Asano and Farrah Hurin. The hierarchy of rank is a central pillar of political

interaction, yet Asano disregards it entirely. More importantly, his Ancestral Majesty supports him in this."

"I never really thought about that," Liara said. "I've mostly been dealing with him from an Adventure Society perspective, which Asano seems to respect. The political side is very different."

"Asano is clearly used to dealing with authorities more powerful than himself. He doesn't like how that has gone in the past and has resolved to not let himself be pushed down. This conflicts with Vesper both directly and ideologically, yet his Ancestral Majesty's wishes force her to capitulate to Asano and his erratic whims. In some ways, your ancestor is using Princess Vesper as a tool more than he is Asano. When you are that powerful and that old, perhaps that is how you come to see the people around you."

"What should I do about Vesper?"

"Support her," Trenchant advised. "Make sure she understands that she isn't isolated and there are people on her side. Otherwise, she'll end up like Asano: brittle, sharp and lashing out at any hand reaching out to her."

In the outer reaches of Rimaros, the windmill-like storm accumulators drained magic from the Sea of Storm's eponymous weather events to both shield the city and help power its infrastructure. A small flying vessel passed over the line of accumulators on its passage towards the city. It had the signature industrial iron look of the Builder's vessels and was being escorted by Zila Rimaros. Soramir Rimaros has sensed their approach and rapidly arrived to intercept, arriving on a floating cloud that sparkled with gold and silver light.

"What is this?" he asked of Zila.

"It emerged from the underwater city while I was monitoring it and approached me," Zila said. "Nothing onboard is stronger than silver-rank. It poses no threat."

Their powerful senses could easily penetrate the vessel, which was crewed by constructs. Only one living thing was aboard; a silver-rank cultist.

"He's claimed peaceful passage as an envoy to the Storm Kingdom," Zila said. "He wishes to speak with someone who can represent the Storm Kingdom."

"You were not enough?"

"I thought it would be best to defer to you, in this."

"And what does he want? What does the Builder want?"

The cultist emerged onto the deck wearing plain, hooded grey robes. It held no fear, even in the face of diamond-rankers. They could sense not just a willingness, but an expectation of death.

"I am a herald of war," he said. "I come with a message. A declaration."

"Let us hear it, then," Soramir told him.

"Your kingdom was offered escape from my master's intentions, and you rejected his goodwill. As a result, your kingdom will pay the price. He is no longer just coming for your astral spaces. He shall despoil your lands and massacre your people. He is the Builder, but all your works shall be unmade, Soramir Rimaros. Everything you have built shall be rendered unto dust."

"Is that it? Soramir asked. "That's the whole message?"

"It is. You may kill me now, for my task is done."

"Why bother. Go back and tell your master he could have just sent a note."

Soramir turned around and shot back toward the city.

Chapter 519

One Battle at a Time

Jason took the sound recording crystal out of the projector, stopping the music. He then returned the projector to his inventory. Vesper stood on the other side of the large, wooden-floored room, looking slightly flushed. She stood with her back to him, looking out the window. They were in the lower-security area of the royal palace, close to the arrival lake, where minor affairs and less prominent guests were hosted.

“You can dance, I’ll give you that,” she said.

“I did tell you I’ve got the moves.”

“That thing you did, leading me with your aura. I’ve never seen aura control used like that.”

Jason walked across the room to stand next to her and looked out at the water. Boats shrouded in air bubbles were regularly surfacing, having risen to the sky island from the sea below.

“The trick is that it’s not just the aura,” he said. “It’s the music and how you lead with the body. Bring it all together and you can teach your partner a dance when they are already dancing it.”

“It’s delicate. Impressive.”

“That may be the first nice thing you’ve said about me.”

“I don’t hate you, Mr Asano. I hate the trouble you bring.”

Jason gave her a flat look.

“I know,” she said, not meeting his gaze. “We were the ones who brought you into this. But trouble clings to you like cat fur to a coat. You can’t deny that.”

“I’ve denied the Builder, Princess. I can deny you. Also, what do you know about coats? Who has a coat in the tropics?”

“Where did you learn to do that with your aura?” she asked, ignoring his question.

“As you’re aware, my aura is a little outside of the ordinary. I occasionally take the time to stop and rebuild my control techniques from the ground up, and one of those times I swapped aura control tips with a vampire.”

“A vampire?”

“His name’s Craig. He’s a friend.”

“Vampires should be killed on sight.”

“Not every vampire is a monster. Not in my world, anyway. Perhaps it’s the low magic that dampens their hunger and balances their minds, I don’t know.”

“Leaving vampires unchecked will cause grave problems down the line.”

“Oh, I’m aware. My friends from home brought word that as soon as I left, the vampires started a war.”

“Why would they wait until you leave?”

“Because people from my world have learned what it is to be my enemy, Princess.”

“This is not your world, Mr Asano.”

“I know. But my enemies here will learn too.”

She heard flint in his voice, reminding her of the cold, hard adventurer he had been on their expedition together. No one on their side had actually seen him fight, but the enemy survivors had been terrified of him. The Magic Society was still unsure what Jason had done to the member of their group who was still unconscious, weeks later. The church of the Healer said it was some kind of soul trauma and was sending a specialist. Anything that could be learned about how star seeds worked was a potential asset against the Builder.

Vesper took a note from her pocket and handed it to Jason.

“Go to that shop and buy the listed skill books,” she told him. “Once you’ve used them, we’ll go from there. Don’t just blindly think that what you learn from a skill book will be enough. I’ll work with you to integrate that knowledge. Make it your own.”

“I’m familiar with the process. It would be a little odd if I got to silver-rank without using my skill-book ability.”

“Using it and using it well are very different things.”

“True enough,” Jason acknowledged, tucking the note into his inventory. “Who am I going to run into this time? Another Irios? Some jealous admirer of Zara’s? The king?”

“I’ve already used that brush, Mr Asano. A good artist is versatile.”

“Fair enough.”

Jason was about to leave when a system box popped up in front of him.

-
- Contact [Claire Adeah] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Rick Geller] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Hannah Adeah] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Dustin Kettering] has entered communication range.
-

Jason immediately sent a voice chat request.

-
- You have entered a voice chat with [Rick Geller].
-

“Jason?” Rick’s voice appeared in Jason’s head.

"G'day Rick," Jason responded mentally. "What are you doing in town?"

"What are you doing alive?"

"It turns out death isn't for me. I gave it a couple of goes; did my due diligence, but nah. It turns out that coming back from the dead is kind of my thing."

"Sounds like you haven't changed."

"You might be surprised," Jason said.

"Really? If you're not standing next to some absurdly gorgeous woman right now, I might believe it."

Jason looked at Vesper, who was watching him and had realised something was happening.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Jason said.

"No? Cassandra Mercer? That silver-haired indenture? The damn Hurricane Princess? Is she why you're in Rimaros?"

"Definitely not," Jason said. "I arrived here when the monster surge started, that's all. I'm just a no-name adventurer."

"Where are you right now?" Rick asked.

"The royal palace."

"Of course you are."

"I assume you are too, since my chat isn't blocked."

"Just got here. I have to deliver an important report, but meet up after?"

"Absolutely. I'm here with a princess, so she can probably help me track you down."

"Oh, come on, Jason."

"I've told you before Rick: what I have can't be taught."

Jason and Vesper were walking down a long hallway. It was filled with portraits of men and women looking stern and regal, all with blue hair and the same circlet of gold set with a large sapphire. At the end of the hallway, it opened into a waiting room outside of some large impressive doors. The line of portraits ended opposite the doors with a picture of Soramir.

There was a palace official present, acting as escort for Rick Geller and his team, most of whom Jason had trained with in Greenstone. Aside from Rick, there were the elven sisters, Hannah and Claire. Dustin Kettering was a friend of Neil's, from their time suffering together in Thadwick Mercer's team. There was someone he didn't recognise with them; a woman of the runic people with their iconic dark skin lit up with glowing, tattoo-like sigils.

“Jason,” Rick hissed. “What are you doing here?”

At the same time, the palace official was bowing to Vesper.

“Your Highness,” he greeted.

“G’day Rick. Ladies. Dustin. This is Vesper; she’s a local tour guide.”

The palace official flashed an unhappy expression at Jason but it smoothed as Vesper made a subtle, restraining gesture. Before anyone else could speak the doors were opened from the other side by another official.

“Princess Vesper, Richard Geller and Jason Asano. Please enter and stand before the king.”

The rest of Rick’s team stayed behind with the official that had already been with them as Vesper led Jason and Rick in following the official into the palace throne room. It was large and long, with a central carpet of rich blue running down to a raised throne. The ceiling was a massive skylight made up of irregular glass fragments, as if they’d been shattered. Each was tinted in shades of blue that varied ever so slightly from fragment to fragment. The result was that the room felt like it was underwater, washed in shifting blues. Jason craned his neck like a tourist, not hiding the degree to which he was impressed.

The vast chamber was all the more cavernous for only having a few people in it as the official led them towards the throne at the far end. Sitting on it was a man with blue hair wearing the simple gold circlet from all the portraits outside. Flanking him to one side was Soramir and the other was Zila Rimaros. Dawn was also present, standing off to the side from the throne.

When they reached the end of the hall, the official bowed and left via a discreet side door. Vesper and Rick both kneeled as the Storm King looked sternly at Jason.

“So,” he said. “You’re Asano.”

“And your Zara’s dad. G’day, Your Kingness.”

Next to Jason, Rick made a muffled noise. Soramir took on a wry smile while Dawn shook her head.

“Is it true that you once gave the Mirror King a speech on why you wouldn’t kneel?” the Storm King asked.

“I wouldn’t call it a speech,” Jason said. “We were just chatting. I have some strong feelings on mandatory demonstrations of respect.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“That being said, I’ll take a scuffed knee over a slit throat, so if you’re going to have me executed if I don’t kneel, I’d appreciate you letting me know so I can get to it.”

"I think we both know that moment has passed, Mr Asano. What will you do if I decide to have you executed for your insolence?"

"Die on my feet. I've done it before."

"But can you again? Word is, you're all out of resurrections."

"You're listening to the Builder, now? That's not what I'd call a reputable source, Your Majesty."

The king stood up, took the three steps down from the throne and moved to stand in front of Jason. He was much taller, looking down as they met eye to eye.

"I can see why my daughter picked you," he said. "She has a penchant for reckless choices, and I imagine reckless choices would be the theme of your epitaph, if you'd ever stay dead."

"She picked me because I had the convenient double feature of being dead and on the far side of the world."

"My daughter might make a hash of the big choices, Mr Asano, but she's very good about the little ones. As you might expect, I had you looked into very thoroughly after she made her little mess."

"And?"

"And you've been running around acting like a gold-ranker since you were iron. I'd wonder how you survived like that, but you didn't, did you? Why not act with a little decorum when meeting me?"

"Because you told me not to."

"Did I?"

"You can fit a lot of people in this room, but the only ones here are friends and family, and some of those friends are mine. You don't have Dawn in this room if you're genuinely looking for trouble. You chose intimate and wanted to see if I'd notice because you're looking to take my measure. Plus, you're Zara's father."

"That girl never does the things I tell her."

"No, Your Majesty," Jason said. "But I'll bet she does the things you do."

The king chuckled.

"You know, Soramir wants me to marry one of our impressive young women off to you."

"I guessed as much. How do you feel about that?"

"That remains to be seen. Do you think you're worthy of them?"

"No. But worthy isn't what I'm looking for in a relationship."

"And what are you looking for?"

“Nothing. I need to work on myself for a while.”

The king nodded.

“I have to say, Mr Asano, you’re exactly what I expected.”

Jason blinked in surprise.

“I don’t think anyone has ever said that to me before.”

The king chuckled again as he turned and wandered out of Jason’s personal space.

“Vesper, Young Master Geller, please rise.”

The people next to Jason got to their feet. Vesper was shooting daggers at Jason from the corner of her eye while Rick glanced at him with a familiar mix of apprehension and disbelief. The king turned back to the three with a warm expression.

“Vesper, we’ve had you doing a difficult job with difficult people under difficult circumstances. We’re very happy with the results, thus far. Please continue knowing that you have our full confidence.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“And you, Young Master Geller. You’re a friend of Mr Asano?”

“We did some training together, Your Majesty.”

“And how was that?”

Rick looked unsure of himself for a moment before answering.

“Horrible, Your Majesty.”

The king chuckled.

“Alright,” he said. “That’s enough fun for me. Now there is the unfortunate matter at hand. You have a report to make, Young Master Geller.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Then you have the floor.”

Rick nodded, pulling a crystal recording projector from his dimensional satchel. He set it on the floor, inserted a crystal and an image was projected into the room. At first, all it showed was a massive cloud of dust, moving through the desert. Based on the size of the visible landmarks, it was the size of a sandstorm. After a short time, something moved out of the dust, although it took time as the great moving thing threw up more dust as it went. Slowly they made out a shape so large it occupied the vast majority of the dust cloud.

“Are those buildings?” Zila asked. “This is one of the Builder’s dimensional cities?”

“It is,” Rick said. “This one is a ground city, but it moves. There appear to be thousands of thick legs underneath that move it forward along with some kind of traction system. You should have received reports when it started moving south several weeks ago.”

“We did,” Soramir said. Rick looked at him, his face seeming familiar, although he couldn’t sense an aura from the man. Then he realised he’s seen his face outside the throne room, in the very first portrait. Soramir had a wry smile at Rick’s expression.

“Please continue, young man.”

Rick nodded.

“My team was one of many assigned as outriding scouts, maintaining a distant perimeter as the city moved south. It went through the arid lands and the Arkivahl Desert, which are sparsely populated. The City of Glass was thankfully not in its path. As it neared the coast and Storm Kingdom’s northern border, there were two cities in its path. Small ones, but heavily populated. Especially during a surge. Forces were mobilised to attack the city, but the attack failed. The city has two diamond-rank essence users and some kind of diamond rank flesh abomination. I haven’t seen it, but reports describe it as a dragon of flesh and steel. Not a match for a diamond-rank essence user, but a highly destructive threat.”

“What happened to the cities?” Jason asked.

“They have already fallen,” the king said, his earlier joviality gone. “We received word several days ago.”

“The assessment,” Rick said, “is that between the defences built into the city and its defenders, a minimum of four diamond-rankers will be required to successfully attack it. Five or more would be better.”

“We have one more diamond-ranker,” Zila said. “He is currently monitoring the underwater city already here in the kingdom, which is also on the move. We can only assume that it presents a level of danger equivalent to what was just described to us. The two cities are converging on the northern reaches of the kingdom. There are two more cities in the kingdom with diamond-rankers we can call on. That will be five. Enough for one city. Maybe.”

“I don’t imagine that the Builder will be so kind as to leave us to one battle at a time,” the King said.

Soramir looked at Jason, then followed Jason’s gaze to Dawn, standing unobtrusively back from the others. She looked back at Jason.

“No,” she told him.

Chapter 520

No One Telling Me I Can't

Jason and Dawn walked towards each other until they were face to face.

"No," she repeated.

"Dawn."

"I said no."

"Yeah," Jason said softly. "You did."

She wheeled around, turning her back on him as she ran a frustrated hand over her face. The rest of the room's occupants looked on in confused silence, aside from Soramir. He was looking at them with narrowed eyes.

"Why do you have to be like this?" Dawn asked, her back still to Jason. "Time and again, why are you so eager to make the sacrifice?"

"You know me," Jason said, the habitual amusement in his voice a transparent veneer over his sober undertone. "Hero complex."

"How many times were you the one to step out on Earth when the factions were squabbling over meaningless scraps like scavengers?"

"You stepped out with me. You, me and Farrah."

"And look at what it did to you. You're a vase smashed and put back together so many times you're more glue than pottery."

"That's a little hurtful."

She turned back around to face him.

"Why do you always have to make things so difficult?" she asked.

"I'm a delight to work with."

"When I first tried to work with you, you killed me."

"It was one time."

"You looted my corpse."

"I was meant to pass that up? You're a diamond-ranker. That made me rich."

"You're an idiot," she said.

"That's not news to anyone. If I were smarter, I wouldn't be the one standing here. It took me way too many stupid choices to get this far. Why stop now?"

The Storm King cleared his throat.

"Perhaps one of you would care to enlighten the rest of us as to what you are discussing."

“Your ancestor should have figured most of it out,” Jason said, not taking his eyes from Dawn. “Why don’t you go ahead and explain, Soramir.”

“The Hierophant is allowed to intervene in our world a single time,” Soramir said. “Even if we call in aid, we can, at most, eliminate a single one of the two cities bearing down on our kingdom. I believe Mr Asano wants her to use her one intervention to deal with the other city.”

“Is that even possible for one person?” The King asked.

“If she is the person,” Soramir said, “Then I believe so.”

The King turned to Dawn.

“Lady Hierophant. What would it take for such a feat to be even possible?”

Dawn turned her gaze on the king.

“No one telling me I can’t.”

She turned back to Jason as the others exchanged uncertain looks, except for Soramir and the king. Soramir revealed nothing on his expression, while the king had just caught a dose of Dawn’s aura and was looking shell-shocked.

“Uh... may I say something?” Rick said in the pause.

“Go ahead, Rick,” Jason said.

“The two diamond-rankers from the northern continent who were part of the failed attack on the rolling city are still trailing it with the outrider teams. I don’t want to speak for diamond rankers but it seems likely they’ll help.”

“That would make seven,” Zila said. “Perhaps that would be enough to handle one city and then the other.”

“It won’t be,” Dawn said.

“May I ask a question?” Vesper said.

“I think any perspective is valuable right now,” Soramir said. “Please go ahead, Vesper.”

“Lady Hierophant,” Vesper said. “Why are you talking like Jason is the one who gets to choose if you act? Why were we summoned to attend this briefing?”

“Because I did not come to this world to help protect it from the Builder,” Dawn said. “Warning the Adventure Society and the governments was my personal decision, but you have the strength to fight for yourselves. I was sent here to see that Jason Asano completes the task for which he returned to this world.”

“Just to be clear,” Jason said. “I was coming back anyway.”

“Jason is not important to your world,” Dawn said. “He was important in that he helped trigger the long-delayed monster surge, but that is done. What he needs to do now

is for another world, not this one. I was sent to make sure that task was carried out, which cannot be done until the monster surge is over.”

“What I have to do doesn’t matter,” Jason said, forestalling questions.

“The point,” Dawn said, “is that my intervention needs to be used to keep Jason alive.”

“And you claim this task is worth leaving my kingdom to fall?” The Storm King asked.

“Yes,” Dawn said. “Your kingdom has many people, but if Asano fails, his entire world dies.”

“I’m still unsure as to why Asano gets to choose whether you help us or not,” Vesper said. “Aren’t you in control of your own intervention?”

“Jason cannot control my intervention,” Dawn said. “What he does know is that if he runs off and attacks one of these cities, I will go and pull him out. And since I am intervening anyway, there is no reason to use anything but my full measure of power.”

“Like holding himself hostage?” Rick asked.

“But that only works so long as he’s willing to make a suicide rush at one of these cities with complete commitment,” Vesper said. “Why would he do that? What would it get him?”

“It gets me acting to assist the Storm Kingdom,” Dawn said.

“You’re saying,” Vesper said, “that he will go that far just to force your hand into helping us when it gets him nothing and costs him what has to be his strongest asset in this world. I ask again: why?”

“What kind of question is that?” Jason asked. “We’re talking about a kingdom full of people. Maybe you can do some evacuating, but it’s the people with power that’ll escape the Builder’s forces moving in. The others will all get left behind. It’s not heroic to give up a safety net if it can help millions of people. It’s the bare minimum you can do and still be a person.”

“I cannot stop Jason and take him far from here without intervening,” Dawn said. “Your family could, but why would they? He’s trying to save your kingdom. His ability to force my hand is why it is effectively his choice as to whether or not I intervene. All I can do is try and convince him to take his allies and leave.”

She turned her gaze back on Jason.

“Which he will not. He is stubbornly human for an outworlder. Again and again, I have watched him sacrifice for those who turned around and treated him poorly. Exploited him. And he kept doing it, even when it made his own family fear what it turned him into. That is

how far he will go to secure my assistance for you, for no more reason than you need him to."

"They get it, Dawn. I have a hero complex."

"I'm asking you to walk away, Jason. You would risk billions of people and a world full of life arguably more deserving of help than the human race for one kingdom."

"Dawn, why ask when you already know the answer?"

"I don't know," she said. "Perhaps in the hope that all you've been through is finally enough. Perhaps because I like knowing that it never will be. You don't have a hero complex, Jason. You are—"

"Don't say it," Jason told her. "I'll blush."

"Are you truly going to claim that a being of your resources, power and knowledge cannot find a way to stop this man?" Zila asked Dawn.

"Of course she can," Jason said. "She just won't."

"Why not?" Soramir asked.

"Because the World-Phoenix sent me in person to watch over Jason because it wanted me to connect with the mortality I had long drifted away from. At first, I thought that meant embracing the small moments and simple pleasures. I became a painter again, as I had been in my youth. But I could have learned that anywhere. It was the stubborn foolishness of a mortal that kept letting the world burn his hands as he pulled it from the fire that she wanted me to see."

Dawn turned to the other silver-rankers.

"Jason is a fool. A mad idiot who makes one terrible choice after another. But sometimes we need the passion of young fools. They will make the choices that the sensible and wise will not. They challenge the impossible. That is why the World-Phoenix sent me to Jason Asano."

"Okay, now I am blushing, I can feel it."

Dawn laughed.

"I'm trying to make a speech here," she told him.

"And it's very nice," Jason said. "Very flattering. And I know that we just had this big conversation about me getting my selfish way and pushing you into helping out, but maybe there's a way to even the odds without forcing you to step up."

"And what's that?" the Storm King asked.

"Does this world have some kind of magic plutonium?" Jason asked. "Because I know a guy."

Rimarus was mobilising on an unprecedented scale, the Magic Society, Adventure Society and government working in conjunction to muster all the available forces. Only the minimal force required to defend the city would be left in place. With most adventurers from silver-rank up preparing to move out in a fleet of airships and through a cornucopia of portals.

The Storm King and Soramir, who had been trying to shape the chaos from an administrative hub within the palace, finally stepping through a door to a private balcony during a lull for a break.

“Thank you for your guidance, Ancestor,” the Storm King said after activating the balcony’s privacy screen.

“What for?” Soramir asked.

“I was reluctant to take such a casual approach to Asano but you talked me into it. Now he had swayed this mysterious Hierophant to our aid. What is a hierophant, anyway?”

“A hierophant is someone like me, and one day, you,” Soramir said. “She once held a position of great power that she has passed along, although her position was far more than the king of an ordinary physical realm. Hierophant, for me, is a description. For her, it is a title.”

“Her aid may be all that holds this kingdom together, and it hinged on a boy. If you hadn’t advised me on how to approach him...”

The king trailed off, shaking his head.

“That was not to sway him, descendant. He was always going to help us, however we treated him. As the Hierophant said, it is simply who he is. I wanted to show him our goodwill. And, if all works out, we must show him our gratitude. At this point, any fool can see his friendship will be a treasure in the decades and centuries to come.”

“If the Hierophant saves the kingdom, I’ll shower them both in glory. And if she is right about the Builder’s intentions, she will.”

“Asano has had his fill of fame and found the taste bitter. You need to hide his involvement, descendant.”

“People will know.”

“And they will know you want them to keep their mouths shut. The combination will afford him as much privacy and protection as we can offer.”

“I defer to your wisdom, Ancestor. We should not be thinking ahead right now, however. I do not like our allocation of resources, putting out weakest bet where we can least afford to lose.”

“I share your concerns, but to do it any other way would tip our hand.”

Soramir turned off the privacy screen.

"That is as much break as we can afford," he said. "I'll assist you as long as I can with the administrative tasks before I need to deploy."

"Thank you, ancestor."

In the largest Artifice Association workshop in Rimaros, resources were being brought in by a train of couriers with dimensional space powers. Travis was at a drafting desk, madly drawing out designs with input from Clive, Gary and the Knowledge priestess, Gabrielle.

Travis had a profound grasp of the weapon he was designing and had no trouble recalling the details. One of his essence abilities was specialised in constructing and modifying design models in his mind. Like holographic recordings only he could see without Jason's Party interface. Jason had commented that it was the closest he had seen to the images projected by his own interface ability.

Travis' knowledge fell short in two areas, which was where Clive, Gary and Gabrielle came in. The first area was with the tools he had to work with. Magitech weapons were technological as well as magical, which artificer workshops were not equipped to handle.

Gary was an artificer and, while he specialised in weapons and armour, he was well versed in all the tools of his trade. Travis explained what he needed to the others, Clive helping decipher that into magical terms. Gary's role was to determine what was possible with the tools at hand and where they would need to adapt the design.

In addition to not knowing the tools at his disposal, Travis' other shortfall was his ignorance of the materials he had to work with. Gabrielle's contribution was in determining appropriate materials. As priests and priestesses of Knowledge were wont to do, she had simply turned up where she was needed and got to work. Gabrielle was able to tell him what local resources he could use as elements of the rapidly forming design were completed. Those were the materials being brought in, ready for assembly to begin.

"And you're certain this is alright?" Clive asked Gabrielle, not for the first time. "It seems like we're wading into a lot of grey areas in terms of what your goddess would generally allow."

"The highest transcendent beings all operate in balance," Gabrielle explained. "The goddess of Death and the Reaper, for example, each have their areas of authority and they work with an ebb and flow. The builder had come to our world and has been pushing the boundaries of the agreements it agreed to abide by. This gives the gods of our world

an amount of leeway to push their own boundaries in reaction. The time has come for the Builder to pay for his recklessness.”

“I hate that I’m not a part of this,” Jason said. He was on the balcony of his cloud house, feeling at a loss. Compared to the chaos taking place in Livaros, sleepy Arnote was quiet and tranquil. This was especially true looking out over the placid, turquoise lagoon.

“You have pushed me more than a little today,” Dawn told him. “This is what I ask in return. If you participate in this operation, the Builder has an open invitation to use any of his assembled forces to come after you. People are going to die today, Jason. A lot of people. There are diamond-rank hornets in that nest, Jason. Don’t poke it.”

Chapter 521

A Lot More Steps

“Travis is supervising the construction now,” Clive said, shortly after arriving at the cloud house with Gary. They joined the rest of their teams, minus Jason, in getting ready to head for the Adventure Society. Farrah, Gary and Rufus would be joining with Jason’s team for the operation, with only Jason sitting out at Dawn’s insistence. Jason had modified the cloud house to have a locker room with separation screens, allowing the men and women to change privately while still talking.

“The actual construction is being done by high-ranking artificers,” Gary said. “That kind of delicate precision work is outside of my field. All I could offer was what was and wasn’t possible in terms of manufacturing with artifice techniques. I don’t even understand a lot of what he needed, and he said it didn’t even take magic normally.”

“The principles involved were extremely tricky,” Clive agreed. “This whole field of magic-like effects with no magic is fascinating, but I get the feeling that Knowledge is going to be very careful about how it’s introduced to our world. She wouldn’t let Jason do it at all.”

“Even on Jason’s world,” Farrah said, “that kind of expertise requires no less extensive and specialist training than magical study does here.”

“Where is Jason?” Clive asked. He had put on his combat robes and was sliding wands into the thigh holsters. His growth-item staff was slung on his back, held in place by a small circular item set into his robe. It allowed the staff to be grabbed or replaced easily, holding it like a magnet.

“Downstairs in the waterfall room,” Farrah said. “He doesn’t like us all going out like this without him.”

“Are you sure he hasn’t snuck off?” Rufus asked. Farrah shook her head.

“He knows that it’s too easy for the Builder to kill him off in a battle like this where both sides are deploying diamond-rank combatants,” she said. “I know that isn’t the kind of thing that tends to stop Jason, but Dawn stuck her neck out for him here. He’s not going to betray the one thing she asked in return.”

“He won’t be idle,” Humphrey said. “Monsters won’t stop coming just because most of the adventurers are heading off for battle. Those that aren’t participating will have their hands full.”

“I’m going to go let him know how it went with Travis,” Clive said, heading for the stairs.

“Not a lot of point,” Farrah said after Clive left. “With the connection Jason has to his cloud house, now, I’m fairly certain he can see and hear everything that happens in it.”

“He can WHAT?” Humphrey yelled.

“Oh, calm down,” Sophie told him.

The waterfall room was empty other than the boards on every wall that allowed Jason to write in the cloud-stuff like a chalkboard. The notes for Jason’s project were scrawled across them like the mad scribbling of a serial-killing wizard, although Jason wasn’t paying them any attention. He was standing at the cave entrance where the waterfall rushed past in its path down the cliff-face outside. The gap was the only part of the room’s natural stone not hidden behind walls, floor and ceiling.

He stood staring at the plummeting water, close enough to be splashed by it. The roar of the water was muffled as the cloud walls absorbed the sound instead of letting it reverberate through the room. Standing right in front of it, though, Jason got the full effect.

Clive came downstairs, seeing the room for the first time. His eyes immediately shot to the astral magic scrawled over every wall, only for blank cloud walls to rise up in front of them, slightly shrinking the room.

“Another day,” Jason told him as he turned around and moved into the room, away from the sound of crashing water.

“Jason, what was that? I only caught a glimpse, but some of what I saw...”

“We don’t have time for that today. We’ll get into it when we do.”

Clive frowned at the now-blank walls, but after a moment turned his attention back to Jason.

“They’re working on the devices under Travis’ supervision. He keeps reminding everyone that he has no idea if they’ll actually work, though. We’re cobbling together multi-disciplinary weapons with no testing and no one who truly understands how the entire device works. No even Knowledge can tell us that, because there isn’t anyone who knows for sure.”

“Travis has done this kind of work before,” Jason said. “He’s not the most confident guy in the world, but he knows how to improvise overcomplicated magic ordnance. Did he explain about radiation?”

“He said you might ask and to tell you there won’t be any,” Clive said. “The materials the goddess of Knowledge suggested are designed to emit resonating-force damage. It’s perfect for dealing with the Builder’s minions and all the hard materials they like to implant themselves with.”

“Thank you for the update, although it’s not my business at this point. I have my own job, keeping the monsters off this island while most of the adventurers are at war. You and the others need to get your heads in the game. Even if this goes the way we want, a lot of people are going to fall in this battle.”

“Maybe Dawn was wrong about what the Builder is up to,” Clive said. “Maybe it will go better than we think.”

“Don’t bet on Dawn being wrong, Clive.”

Clive nodded to himself.

“That’s about what I figured. We’re about to head out.”

“Good luck, and come back alive.”

“We’ll do our best.”

After Clive made his way back up, the inner walls vanished to reveal Jason’s notes scrawled over the walls once he was gone. Jason was glancing over them when Arabelle came down the stairs.

“You’re not going to see them off?” she asked.

“No.”

“It would be accepting an involuntary separation all over again?”

“We don’t have time to start digging through my head,” Jason said. “That’s far too big a mess to delve into lightly.”

“Yes, but there never seems to be time, does there? You ran off with your team for two weeks.”

“Things are busy for everyone. You do the work and you heal up after. That’s how adventurers operate.”

“Jason, mental recovery isn’t like physical recovery. You can’t just go out, take the damage and then come to me to fix you with a recovery spell. It takes time and work and honesty.”

“I know.”

“There’s no going back to the way you were. There’s only going forward.”

“I know.”

“And knowing is the first step, but there are more steps than that, Jason. A lot more steps. When this is over – and I mean the battle, not the monster surge – then you and I are going to sit down and get into it.”

“Alright,” Jason said.

Fleets of ships and airships converged on the north from all across the Sea of Storms. Every adventurer from silver-rank up had been mobilised, and every airship that could carry them had been commandeered. Regular ships were not used as they would be vulnerable to the Builder's moving underwater city.

One of the sea's magical storms was roaring through the central waters, necessitating a wide, arcing approach. Normal protocols had airships operating at far lower than top speed, so as to avoid monster attention, but moving in a fleet was different. With such a formidable force, any gold-rank monsters too stupid to avoid the sea of adventurer auras were swiftly slaughtered.

The underwater city was also moving toward the northern reaches, as the rolling land city moved south toward the coast. The cities in its path had been evacuated as it moved south, leaving empty infrastructure that it moved through like a bison passing through long grass.

The adventurer fleets and Builder cities all converged on the southern coast of the northern continent for one of the largest-scale battles, both in numbers and rank, that the world had ever seen.

With most of Rimaros' adventure population flying north of crowded airship, only a token force remained to defend the city, on a constant state of alert. This included Jason's team, waiting in a ready area of the Adventure Society campus with other teams selected for the task. Unsurprisingly, talk amongst the adventurers was about the Builder.

"What is even the point of staging attacks like this?"

"I heard it even offered to leave the Storm Kingdom alone."

"There's no way an offer like that is real. It would just be part of some plan to hurt us even worse later."

"But isn't it only after the astral spaces? Why bother attacking us?"

"Who do you think is stopping them? Plus, they probably want to crush the Storm Kingdom so other countries let them take the astral spaces instead of getting wiped out. I've heard some countries already staged attacks on other Builder cities and got wiped out instead."

"Those are just rumours, like that crap about the god of Purity summoning a bunch of bird people."

Humphrey's team didn't participate in the discussion. They stood with other teams attached to the Geller family that hadn't been sent out on airships. This included Rick and his team, who likewise stayed quiet, despite knowing more than most.

The defence of Arnote was low-priority and would remain so unless Builder forces arrived to change that. The island's gold-rank residents were all gone except for Pelli. An elderly member of the royal family, she lived a relatively humble life as mayor of Palisaros, the village where Jason was living. She was a core user, and while she did have the power that came with her rank, her abilities were not combat-focused.

Most of the silver-rankers had also been sent away. Teams had been left at critical points around the island to respond to any normal surge-related threats, although Palisaros itself only had Jason and Pelli, and Jason left the village shortly after his team did. Shade, in the form of a bird-like flying construct, carried him around the island. He stopped in locations just long enough to get a sense of them with his aura perception, to give himself as many viable portal destination options as possible.

Under normal circumstances, extending aura senses to their limits was rude, but this was no time for politeness. Adventurers across the island were pushing their senses to the limit and Jason was no exception. With the island's sparse population making it easier to avoid being overwhelmed with input, he could spread his senses very far.

In the right location, his senses could take in half the island. He could sense the other adventurers likewise extending their perception, one member from each team on the island doing so. By limiting themselves, they wouldn't interfere with each other, which was why rules about using senses at full strength existed in the first place.

Jason sensed another aura and he was fairly certain he recognised it. Some time ago he had briefly sensed an aura pointed in his direction that withdrew the moment he sensed it. From that fleeting glimpse, he had thought it was a gold rank aura, based on the strength. Now that he felt it again, he realised it was more like his own: silver-rank, but immensely powerful.

This time the sense didn't shrink away from him, although he felt a reaction as his senses encountered it. He suspected it was stronger than his own aura, although the difference was not vast. It was also very well-controlled and he was able to sense very little from it. The one thing he did sense was something about its nature that differentiated it from normal auras. There was a rich and complicated sense of layering to the aura that took him a moment to realise what it was.

Jason had heard about people with four aura powers, although he had only encountered one with four perception powers, which had been on Earth. Normally, both perception and aura powers were restricted to one per essence user. It was possible,

however, for racial gift evolutions to unlock that limitation. A few rare essence users had one aura ability or perception ability per essence. Some even had one of each.

Jason made his way to the town where he sensed the aura, finding the owner waiting for him on the roof of a building as he arrived. It was a celestine woman with candy-pink hair and eyes. Shade's flight form dissolved and was drawn into Jason's cloak as he descended to the roof.

"I think you and I need to have a talk," he told her.

"Is this the time for that, Asano?" she asked, not hiding that she knew who he was.

"If a monster shows up we can postpone. Who are you?"

Chapter 522

A Normal Man

The office door of Havi Estos burst open to admit Havi's stumbling, flustered great-nephew. Havi looked up unhappily from the accounting papers he had been concentrating on.

"Jono, what have we said about knocking?"

"Sorry, boss, but—"

He was cut off as a strong arm grabbed him by the back of the shirt and yanked him back out of the office door to clear the way. A woman with bright pink hair stormed in and planted herself in front of Havi's desk.

"Estella," he said warmly. "I don't normally do personal meetings here."

"My other thought was burning this place to the ground, Estos, so you should be thankful I want the money."

"Then, thank you, I suppose."

"What did I tell you after last time? That if you send me to look into some crazy powerful monster, we're done. So you're going to pay me – triple, by the way – and then you're going to forget I exist and never call on me again."

Havi observed her from under raised eyebrows.

"I take it there was a problem with... what was the name?"

"Jason Asano," Jono's voice came feebly from outside the office.

"That was it," Havi said. "There was a problem with Mr Asano?"

"Yes, Havi. There was a big bloody problem with Jason Asano, starting with the fact that I just got done escaping the shadow monsters he sent looking for me the moment he sensed me. Shadow monsters, by the way, that were extremely difficult to spot and evade."

"All I asked you to do was take a peek at his aura and see what you find. Unless you were careless, he shouldn't have been able to sense someone with your strength. Tell me everything."

"If you want anything out of me, Havi, then you pay me first."

"That is not ordinarily how I do business, Miss Warnock, but—"

"Then I guess I'll go with burning the place down after all."

She turned and strode out.

"Estella..."

She didn't stop and left the office. Havi's figure blurred and vanished and he appeared in his office doorway, but she was already gone from the outer office. Jono was sitting in his chair, looking nervous.

"I thought this building was meant to have protections against people strolling in or out," Havi said.

"I thought you liked using her because she doesn't care about that kind of thing," Jono said. Havi turned a gaze on him and Jono wilted.

"Quite right, Jono."

Jono let out a breath as Havi returned to his office.

"What have I told you about breathing, Jono?" Havi's voice came from his office.

"Sorry boss."

"Find out everything about Jason Asano, Jono. Everything."

"Yes, boss."

"And send Warnock her money. Triple the usual rate."

"You look nervous, granddaughter. Is that why I haven't seen you in a little while?"

"I'm a little concerned about one of your neighbours, Grandpa."

Estella cast her gaze along the river to the house sitting beside where the river spilled over the clifftop. Warwick followed her gaze.

"I was wondering why you had your aura so retracted. You know Mr Asano, Stella?"

"Kind of. Can we just go inside, please?"

In the house, Warwick started brewing a pot of tea.

"What have you gone and gotten yourself into?" Warwick asked. "You know that Asano's name has been appearing a lot over the last few weeks, within certain rarefied circles?"

"Oh, I've heard."

"Perhaps you should tell me everything. I know Mr Asano a little. The man makes a delightful smoky meat sauce. I might be able to smooth things over."

"I don't think he knows who I am and I'd rather keep it that way," Estella said. "I wouldn't be here at all if you hadn't asked me to come. Is it something to do with what's happening in the city? The Adventure Society is mobilising on a level I've never seen. Word is that the city is preparing for war with the Builder cult who were around a few years ago."

"That's exactly what's happening, and exactly why I asked you here. But first, tell me everything about what has you so nervous."

“A few weeks ago, Havi Estos hired me to poke around Asano’s aura.”

Warwick burst out laughing.

“You kicked a steel plate there, girl.”

“Tell me about it. I picked a moment he was the least on guard. He was buying cheese. He noticed the moment my senses got anywhere near him. The way he felt, he’s like Amos Pensinata.”

“I’m quite curious as to what Amos will make of Mr Asano,” Warwick said. “I’m not alone in that regard.”

“I thought you’d tell me off for working for Estos.”

“There are certain inevitabilities within society that can go very messily. Estos is a man who makes such affairs go cleanly and there is always a place for such people. He’s careful about keeping his hands clean and too smart to let yours get dirty for him. If you are going to continue to avoid joining the Adventure Society, you could do worse. Just be careful.”

“That’s why I’m done with Estos. He kept sending me to take a look at the kind of people you don’t want looking back.”

Warwick nodded. He finished the delicate tea brewing process and poured them each a cup.

“What happened with Asano?” he asked.

“He sensed me and sent some kind of shadow creatures to try and track me down. Very hard to detect.”

“But they didn’t manage to track you?”

Estella shook her head.

“Asano didn’t get a clean look at me. It wasn’t long after that when I started hearing his name associated with other names. Like Rimaros. I don’t need that kind of trouble, so I’ve been staying quiet.”

“And that’s everything?”

“It is.”

“I don’t think that will be a problem. I’m sure Asano will be reasonable, and I can’t have my granddaughter too nervous to come visit me. You’ll probably be meeting him soon, anyway.”

“I don’t like the sound of that. This is about the Adventure Society mobilising?”

“Yes. Almost every adventurer in Rimaros will be involved. Pelli has asked me if you would help protect Arnote while that’s going on.”

“Grandpa, I’m a scout and a spy, not a warrior.”

“With the Adventure Society busy, they won’t be tracking manifestations and sending response teams as normal. Teams are being situated around the island to handle any monster manifestations, but Pelli will be the only gold-ranker here. What we need is your sensory range, which can cover a much greater distance than the silver-rank teams assigned to the island. You just need to watch for manifestations outside of the sensory ranges of the teams on the other side of the island. Pelli will cover this side.”

“And where does Asano come in?”

“He’ll also be here on Arnote. He can use portals and is going to help the teams with rapid response. Part of that will be staying mobile and, like you, expanding his senses to cover as much territory as he can.”

“If we’re both blasting our senses at full range, he’s probably going to recognise me.”

“That seems likely, yes.”

“And if he decides to make an issue of it?”

“Then talk to him. The royal family thinks everything needs to be a political game, but my read of Asano is that he’ll appreciate some straightforward honesty. You haven’t done anything to hurt him, so just deal with him straight. Tell him that you’re my granddaughter and I think he’ll be reasonable.”

“You think he will?”

“You can never truly predict another person, granddaughter. I thought you would become a celebrated adventurer, once.”

“And I thought I’d grow up with parents. People inevitably disappoint, Grandfather.”

“All of us?”

“You just asked me to blast my aura out in front of the exact person I’m trying to avoid.”

“I take your point,” he said with a wry smile. “You could say no.”

“You know that I won’t,” she said. “You only ever have to ask. Maybe you can help smooth things over with Asano beforehand, though. Seeing as you know him.”

“I would very much like that,” he said. “Unfortunately, I’m deploying in roughly the time it will take to finish my cup of tea.”

“It’s happening now?”

“I was rather hoping that you’d arrive earlier,” he admitted. “But I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

On the flat roof of the largest building in a small town, Estella Warnock was sitting on a folding chair, failing to concentrate on the book in her hands. She was trying to distract

herself since a monster manifestation would be impossible to miss unless someone came by to knock her unconscious. Which, she contemplated, was not out of the question.

With her senses pushed out to their full extent, every aura on almost half the island was within her sensory range, teasing at the edges of her perception. Only the low population allowed her to push her perception so far without suffering from sensory overload. She was also distracted by the anticipation of a certain aura entering her range. She put away the book, giving up on self-distraction.

It was not long after when she finally sensed the aura come into her range. She felt the reaction as it sensed her in turn, the source of the aura shifting direction to move towards her. She looked up at a dark bird-like shape gliding through the air and watched it disperse into a cloud of darkness that was drawn into the cloak of the man inside it, now floating down towards her. He wore combat robes in the dark red of dried blood and his cloak was lit up with pinpricks of light. He arrived in front of her, eerie blue and orange eyes staring out from a dark hood.

“I think you and I need to have a talk,” he said, his voice granite cold.

“Is this the time for that, Asano?”

“If a monster shows up we can postpone. Who are you?”

“Estella Warnock.”

He reached up and pushed the hood back from his head. He wasn't especially handsome by silver-rank standards but his dark hair was oddly shiny and his strange eyes compelling. His gaze moved to her hair; the same colour as her grandfather's.

“Warwick?” he asked.

“My grandfather.”

“Did he send you to spy on me?”

“No. That was Havi Estos.”

She could tell from his expression that it took him a moment to place the name.

“Someone pointed me in his direction a while back. He's some kind of criminal middleman, right?”

“Kind of criminal, kind of not. He used to pay me to look into people. Examine their auras to get a sense of them.”

“Used to?”

“I don't do that anymore. He kept pointing me at the kinds of people I didn't want to be pointed at.”

“If it makes you feel better, the royal family sent diamond-rankers to do the same thing. That kind of company speaks highly of you.”

“Diamond-rankers? As in, more than one?”

“I know, right? I should move to a small town or something. Wait, I did, and they came to my barbecue. Do I have to move to the moon? No, if some diamond-rankers found out there was some guy living on the moon, they'd definitely check it out. You're a local, right? How do you lay low in Rimaros?”

“I think that boat may have sailed for you,” she said warily. The encounter was not going the way she expected. “Are you going to come back at me for spying on you?”

“Lady, if I made an enemy of everyone that went rummaging through my soul, I'd have diamond-rankers, gods and great astral beings on my enemies list. Oh, wait. Look, the point is, I can't go after every silver-ranker that comes poking around when I've got Purity and the Builder sending assassins after me. It seems like you were just doing a job, and since you're Warwick's granddaughter I'm not going to make an issue of it. As long as you're done prodding me for goodies.”

“All I'm looking for is to have nothing else to do with you.”

“That's a little hurtful, but smart. I'd have nothing to do with me if I could get away with it. I'm not sure how reliable you are, though. You sold out your employer awfully fast.”

“Not employer. Client. Occasional and former client, who kept putting me in situations I didn't want to be in. And I know what trouble will come from him. You seem like a whole other kind of trouble.”

“Oh, I am. You should definitely have as little to do with me as possible. On an unrelated note, we should stay in immediate contact.”

“What?”

“You're here monitoring the island with your crazy perception range, right?”

“You should talk. At least I have a power for it. You're just weird.”

“I am not weird. I'm normal. I'm a normal man who eats normal sandwiches and occasionally saves the world.”

“What are you talking about... actually, I don't want to know.”

“My point is that we should stay in contact so you can warn me if something pops up so I can portal people as quickly as possible.”

“And how would we do that?”

Something appeared in front of Estella.

➤ [Jason Asano has invited you to join a party.](#)

“What is this?”

“Just a way to keep in touch.”

“I don't like it.”

“It's fine. It definitely won't hurt.”

“Yeah, because no man ever said that to me before.”

Jason snorted a laugh

“Fair enough. Look, it's just a telepathy thing for communication. You've never used one before on an adventuring expedition?”

“I'm not an adventurer.”

“You're not?”

“No.”

“Then why are you here helping out?”

“My grandfather asked me to.”

“Did he tell you that you might run into me here?”

“He didn't say might. He told me I would.”

“And you did it anyway?”

“My grandfather asked me to.”

He flashed an impish grin that definitely wasn't mischievously sexy.

“I like you, Estella Warnock. You should come to one of my barbecues.”

“This would be the barbecues where diamond-rankers show up?”

“Good point. You might want to...”

He trailed off and they both turned their heads to look west.

“Duty calls,” he said. “That's the response team I'm sensing downstairs, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I'll go open them up a portal. You should accept that party invite. The magic communication one, not the barbecue one. Although, that too.”

“Fine,” she conceded.

-
- You have joined a party.
 - Party leader is [Jason Asano].
 - Voice chat is available.
-

The team moved out of the portal and raced off in the direction of the manifestation without a word. Jason stayed next to the portal, a cloud chair manifesting under him as he sat.

“Shade, did I make an idiot of myself with that woman?”

"I thought it was fine, Mr Asano."

"I shouldn't have asked her out like that."

"You invited her to a social gathering, Mr Asano, not to a candlelit dinner."

"I just got done telling people I wasn't looking for someone."

"Are you?"

"No! I need to, you know. Work through my own stuff before I start dumping it on someone else."

"Then perhaps you should stop avoiding Mrs Remore."

"I am not avoiding Arabelle," Jason said. "What I should be avoiding is celestines. All these crazy gorgeous women are affecting my judgement."

"Yes, Mr Asano. That must be what's doing it."

Chapter 523

This One Time

The lumbering figure was only passingly humanoid, its massive body embedded with coral that jutted from its flesh like spiked armour. It was still some way offshore, yet the sea only reached up to the giant's thighs. What was above the surface was already a match in height for a five-storey building.

"Asano," Pelli said through voice chat. "I'm sensing a gold-rank monster near your location."

"Yep," Jason said. "I'm just looking it up."

He was already painted in monster blood, some of which had smeared from his hand onto the magical marble tablet he was holding. It was a copy of the Magic Society's monster almanac in which Jason was looking up the monster wading out of the sea.

"Reef giant," he read from the tablet. "Matches the description."

"They're a common monster in this region," Pelli told him. "Common for gold-rank, anyway. They're slow, but they're incredibly tough, which is a bad match for my abilities."

"It's fine," Jason said. "That's my specialty."

"Jason, don't fight a gold-rank monster alone. I'll be there as soon as I clear the flock attacking this town."

"Don't worry," he told her. "I've got something to boost me."

"If you insist on fighting it, beware of its coral-tipped whips," she warned him. "They're much faster than the monster itself."

"So I'm reading."

The beach was littered with monster corpses; freakish abominations combining elements of grasshoppers, cicadas and lobsters called lobhoppers. Jason put away the monster almanac and cast an eye over the dead creatures.

"Shade, who is naming these monsters?"

"I believe it falls to the person who first encounters them."

"I bet it was the same person who named the shab. It's just lazy; the guy should be ashamed of himself."

Dozens of the silver-rank monsters had launched themselves out of the sea, yet never made it off the beach. The massive swarm of Gordon's affliction-spreading butterflies was still hovering over the beach, almost thick enough to block out the sun. Shade's bodies were flitting across the beach, touching each monster corpse in readiness for looting.

Both Jason and Gordon could direct the butterflies, although the control was haphazard at best. By and large, the conjured entities sought out anything Jason deemed an enemy and attempted to afflict it. They swept out over the water as Jason held his hands out to his sides while chanting a spell.

“As your lives were mine to reap, so your deaths are mine to harvest.”

The remnant life force lingering within the monsters poured into Jason, streams of glowing red energy moving through the air to be absorbed into his body.

-
- You have gained multiple instances of [Blood Frenzy].
 - [Blood Frenzy] has increased your [Speed] and [Recovery] attributes.
 - Your [Speed] and [Recovery] attributes have reached the maximum threshold for your current limitations. Additional instances will be converted to [Blood of the Immortal].
 - You have gained multiple instances of [Blood of the Immortal].
-

Jason’s life force was already bolstered by the healing effects he had accumulated during the fight with the lighthoppers, his health extending far beyond his normal maximum and into video game hit point territory. Now with his attributes boosted, he was ready to face the relatively slow reef giant.

The butterflies went out to meet the monster as it waded into shore. The giant was one of the largest monsters Jason had ever faced, but there was an odd reversal between them. The gold-rank monster’s speed would have been mediocre for silver-rank, while Jason’s was boosted to a level bordering on gold. That did not mean that it was helpless, however, as Pelli has warned him. He saw why as the butterfly swarm drew close to the giant.

The monster’s body was embedded with fragments of sharp coral, half-buried in its flesh. As the butterflies drew near, the shards of coral shot out, revealing themselves as the razor-sharp ends to dozens of whips made from what looked like thin strips of kelp. The whips flailed in a wild blur, somehow avoiding becoming entangled with one another while thrashing through the butterflies.

The butterflies exploded as they were destroyed, which triggered small chain reactions given how many of the butterflies there were, all swarming on the one enemy. It was not such a problem when they were spread out over many enemies, which was their primary purpose, but clumped around a single foe, their explosive nature became a liability.

Jason was unconcerned that only a few of the butterflies made it through the flailing barrier of whipping kelp tipped with coral spearheads. Even one was enough to get the

affliction ball rolling, after which it was just a matter of time. Jason could have even backed off and waited for the afflictions to escalate, but he didn't. He wasn't walking away from a chance to push himself and grow stronger.

As the monster waded into shore, Jason stood waiting, his new sword in hand. The sigils set into the black blade had the red glow of life force, containing the power that would normally belong to Jason's conjured dagger. His fingers tightened and loosened around the grip, the only sign of his nervousness as the gold rank monster closed in on the shore.

The giant emerged from the water and the fight began. Despite having read the monster's Magic Society listing, Jason was still surprised. He had known the monster was gold rank, but given his abilities and the monster's deficits, he had been anticipating a convincingly one-sided win. Instead, the many warnings he had been given about underestimating gold-rank monsters were borne out.

The lumbering monster, for all its physical power and resilience, was little more than a slow-moving weapons platform. The true threat was the coral-tipped whips anchored all over its body, even to its face. They formed a shifting razor wall that was extremely intimidating to approach.

Jason quickly discovered that staying out of the whips' range was no guarantee of safety. More coral pushed its way out of the giant's skin and was fired off; larger, spiked fragments, not tethered to the giant like the whips were. Jason's cloak was very good at intercepting small projectiles, but these were only small relative to the giant. To Jason, they were more like spears, one of which struck him heavily in the side. It tore through his conjured cloak and robes but glanced off his flesh, leaving only a scratch that healed in moments.

The seemingly insignificant blow had soaked up a huge portion of Jason's accumulated life force. A few more hits like that would take him from shrugging off attacks to his being pinned to the ground like the least pretty butterfly in the collection. Fortunately, his amulet's magic was already at work. Every affliction that built up on the giant also placed a shield on Jason that healed him as it was broken, adding to his accumulated life force.

The amulet's effects were only enough to take the edge off attacks, rather than entirely protect him. This was especially true against a gold-rank monster, but it gave him a valuable margin of safety, so long as he didn't over-rely on it. He admonished himself as he became more conscientiously evasive, using Shade's bodies to shadow-jump around.

While Jason had underestimated the monster, despite telling himself that he wouldn't, he did have surprises of his own ready. When the giant was in the middle of the field of dead monsters littering the beach, Jason looted them all and they dissolved into rainbow smoke. Jason had not grown used to the foul stench, despite his years of adventuring, but could at least endure it as it disoriented the monster, giving Jason his first chance to move in and land hits.

The distraction was only momentary, but Jason's combat style lived in those moments and he earned one opportunity and then another to attack. The giant swiftly recovered from the stench and Jason tossed a throwing dart marked with a green cord. It was intercepted by a whip and exploded into conjured vines that entangled the whips. They swiftly sliced their way free, but not before Jason once more moved in, landed hits and escaped.

Jason made his moves and took his chances. For all that the whips and the coral spears were a threat, the advantages that had prompted Jason to take the fight were real. He was able to choose his range and had the freedom to retreat as needed, allowing him to use his preferred hit-and-run strategy.

Even so, he took plenty of hits, although that was always accounted for in Jason's strategies. His potent drain attacks and spells, plus the regeneration he built up, fed Jason a constant stream of excess life force, even as the whips and spears Gordon didn't block whittled it down. This was normal for Jason, who used the strategy as the key to surviving his skirmishing combat style. He needed to repeatedly conjure fresh combat robes as the old ones were shredded.

Jason's familiars also played their parts. Shade and Gordon were largely safe from the monster's attacks due to their incorporeal nature, although neither had abilities that could substantially harm the immense vitality of the giant. What Gordon excelled at was using his orbs to either shield Jason from coral spears or shoot them out of the air with pinpoint accuracy. His resonating-force beams were well-suited to breaking down the rigid structure of the spears before they could reach Jason.

Shade was Jason's primary shadow-jump platform on the flat, open beach, while Colin was useful in multiple ways. His humanoid form sent straps of blood-slick leather to entangle the coral whips. The whips quickly pulled free but each interruption gave Jason another chance to move in with his sword. Leeches also formed from the bloody leather straps, crawling into the giant's body and digging in with rings of tiny teeth. Coral spikes jabbed through the monster's skin to impale many of them, but there were plenty more. Even the ones that were skewered left yet more afflictions in their wake.

Jason did not accumulate mana with the same alacrity as life force, but his generally efficient powers and the mana regeneration he did have allowed his levels to climb above his normal maximums. Once the afflictions on the gold-rank monster had built up, it was worth looking to spend that mana.

“Suffer the cost of your transgressions.”

Ability: [Punition] (Doom)

- Spell.
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Silver 4 (09%).

- Effect (iron): Inflicts necrotic damage for each curse, disease, poison and unholy affliction the target is suffering.

- Effect (bronze): Inflicts or refreshes the duration of [Penitence].

- Effect (silver): Damage per affliction can be increased by increasing the mana cost to high, very high, or extreme. This reduces the cooldown to 20 seconds, 10 seconds or none. Consecutive, extreme-cost uses have a shorter incantation.

- [Penitence] (affliction, holy): Gain an instance of [Penance] for each curse, disease, poison or unholy effect that is cleansed from target. This is a holy effect.

- [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.

Even for a gold-rank monster, the giant’s vitality was enormous. Jason had never been able to unload as many afflictions as had accumulated on it without killing the victim before, yet the giant remained relatively unharmed. While its flesh was marked with patches of dark necrosis, it was still going strong as it shambled around the beach, trying to catch Jason within the zone of its whips.

Jason’s Punition spell was stronger for every affliction on the target. With what had built up on the giant, one casting would have killed almost anything else he’d ever fought, but the giant kept coming. Normally the mana cost was moderate, but Jason bumped it three stages through high and very high, all the way to extreme. This reduced the incantation of future casting while reducing the cooldown to nothing.

“Suffer.”

More damage.

"Suffer."

More damage.

"Suffer."

More damage, but the giant kept coming even as Jason kept casting. By the time Jason's mana was all but depleted, its skin was blackened and rotting, the colourful coral whip heads becoming bleached and pale. In spite of this, the monster was still going strong. Jason's powers might breach the resistances of gold-rank enemies, but the level of damage they inflicted was still at silver. Gold-rank monsters took a lot of killing.

For the majority of his adventuring life, Jason had rarely gotten the chance to fully explore the impact of his abilities on monsters. While he killed slower than most adventurers, most things still died before his abilities could move through their full sequence. Given the opportunity, Jason's powers told an almost religious story, beginning with the cost of sin and ending with the price of absolution.

"I think Clive was right," he muttered. "The abilities we get are based on our personality. Even my power set's a chuuni."

He raised his free hand towards the monster as he cast a spell.

"Feed me your sins."

Ability: [Feast of Absolution] (Sin)

- Spell (recovery, cleanse, holy).
- Base cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Silver 4 (08%).

- Effect (iron): Cleanse all curses, diseases, poisons and unholy afflictions from a single target. Additionally, cleanse all holy afflictions if the target is an ally. Recover stamina and mana for each affliction cleansed. This ability ignores any effect that prevents cleansing. Cannot target self.

- Effect (bronze): Enemies suffer an instance each of [Penance] and [Legacy of Sin] for each condition cleansed from them.

- Effect (silver): Increase cost to moderate to affect all afflicted enemies and allies in a wide area.

- [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.

- [Legacy of Sin] (affliction, holy, stacking): You are considered more damaged for the purposes of execute ability damage scaling. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

As the giant lit up from the inside with transcendent light, Jason's depleted mana was more than filled. With so many afflictions converted into mana, he was so bursting with it that he'd have trouble using stealth because the mana leaking out of him would be so easy to sense. Further, for each affliction, he gained an instance of Integrity that continually fed him health and mana. With so many being stacked on him, Jason was now gaining life force faster than he could lose it, even standing in range of the whips.

"Let's see if we can change that," he said, eyes locked on the giant as the sigils set into his black blade turned from red to blue.

"Mr Asano, you're talking to yourself again."

"Do you mind?"

"I just worry you might be getting ready to take a dramatic fighting pose."

"I am not going to take a fighting pose."

"You're not imagining yourself on the poster of an action movie, then?"

"Absolutely not."

"Or a limited-series premium television show with a fight choreographer from Hong Kong?"

"Can you please stop? I'm trying to fight evil here."

"With your powers of blood and plague and your black sword?"

Gordon was floating between Jason and the giant, shooting down spears or deflecting them with shields. Jason spotted his orbs strobing, which was the dimensional being's equivalent of laughter.

"You're all mean," Jason said. "All I wanted to do was look a little bit cool and you've ruined it. At least Colin gets me."

Colin, who looked like a blood clone of Jason, struck a fighting pose.

"Oh, that's not helping," Jason lamented. "You look like a power ranger."

A coral spear passed through Colin's head and he toppled over, the top third of his body breaking into a pile of leeches.

"Oops," Jason said. "I probably shouldn't get distracted."

Jason dashed toward the giant, dark red leather straps shooting out from his conjured robes to entangle the whips. They only held for a moment but Jason's speed still bordered on that of a gold-ranker as he dashed in. He landed a few quick blows with his sword before getting out, but even this was not fast enough to completely escape whips as fast as the giant was slow. The freed whips gouged Jason's flesh, eating away at his accumulated life force more than previously, courtesy of Jason himself. The afflictions his sword had just left behind impacted both the monster and himself in an escalation tactic pairing risk and reward.

-
- [Price in Blood] (affliction, holy, blood, stacking): Damage between people who share the affliction is increased, including damage sources in place prior to this affliction taking effect. Damage from holy sources is further increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

Jason didn't let up, continuing his hit-and-run sword strikes to escalate the damage to both himself and the giant. Once it reached a point where even his absurd life force gain was no longer enough, he moved the fight into its final phase.

"Mine is the judgement and the judgement is death."

Ability: [Verdict] (Doom)

- Spell (execute).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Silver 4 (06%)

- Effect (iron): Deals a small amount of transcendent damage. As an execute effect, damage scales exponentially with the enemy's level of injury.

- Effect (bronze): Damage scaling is increased by instances of [Penance] on the target.

- Effect (silver): Inflicts or refreshes [Sanction] on the target.

- [Sanction] (affliction, holy): Healing, recovery and regeneration effects have diminished potency. Base strength of this effect is very minor but scales exponentially with the enemy's level of injury. Scaling is affected by [Legacy of Sin] in the same way execute damage is. Cannot be cleansed while any instances of [Penance] are present.

Even Jason's most potent ability didn't finish the giant, although the monster finally showed its suffering. Large portions of its body burned away in trails of rainbow smoke as

it staggered and stumbled. Its combat effectiveness dropped as the whips slowed, many of them burning away in transcendent light. Jason no longer kept moving in to attack, instead, waiting for his execute power to come off cooldown to finish the job. Even then, it took three more castings of the finisher before the creature's gold-rank resilience could finally take no more.

In the aftermath of another battle that left him painted in blood, Jason reflected on the power of the gold rank monster. He had every advantage he could muster, from a very favourable power match-up to a pack of monsters he could feed on and buff himself with as a lead-in. Even with all of that, the battle had been an incredible slog. If any of his advantages had been absent, or if unforeseen factors had intervened, the fight could have turned deadly for Jason very quickly. If years of this was what it took to reach gold rank, he had a new appreciation for anyone who managed to accomplish the feat. As for diamond rank, it felt further away now than in Greenstone where it was almost a mythical realm.

While Jason was fighting a giant on Arnote, the war with the Builder had already begun. Airships swarmed over the Builder's submarine city in the Storm Kingdom's northern waters that had surfaced to disgorge airships of its own. Close by, on the rocky desert coast, a vast plume of dust was being thrown up by the approaching land city.

On a rocky coastal outcropping, Dawn stood alone, looking at the dust storm. She knew what the builder wanted from this attack. It wanted her to use up her single chance to intervene while also showing its power to cow the nations of the world. She would allow the Builder its first objective since this was not her world to fight for.

It was not what she would have chosen as First Sister of the World-Phoenix, but that was not her role anymore. The World-Phoenix wanted her to find her mortal sensibilities, and those sensibilities let Jason make the choice for her. It might not be the most strategic move, but perhaps it would be. A victory at this stage would bolster the morale of a world under siege.

That would help stymie the Builder's second goal, of intimidating the world's nations. It was as far as she would go on that since the true fight belonged to those for whom the world was theirs to fight for. She would act this one time, then success or failure would be for them to seize.

She raised a hand to the sky.

Chapter 524

Between Mortal and Something Else

Battle raged over the waters of the Storm Kingdom's northwestern reaches. The Builder's underwater city had surfaced for battle, disgorging airships to meet those from Rimaros in the skies above. Many adventurers were not even in airships, free-floating in the air or even approaching through the water. The Builder's force had many constructs designed to operate in the water, along with abominations modified not from intelligent races but sharks and other deadly denizens of the deep. Fighting underwater was not a weakness to the Adventure Society forces, however. The Sea of Storms had no shortage of people adept in aquatic environs.

The Builder's forces were much more numerous than those of the adventurers. Along with creations designed to swim or fly on their own, more were delivered into battle via airship, triggering ship-to-ship battle between the two sides. While the Builder had the quantity, however, the adventurers had the quality. The mass-produced creations were no match for well-trained adventurers, and the Storm Kingdom's adventurers were certainly that. While most might not be on the level of a Rimaros guild member, even those with Thadwick attitudes did not have Thadwick aptitudes. The Adventure Society branches in the Sea of Storms would not allow it.

Compared to the eclectic creations of the Builder cult, whose essence users served more as leadership, the adventurers were all people. Only their familiars and summons added more extreme diversity to their line-up. The Builder's creations were much more varied, with winged serpents, multi-headed crocodiles and giant sharks either entirely artificial or grotesque combinations of steel, stone and flesh.

Many of the creations were much larger than almost everything on the adventurer side. The only things the adventurers fielded to keep up were a few massive summons, each of which made an impression. From the huge cloud with seven hydra heads dangling from it to the dragon made of loose boulders, held together by electricity, they cut formidable figures. None, however, could match the size of the Builder cult's largest creation.

As the battle began, the adventurers could sense something vast moving in the deeps. From the air above they could make out a leviathan silhouette in the water before it finally moved to the surface and erupted out. It was a massive lamprey; a diamond rank abomination of flesh and decaying metal. Its sides were plated in pitted steel, its maw ringed with rusted iron teeth. It lunged from the water like the grasping arm of some

monstrous sea god. It rose hundreds of metres without revealing the full length of its body. Two low-flying airships were engulfed whole before it reached the peak of its lunge and splashed back on the water with a booming slap as its body fell flat, kicking off massive waves.

The battle had two aspects. One was the diamond-rank powerhouses for each side. They would keep each other in check as any diamond-ranker the other side couldn't account for would rampage through the lower ranks of the enemy. The adventurers had six diamond-rank essence users, while the floating city deployed only two. They had to rely on other diamond-level powers, like the flesh-abomination lamprey.

The Builder cult's great equaliser was the city itself. Like an iceberg, most of it was below the water, making it much larger than it seemed from the surface. This was not news; the city had been scouted and the adventurers knew its true size. What they didn't know was what that humungous bulk contained behind the sealed, underwater walls.

Below the surface, ten massive panels opened up on the city's exterior. From the resulting apertures emerged massive tentacles of segmented steel, so large they either occupied the bulk of the city's internal space or were contained in a dimensional storage space with unheard-of scope. The Builder cult's floating city turned out to be a city-sized kraken construct.

The tentacles rose from the water, each one a diamond-rank construct in its own right. Their massive length and bulk needed no special features; just swaying in the air allowed them to swat airships from the sky with monumental force.

Pandemonium reigned as the sky over the kraken-city become barely comprehensible, let alone navigable. Normally dominant silver-rankers were more reliant on luck than their abilities for survival. Builder airships staged ramming and boarding actions while adventurers flung around powers that filled the air with clouds of energy and flashes of light, along with stranger and more eclectic effects. Trees grew out of clouds, extending vines to pull people from the decks of airships. Jade orbs flew around, hammering constructs out of the sky. One Builder airship grew arms and started attacking itself, the passengers being forced to battle their own ship.

The diamond-rankers, meanwhile, confronted one another. The adventurers had six in their number; Soramir conspicuous in his absence. One each faced off with the Builder cultists diamond-rankers, their clashes spelling doom for any lower-rankers nearby. Gold rankers had a chance to survive the collateral damage, but any silver that drifted too close was in imminent threat of annihilation. One diamond-ranker was attempting to hunt down

the lamprey while the remaining three were shielding the rest of their forces from the kraken tentacles.

The second aspect to the battle, after the diamond-rank powerhouses, was the gold and silver-rank forces on both sides. The objective of the adventurers was to invade the city, find and fight their way to its core mechanisms and destroy them. This was the role of the lower-rankers while the diamond-rankers kept their equivalents tied up.

The Builder's goal was to prevent this and drive away the adventurers, bleeding them without allowing them any gains. The Builder cult could much more rapidly replenish its forces in the aftermath; their creations might be weaker than essence users but were much easier to replace. Attrition and pyrrhic victories were to the cult's advantage.

As the battle progressed, the quality of the adventurer's force became increasingly telling. They were yet to break through the magical dome blocking access to the city, but their six diamond-rankers were slowly but surely proving superior. The same was true of the lower ranks, with the mass-produced creations of the cult failing to match the essence users. The high standard of the Storm Kingdom's adventurers was showing its worth.

The city's defence screen was a formidable thing, but no barrier in the world could hold off a diamond ranker for very long. Once the diamond ranker hunting the lamprey managed to slay the beast, she turned her attention to breaching the barrier. With myriad gold-rankers pounding away as well, it could only hold up so long. With the city's power source also driving the massive tentacles fending off even more diamond-rankers, there was a limit to what it could spare to maintain the shields. When it inevitably broke down, silver and gold-rankers poured into the city.

Six diamond-rankers acting together was a world-shaking force. The doom of the floating city was clearly coming, but it was extracting every drop of blood it could. In the wake of the battle, the adventuring strength of the Sea of Storms would be considerably diminished.

A crew of pirates had been hovering around the periphery of the Storm Kingdom since the beginning of the monster surge and their bold captain, on hearing about the mobilisation, saw a once-in-a-lifetime chance to make a raid that would affix his name in the annals of pirate history - raiding Rimaros itself.

Of the three major islands of Rimaros, Arnote was the least populous and least defended. Without the riches of Livaros or the people of Provo, its more powerful residents had always been the only protection it needed. But with the forces of Rimaros mobilised,

only a handful of teams remained. Most importantly, the only gold-ranker still present was the core user, Pelli, who was mayor of some village.

If enough monsters spawned in the area during this time – a good chance in the middle of a monster surge – then the defenders might well be drawn away from a juicy target long enough for a successful raid. For this reason, the captain had planted people in the towns of Arnote, with signal beacons to call the pirates in should the chance arise. This exact thing had happened, and the pirates had moved in on the town of Kasilaro.

At first, things had gone exactly as expected. The team stationed there were busy fighting monsters underwater, off the coast. The pirate's airship had swept in, the residents fleeing as the pirates kicked open doors, snatching anything of value. They even took the time to grab the pretty women and boys who looked fun to play with, which was around the point that things started going wrong.

The gold-ranker, Pelli, had arrived within expectations. Any gold-ranker could move swiftly enough that they would reach the town before the raiders had their fill of plunder. The captain was also a core-using gold-ranker, which was a rare rank amongst pirates. It had won him the prestige he enjoyed within the pirate circles and was the source of his current boldness. His part of the plan was to keep the gold-ranker busy while his first mate led the crew in continuing to loot the town.

Pelli did not want the collateral damage of her confrontation with the pirate captain to wreak havoc on Kasilaro and its residents, which was why she fought outside the town. As this exposed the town to the pirate's crew, she had called in backup.

In the town, the crew was hauling everything of value to the airship tethered to the ground, just beyond the town gates. They used carts and wagons pilfered from the townsfolk, as well as using the residents themselves as pack mules. Their activity centres on the town square, which made a useful transfer point for looted goods and had the main road running straight to the gates.

The crew began to notice that some of their number hadn't shown themselves in a while. At first, it hadn't been apparent. Those missing were the ones who'd grabbed a pretty boy or girl and dragged them into a building for some fun. When they took too long to re-emerge, the first mate became concerned. She grumbled to herself that they should have known better than to be so long about their sordid business, but pirates were not famous for discipline.

She was about to go looking for them when the presence of trouble was confirmed by the missing crew's reappearance. They came staggering out of buildings, stumbling and some falling over entirely. Their skin was blackened, their limbs withered and their eyes

were full of fear. As the rest of the crew noticed them emerging, they stopped hauling loot in the direction of the airship and looked around, worried.

“What happened?” the first mate asked after she marched up to the closest of the stricken still on their feet. The man opened his mouth to speak but only coughed black blood over her before falling to his knees. Then a cold voice spoke, echoed from points all around the town square, even though the speaker was nowhere to be seen.

“Did I say you could go?”

Long shadow arms emerged from dark doorways and alleys, grabbing the afflicted crew and dragging them back into the alleys and doorways they had just emerged from. Those still standing toppled over as they were all dragged into the darkness and disappeared.

The first mate was the strongest member of the crew short of the captain himself, but she couldn't sense the speaker with her senses. It was unlikely to be a gold ranker though, or he wouldn't be hiding. More likely, it was a stealth specialist looking to intimidate them. Unfortunately, she knew that her crew were bullies it would be likely to work on.

“It's just some adventurer,” she called outleaping up onto a wagon. “Hey, adventurer! Unless you want us to slaughter everyone in this town, you'd best show your face.”

Cruel laughter came from every shadow. Disconcertingly, even her own.

“I didn't come here to save them,” the cold voice informed her. “I came here to kill you.”

“Screw this,” one of the bronze-rank pirates said and broke out into a run. That triggered most of the others, only the few silver-rankers remaining behind. The pirates ran with the sun at their backs, their shadows stretched out in front of them. A dark figure rose from the shadow of the first pirate to run, grabbed him by the neck and gave a single sharp shake.

The fleeing pirates pulled to a stop as the figure dropped the pirate with the now-broken neck. He was shrouded in a dark cloak over robes the colour of dried blood. Two strange orbs floated around him like disembodied alien eyes. Two smaller versions of those eyes watched them from within a dark hood. he drew a sword with a black blade, marked with ominous red sigils.

As the battle over the floating city raged, only one person stood on the coast to confront the approaching land city. The great fortress approached hidden in a storm of desert dust kicked up by its passage. Dawn raised an arm in the air and pointed to the sky. As she moved her hand, lines of fire lit up the sky, drawing out a ritual circle even more

vast than the dust cloud hiding the rolling city. When she started chanting, her words were like a tsunami, audible even over the cataclysmic sounds of the diamond-rankers battling above the ocean.

“I call back to the origin of infinity. From the fires of creation were you born in the days before days, and from the fire shall you come again. The birth of all things marks the beginning of the end, for in creation is the promise of annihilation. In the place, the end has come, so bring forth the flames of beginning and let them mark the end.”

Dawn’s words of fire and thunder carried out over the land and water, even the madness of the nearby battle coming to a momentary lull. All eyes present turned to see the grand summoning circle in the sky. The circled started to close in on itself, its lines entangling and folding over one another like a wire sculpture of white, yellow and orange. It took on the framework of a fiery bird of barely comprehensible immensity, flames lighting up to fill in the gaps and flesh out the great phoenix blanketing the dust storm below.

The sky started to darken as if the sun was trembling before a presence born of power older and greater than itself. Day turned to night as the flaming bird took on the role of a burning moon, lighting up the dark as the dust cloud beneath it burned away, combusting from the heat sweeping out from the awe-inducing firebird.

The land city was silhouetted in flames as the dust cloud was burned off around it. An apocalyptic column of fire descended from the cosmic phoenix’s body onto the heart of the city. From its wings came streamers of flame, twisting through the air on their way down to ravage the city’s outlying districts as the centre burned away.

An aura, more oppressive than anything the world had felt before, crashed down on the burning city. Even the diamond-rankers within, who had been readying to go and confront Dawn, were suppressed. The raw power on display did not belong to this world but to something greater; a force that belonged to the cosmos.

No defenders emerged from the city. No defences rose to protect it. The vast city of stone and steel was melted down like slag in a foundry, along with everything in it - living or otherwise. Dawn only had one chance to intervene and she used it to the absolute limit, showing the world a power it had never seen before and might never see again. Even the inhuman forces of the Builder, battling off the coast, took pause as they were struck dumb, shocked at the spectacle.

Such a vast power, so beyond the limits of the world into which it was summoned, could only last a short time. The burning light of the phoenix dimmed, the sun shining brighter again as the great phoenix grew dark, slowly turning to ash and drifting away.

Even with such a sight before them, the terrible carnage of the battle over the floating city battle could only be stalled for so long. As the ashen remains of the phoenix floated on the air like a volcano's expulsion, the brutal war resumed.

"Thank you," Pelli said to Jason.

"I couldn't stop them all before they hurt and killed some of the townsfolk."

"I thought you didn't come to save them?"

"You heard that."

"I'm going to assume that was something you said so they wouldn't try taking hostages."

"Thank you."

"You didn't kill them all?"

"The bronze-rankers died too fast. The silver core users I was able to keep alive, but there was a woman who was more skilled than the others. No cores, maybe an ex-adventurer. Not guild level, but there was clearly some training there. I didn't take any chances with her. I felt the gold-ranker run off."

"I tried to finish him, but it's hard to kill a gold ranker, even when you are one. You need powers to outpace them, trap them or load them up with ongoing damage. Not an issue for you, I suppose."

"For me, the trick has always been taking them alive. I have a tool for that now, but in groups, the weak ones die too fast."

"You can kill them all as far as..."

Pelli trailed off as an aura unlike anything she had ever felt washed over the island. Then the sky started to go dark as the sun dimmed. Even from fifteen hundred kilometres away, the events to the northwest could be felt.

"What in the names of the sweet gods is that?" Pelli asked in a trembling voice. "It's not an eclipse. I've never felt power like that."

"That's my friend Dawn," Jason said.

"That's a person?"

"This is the power that lies between mortal and something else."

"I don't even know what that means."

"I don't think we're meant to. Not yet."

Jason turned his gaze from the northwest, where the aura was coming from, to the east and the direction of Livaros.

"Now it's time to see if she was right," he said.

“Right about what?”

“The Builder’s intentions.”

Even as the incredible aura continued to wash over the island, another vast and powerful aura erupted from where Jason was looking. It was distant, but large and high enough in the air to be visible. A massive manifestation of rainbow light had appeared in the sky.

“And right she was,” Jason said grimly.

“What is that?” Pelli asked a second time.

“That,” Jason said, “is a Builder fortress-city, appearing over Livaros.”

“But all our forces have gone to the north-west.”

“Not all,” Jason said. “Just most.”

“Who are left?” she asked. “There’s barely a token force left by the Adventure Society, right?”

“Yes,” Jason said. “It’s just them and your family.”

Chapter 525

Stand at the Front

The royal family of the Storm Kingdom was very large. Every combat-trained member of silver-rank or above was gathered in a ballroom in the royal palace; one of the few rooms large enough to hold them all. From Zara and Vesper to Soramir and the Storm King, the only absent member of that group was Zila, who had gone northwest to fight in the battle there. Only untrained core users like Pelli were exempted from the family call to arms.

With them was the royal guard, all members of the Sapphire Crown guild, representatives from the Irios family and a contingent of clergy. Most of the churches' combat forces were also adventurers and had set out for the battles in the northwest. Even so, the churches had placed their core reserves under the command of the royal family for the defence of the city.

"The first part will not be the most critical," Soramir told them, standing before the gathering with the Storm King and Trenchant Moore flanking him. "What it will be is the hardest. We couldn't hold back more than one diamond-ranker or not only would the attack on the water city be less likely to succeed, but the Builder could realise that we were preparing for his sneak attack."

Soramir looked up through the glass ceiling of the ballroom in which they had gathered. All eyes followed his gaze to the mass of rainbow light floating high above, from which the Builder's fortress-city would soon emerge.

"I have no shame in claiming to be strong," Soramir said, "but I am not so strong that I can handle every diamond-rank threat the Builder cult will have ready for us. We can hope that the cult believed they would catch us unprepared and used their greater resources elsewhere, but to assume that would be folly. We can only operate under the assumption that whatever they send against us will be more than I can handle alone."

He gestured expansively around him.

"Our advantage is home territory. We know that the Builder cult has limited diamond-rank essence users and relies heavily on their creations and the power of the cities themselves. In this case, however, we can match them. We have our own city, with its own power, built up in the centuries since I founded this kingdom."

He nodded at the leader of the Irios family contingent.

“From the first days of this kingdom, the Irios family has built the walls that shield its people in times of crisis. The founder of their family was a man I called brother, and I know he would be as proud of what your family has become as I am of mine.”

He glanced at the Storm King with a smile.

“Every generation has made this kingdom stronger than the one before. Now the time has come to show this interloper who thinks he can destroy us the strength of what we have built together. We are the Storm Kingdom. Some of us carry the very name of this city. Others are its most staunch defenders or the architects of its defences. The people of this Kingdom have given all of us so much. Now, in our time of greatest crisis, we will show them that their faith in us was not in vain.”

Again Soramir looked up before turning his gaze back on the crowd in the room.

“The first step, as I said, will be the hardest. We have a great weapon, but the enemy stronghold is mighty. Our weapon must be carried into the heart of their city so we can be certain of destroying it. This means breaching the city's defences while its defenders wield the full force of their power against us. Normally, that task would fall to me, but I will not be free to do so while harassed by the cult's diamond-rankers. Fortunately, we are not alone. This entity has invaded our world, but our world has gods to watch over us. Archbishop, Rimmon, if you would?”

A man in the garb of the church of Knowledge stepped to the front to address the group.

“Even gods and beings like the Builder have rules,” the archbishop said. “The Builder has been pushing against the limits of those rules, which gives our gods the leeway to push back. Thus far, they have bided their time, waiting for the best opportunities. One of those opportunities is now. The gods are stepping forward to protect the people of the Storm Kingdom.”

Reassurance showed on the faces of the royal family, the Irios family and the royal guard. Soramir's speech was all well and good, but they were up against forces greater than any mortal. It was a relief to know the gods would be standing with them.

“Each of the gods will do what they can,” Archbishop Rimmon continued. “They have granted us, their representatives, miracles to aid the city. The archbishop of war will empower the city's defences beyond what should normally be possible. The archbishop of Ocean will have the sea itself aid us. Knowledge has revealed to me many secrets of the Builder city, from where to place our weapon to how to breach the defences without diamond-rank assistance.”

“This does not mean the task ahead of us is easy,” Soramir said. “Only that it is possible at all. Make no mistake: many of us will fall today. The price we pay for our Kingdom’s safety – for its very survival – will be high. But we will pay it, because that is our duty. Throughout the history of this kingdom, we have always stood at the top. Now the time has come for us to stand at the front.”

Jason’s team, minus Jason himself, were one of many teams given a device to carry into the city. Only one was the true bomb, but once the cult realised the objective of the Rimaros defenders, they would focus on stopping it. For that reason, many teams had been handed dummy devices, with the church of knowledge giving target locations within the city to activate it. As to which device and which target were the real ones, the people assigning tasks claimed not to know. Everyone would have to do their utmost to succeed in case they were the true hope for the city.

“It’s definitely not our team,” Neil said as they waited on an airship docked at a sky tower. “No way they gave us the real thing. The cult will probably put extra effort into killing us just for being Jason’s team, so giving it to us is a terrible idea.”

“It’ll be some gold-rank guild group,” Sophie said. “It’s too important to hand over to anyone but those with the best chance.”

“Unless that’s exactly what they want the cult to think,” Belinda said. “Maybe it is us.”

“It’s not,” Sophie said. “They’re telling everyone that no one knows who has the real thing but that’s just to motivate the rest of us. The ones who have the real thing know what they’ve got.”

“It would have been nice to have Gary, Rufus and Farrah with us,” Clive said.

“They have their own task,” Humphrey said. “Farrah is a formation magic expert and they need every one of those they can get. If we can’t breach the magical defences of the Builder city, none of this will work out.”

The rainbow light above the city was something between a portal and the manifestation effect of a monster or essence, without exactly being either. Only possible during the monster surge when the dimensional membrane of reality was in tatters, it faded away as it disgorged the Builder’s flying city.

It looked like a fairly normal city, except being in the sky. The city rested on a massive disc of stone with a massive and complex ritual circle engraved into the underside. The top of the city looked like any city built heavily of stone, with towers, streets and other buildings that looked remarkably ordinary for a flying city of doom. The defensive dome glimmering

over it was also common in major cities, although being visible when not actively being attacked was unusual.

The battle began with the lines of the massive ritual circle under the flying city lighting up, swiftly glowing brighter until a massive beam of red-white magic shot directly down at Livaros. The ritual circle was not the mechanism by which the city flew but a giant magic beam cannon.

Livaros itself was a city larger than the one flying above it, the entire island being urbanised. The protection that appeared to intercept the beam was not a dome, like that over the Builder city. It was a circular barrier of blue and green magical energy, looking much like a ritual circle. In the near-instantaneous moment the beam was descending, the shield appeared, then another behind it and a third behind that. The first shield wavered and then broke, even as shields continued to stack up. The second, third and fourth shields were broken through before the beam's energy was finally expended.

The glowing ritual circle under the flying city started to fade, the potent beam having pushed the ritual disc near the limit of its endurance. It would take time before it was able to fire again, and the disappearance of the beam was like the crack of a starting pistol. Airships full of adventurers started flying up from Livaros' sky docks, while cult airships passed through the flying city's dome before descending to meet them. Other enemies emerged as well, from constructs and abominations flying through the sky to the diamond-rank forces the defenders of Rimaros had been anticipating.

To Soramir's relief, as he flew up into the sky on a magical cloud, he only sensed one essence user at diamond rank. He sensed other diamond-rank auras, but essence users were always the greater threat. He had no illusions about defeating them all but if he could occupy the strongest of the Builder cult's forces, the gold and silver-rankers had a real chance to secure victory and protect Rimaros.

As he ascended, Soramir gathered power around himself, conjuring water and air to shroud himself in a miniaturised hurricane. With diamond-rank speed, it took only moments to clash with his cultist counterpart, where it immediately became apparent that Soramir was stronger. That was not the same as being in a domineering position, however, as no diamond-ranker should be underestimated.

There were two other diamond-rank auras on the cultist side. One was a massive construct bird with four wings. Unlike the essence user, Soramir was confident he would be able to destroy it given the chance, although that chance was unlikely to be forthcoming. The last diamond-rank aura was strange and diffuse, which Soramir found almost as concerning as the essence user. He had sensed that kind of aura before,

recognising it as the signature of swarm-type entities. As predicted, a swarm of constructs, sharing a single aura, came pouring out of the flying city's defence dome.

The diamond-rank conflict was the key to the early stage of the battle, as the Rimaros defenders needed the freedom to breach the defences of the flying city. Formation specialists, many of whom were from the Irios family, were being carried into battle on airships, along with protective escorts. The greatest danger to them wasn't the cult forces but the collateral damage from a diamond-rank battle that was just beginning.

Soramir's storm powers were formidable in the face of multiple opponents, which was exactly what he needed when outnumbered. They were effective against the swarm constructs which, like many swarm-type enemies, were vulnerable to wide-area attacks. The drawback of Soramir's expansive powers was that the lower ranks of both sides had to stay well clear.

While much of the swarm was struggling against Soramir's storm powers, clusters of the swarm managed to escape in isolation, separating from the main swarm to hunt the lower-ranked Rimaros forces. They were still diamond-rank, but their components, - fist-sized locust constructs – were individually frail for their rank. With their numbers reduced in the smaller swarms, the gold rank adventurers were able to put up a fight.

The battle quickly turned to chaos as the Rimaros airships tried to fight their way to the underside of the city through storms of battle and powers flying back and forth which included actual storms. The formation magic specialists needed to be delivered to the flying city's underside.

Using the information given to them by the goddess of Knowledge, they knew there were nodes not visible from a ground level on the city's ritual disc. If enough of them were impacted by the right rituals, also provided by knowledge, they could bring down the magic dome and expose the city to invasion.

The flying city's beam weapon recharged before any of the Rimaros forces managed to fight their way to it. In the chaos of battle, many from both sides failed to move out of its path in time as it once more hammered at the city below. The flying city needed to be breached before Livaros was cracked open by the repeated beams.

Livaros did not helplessly wait to suffer more attacks. Magic circles, similar to the shield it used, appeared over the city and fired back beams of its own. They weren't anything like the magnitude of those the flying fortress used, and wouldn't be enough to damage the ritual circle of the underside of the city. The flying city, however, was not the target. The Irios family members controlling the defences aimed the beams at the swarm construct, attempting to thin it out as much as possible and take pressure off of Soramir.

Perhaps intimidated by the wild auras from the battle above Livaros and in the aftermath of Dawn's actions, the monster activity that had been raging around Arnote had gone quiet. It had been unusually busy, even for a monster surge, but now it had fallen off entirely.

Jason found himself back at home with Travis and Taika, their bronze-ranks leaving them in the role of civilian. Pelli had joined Jason at his cloud house and they all sat on an upper-floor deck, watching the distant battle. They could make out little at such a distance but they watched nonetheless.

"I feel helpless," Travis said.

"Travis, you're the one who made this battle even viable," Jason assured him.

"Without you, things would have been even more desperate."

"Assuming it even works," Travis said.

"Bro, at least you got to do something," Taika said. "All I could do was sit here."

"You're doing something," Jason assured him.

"I am?"

"Damn right you are."

"What am I doing?"

"Looking good. You're a big, sexy chocolate drop."

"Thanks, bro," Taika said brightly. "That's nice of you to say."

Farrah was drawing in the air with her finger, leaving behind lines of flame that formed ritual circles as she continued to draw. Their airship was hovering under one of the nodes on the underside of the city, each barely the size of a basketball. The airship was being attacked by flying cult creations and enemy airships, the adventurers around her desperately keeping the enemies away from her.

Rufus was a monster, smoothly dashing around with his golden sword. Everywhere he went, a construct fell apart, its neatly cut halves glowing with heat. Gary didn't have the skill to match some of the guild adventurers around him but his specialty tools more than made up the difference. He had long ago crafted weapons specialised in fighting cult creations and his hammer was practically ordnance as it smashed apart constructs, sending waves of force behind the shattered enemies to batter its fellows. His shield grew and shrank as he used it to shield Farrah, the way he had failed to do years ago when she died. He let out all his pent up rage, his roars blasting enemies overboard.

The Rimaros forces managed to take down the dome over the flying city, although the price was high. Many adventurers threw their lives away getting the formation experts to the underside of the city disc to perform their work. Once it was done, airships poured up and over to invade the city.

The diamond-rank defenders moved to stop them. Soramir had managed to destroy the weakest of them, the bird construct, but the essence user was predictably resilient. As for the swarm, that was more troublesome. The beams from below, the gold-rankers fighting it and Soramir himself had managed to shave off a large portion of it, but much remained. It continued to calve off smaller swarms to hunt the Rimaros adventurers, chasing them into the city.

The city itself was an odd mix of familiar and alien to the adventurers moving through it. Stone streets and buildings were not that different from what might be found in a normal city, but the denizens that came out to fight them certainly were. Cultists led packs of their bizarre creations, ranging from humanoid magic cyborgs to floating ring constructs that shot beams of energy.

Ramon Keel was a member of the anti-Builder task force. He was in charge of organising a beachhead in the city and called out as he spotted a group of silver-rank adventurers.

“Hey!”

The group came over, recognising Keel. They had all passed through assessment by Keel’s unit when they registered for monster surge activity.

“Yes, sir,” Humphrey said by way of acknowledgement.

“You’re Asano’s team, right?” Keel asked.

“That’s right,” Humphrey confirmed.

“If I remember correctly, you have multiple portal and storage powers between you right?”

“We do,” Humphrey said.

“Great. I’m assigning you all to logistics, search and recovery. We’re setting up a medical camp here. You’re going to find and bring in the injured, portal them to the city as needed and portal back extra supplies.”

“Sir, we have one of the devices. For all we know, it might be the one.”

“It’s definitely not,” Keel said. “Asano annoys the Builder more than he does me, so he might swat all of you just for fun. There’s no way they gave you the real thing.”

“See?” Neil asked. “What did I tell you?”

“Sir,” Humphrey said. “Given the stakes, I’m not sure we should be taking that risk.”

“Fine,” Keel said. “Pull out your device.”

Clive looked to Humphrey, who nodded. Clive opened his rune portal storage space and pulled out a device the size of a hiking backpack. Keel took a crystal from his pocket and held it near the device. The crystal turned red.

“There you go,” Keel said. “Dummy device confirmed. Now stop asking questions and do what I tell you.”

The adventurers fought their way through the city and into the deeper reaches through tunnels descending underground. The sense of alienness grew in the subterranean depths that were filled with industrial centres akin to foundries and ore refineries. Hot and humid, they were filled with dark corners and orange light. Tunnel warrens led deeper down into the city’s core where the most important parts of the city were secured.

Liara Rimaros had the true destructive device and, as Sophie predicted, had been told its actual nature. She moved with two of her team members; the brother and sister pair Ledev and Jana. The trio of gold-rank stealth specialists had been chosen as most likely to deliver the device successfully, which had largely proven true. After the dome went down they had quickly penetrated the city, finding their way into the depths.

As they moved deeper, however, it grew increasingly difficult to move undetected through cramped tunnels filled with increasingly dangerous fixed defences. They had been forced to fight through more and more constructs anchored in place to move forward, slowing their progress. The stealth specialists excelled at surprise attacks, not breaching emplaced defences.

They were caught up in running battles as the fight from the higher levels of the city started to catch up to their increasingly stalled progress. The only benefit was that people from their own side started to reach them, teaming up for the final push.

They joined a group that was mostly made up of adventurers whose teams had been split up by chaos or casualty. They had found one another and grouped up to push forward. It was a mixed group of golds and silvers, including Vesper and Jeni Kavaloa, whose team Vesper had been assigned to for the invasion.

When Liara revealed they had the true device, the group pulled out all the stops to get them to their destination. They knew that any cost was worthwhile to get it to the target zone. More than one sacrifice was made to get them closer, but as they approached the

location, they were set upon by multiple groups of fresh cult defenders in quick succession.

The problem facing the group was that once placed, they needed to escape before the device detonated. The ideal scenario had been the stealth team placing the device and it going undiscovered, but that no longer seemed viable. In a lull between groups, Vesper addressed Liara.

“We’re close now,” Vesper told her. “Close enough that you can sneak the rest of the way if the rest of us grab enough attention.”

“Vesper...” Liara said.

“We don’t have time to argue, Liara.”

There was no time to argue and the hasty plan was put into motion. Liara only paused a moment before hugging Vesper, nodding and moving off, her stealth powers rendering her invisible. Her brother and sister teammates did the same.

The rest of the group moved to attack the converging cultists and trigger the emplaced defences while the stealth trio moved on. Where they previously avoided facing too many defenders at once, they now grabbed as much attention as they were able. They fought hard and savagely as Liara’s trio avoided the final defenders between themselves and the target location.

Although Liara’s senses were reined in to avoid attention, the other group was close enough that she could sense their auras being snuffed out one by one. She stopped as she felt Vesper’s aura wink out, steeling her resolve and stopping her aura from revealing their location with emotional turbulence. Liara only allowed herself a brief pause before continuing and they reached the target zone undetected. They took out the device and set it up in accordance with the instructions they were given. Unlike the people given dummy devices, the directions were more involved than ‘push the big red button and run.’

“Now we go,” Liara said when the job was done.

“Not me,” Ledev said and his sister paled.

“Ledev, no.”

“There are still too many defenders roaming around,” Ledev insisted. “Of the three of us, I’m the only one with the power to hide this object from their senses now it’s out of its storage space and active.”

“Brother...”

Liara’s hand fell on Jana’s shoulder.

“He’s right, Jana. He can hide it for as long as it takes them to find him, buying everyone as much time to get out as possible before he sets it off.”

One of the functions added to the dummy devices was that they would signal when the real device was activated, letting the adventurers know to retreat. From the moment the device had been turned on, the Rimaros forces had been pulling out.

Jana clasped her brother in a death grip hug until he pushed her off.

“Time to go,” he told her, then turned to Liara. “Just make sure the statue of me looks good, yeah?”

The detonation didn't cause the flying city to explode. It trembled in the air, spiderweb cracks appearing on the underside of the disc. Geysers of force blasted out from the city above and the underside disc, blasting chunks of stone like giant cannonballs in every direction. The buildings of the city toppled as the interior of the floating city was annihilated by the nuclear bomb turned resonating-force device.

Even so, the main mass of the city held together, although the magic holding it aloft was gone. With incredible ponderousness, it started to fall from the sky.

Below the flying city, Soramir gathered up all the power at his disposal, ignoring the diamond-rank essence user who took the chance to land savage attacks. Gold rankers moved to defend Soramir as he conjured up a vast and powerful storm in an attempt to slow and shift the trajectory of the falling island that threatened to land atop Livaros.

More adventurers attempted to help, from telekinetic powers to just braving Soramir's storm to fly up to the falling city and push. Others dropped down, recognising that even if the fortress city missed the island, it would create a massive tsunami. Rimaros had no shortage of water essence users and they moved down to the island to prepare for what was about to come.

Two figures rose up from Livaros below, flying into the air. Both were garbed in the robes of clergy and their auras soared as they were filled with the power bestowed on them by their gods to protect the city. The Archbishop of Wind raised her arms and a great, focused and continual blast of wind started pushing on the falling city. Gold-rankers attempting to help were blasted away, but it didn't matter as the divine power shifted the trajectory of descent.

Seeing the power at hand, the diamond-rank cultist started fleeing, which many of the cult's airships were already doing.

The other clergywoman, the Archbishop of Ocean, became the vessel for her god's power and directed the sea to rise up. So vast was the quantity of water forming a rising column under the descending city that the sea level visibly dropped. The city struck the

column, triggering an explosion of water that immediately sent rain falling over Livaros. The watery pillar slowed the descent of the plummeting city, turning a plunge into a drop.

When it reached sea level, the city was still a massive falling object, displacing vast amounts of water to trigger a tsunami, but the Archbishop of Ocean was not done. She channelled more divine power, arresting the movement of the great wave and settling it back into the sea before it could strike Livaros or sweep out in search of other shores.

The fallen and collapsed city was too large to be entirely submerged, forming a new island off the coast of Livaros. Total disaster had been averted and Rimaros protected, but the death toll amongst adventurers was devastating. It would take time to fully count, but the royal family and their guard contingent had been ravaged, as had the other adventurers who fought for Rimaros instead of heading north.

Jason's team had come through intact, courtesy of their assigned role putting them in relative safety and giving them plenty of time to evacuate and help others to do the same. The moment they were certain they were safe, they found the Shade body Jason had left in the Livaros to inform him they had survived.

Chapter 526

The End of the World

Some of the neighbourhood kids watched from across the river as Rufus and Jason sparred. Stripped down to plain pants, they matched their swordsmanship furiously until even their silver-rank endurance was spent. The children observed with fascination, some trying to imitate them, others engaging in their own spars using sticks.

Jason lost repeatedly, despite all his advancements. Rufus had trained under what many considered to be the greatest swordsman in the world since he was a boy. For all of Jason's practical experience, it would take more than a few years and a few skill books to catch up. After exhausting themselves, they took a refreshing dip in the river.

"I'm sure it would be different if we were using our powers," Rufus reassured Jason.

"Uh-huh," Jason said sceptically.

The Livaros mirage chamber had been shut down indefinitely. There were more important places to use the resources required to operate it.

Rufus emerged from the water first and went into the cloud house. Jason extricated himself more slowly, picking his sword up from the grass and meandering back to the house as he looked around. He stopped, spotting someone outside another house, further up the river.

Estella Warnock was standing outside the house that had belonged to her grandfather, staring at it blankly. Jason hadn't sensed her, one of the few people that could go unnoticed by his formidable senses. She didn't much bother with the polite restraint of aura, instead completely hiding it from everyone around her.

Jason shot a delicate and supporting tendril of aura her way and she turned. They shared a nod before she went into the house that was now hers. Jason looked at the house for a long time before Arabelle came out and stood beside him.

"We don't have long before you'll need to head off again," she told him. "No skipping sessions, remember?"

He nodded absently, still staring at the house that had belonged to Warwick Warnock.

"It's strange, being on the outside of events like this," he said.

"Outside?"

"I didn't fight. I didn't lose anyone. This isn't my kingdom and this isn't my home."

"And where is your home?"

“My home is people. They all came back safe. I’m told it wasn’t planned to keep them out of the city depths, but it was probably Dawn’s doing. I’m so used to being in the middle of these events and losing things to them. It’s strange to be on the periphery of someone else’s fight.”

As with Jason’s team, Arabelle had never been sent deeper into the city than the surface, due to her valuable role as a healer. When the signal to evacuate came, she was able to escape safely.

“You may not have fought the Builder cult,” she told him, “but you did your part. You took lives again, and I know you want to avoid that.”

“I know that it’s inevitable, with the choices I’ve made. The choices I’ll make again.”

He looked at the sword in his hand, gripped halfway down the scabbard.

“Maybe I could have crippled them with this, instead of dosing them with afflictions. The bronze-rankers. They might have lived long enough to get healing.”

He shook his head.

“Mercy is good when I can afford it,” he said. “I’m not going to take chances to save people like that.”

“It sounds like you’re starting to find your balance.”

“Maybe. People are dealing with a lot more than I am right now. It feels like so much is happening all at once. The people of this kingdom don’t even have time to grieve.”

It had been a month since what was variously being called the War of Four Cities or the One Day War. The history books would decide which one stuck. The Storm Kingdom and the Adventure Society were still scrambling to adjust to a new status quo. Between the Rimaros battle and the battles to the northwest, the adventurer population had suffered massive casualties amongst their mid and high rankers. This included more than a third of the royal family’s most powerful members, with the royal guard – the Sapphire Crown guild – suffering similar losses.

Despite their drop in numbers, both the royal family and the royal guard became more active in meat-and-potatoes adventuring in the wake of the battles. With their drop in numbers being reflected across the adventuring population, the Adventure Society was struggling to meet the requirements of monster surge activity. Once more, the royal family had stepped forward in the kingdom’s time of need.

Across all Adventure Society activity, minimum action quotas had been raised and safety standards lowered. Bronze-rankers had not had their number diminished, having been kept out of the war. They were now having their teams combined into larger groups,

and being sent on missions that would normally be tasked to silver-rankers. All of these measures were leading to more losses, but the results of not doing so would be worse. Reports were already coming in of fortress towns having their defences overrun as monster-clearing rates had dropped.

Jason and his allies were no exception to the increased activity. They had been worked to the bone since the battle but were holding up better than most. Their experience of spending months in an astral space in a ceaseless stream of battles, back when they were iron and bronze-rank, left them mentally better prepared than most for the revolving door of contracts.

For many Rimaros adventurers, the current adventuring climate was a very bad fit. The Rimaros adventuring ethos was predicated on turning situations into best-case scenarios, using their plentiful adventurer population and specialised teams to pick the right group for the right job. That was a rare luxury in current circumstances. While it was being done where possible, there were too many jobs and not enough adventurers. Many teams had lost members and been forced to amalgamate as best they could.

Many of the young Rimaros silver-rankers were unused to operating without high-rank backup. The guild forces yet to be properly seasoned were revealing themselves as greenhouse flowers, especially at the bronze and early-silver level, shrinking the gap between guild and non-guild adventurers. They might not have the depth of training enjoyed by their guild counterparts, but for most, this was not their first taste of desperation. Their mentality was holding up much better under adverse conditions.

The good news in all the mess was that while the adventurers of the Storm Kingdom had seen their darkest hour, they had fought through and won. The lower-rank adventurers and the population at large had been almost entirely shielded from the battles with the Builder. The region around the rolling land city had been burned into desolation and covered in molten metal and stone, but it was mostly empty desert. The nearest cities had already been evacuated before the land city rolled right through them, keeping casualties low. That made for a lot of refugees, but it was the territory of the kingdom to the north, saving the Storm Kingdom from needing to deal with them.

As for the other two cities, the construct kraken city had sunk to the bottom of the ocean after the most straightforward of the city battles. With the flying city that fell from the sky, the intervention of the gods had managed to shield Livaros. The most that had happened was some minor coastal flooding on the islands of Provo and Arnote, as well as the south coast. The water essence users and the Archbishop of Ocean had protected

Livaros entirely, despite being the closest landfall. The flying city was now a stony island just southwest of Livaros, having fallen into relatively shallow waters.

Jason didn't know a lot of Rimaros adventurers, but he nonetheless went through casualty listings as they came out, along with most adventurers. The young he-who-would-be-Thadwick who Jason had encountered during his first supply contract had died. Although Jason didn't have the details, he liked to imagine that the young adventurer fell heroically, unlike his Greenstone counterpart.

There was no question that Ledev and Vesper had both died saving the city. Jeni Kavaloa had died fighting alongside Vesper as well. She might not have wanted to work with Jason again, after their expedition together, but Jason had respected her a lot. He couldn't help but feel that his own sacrifices seemed hollow in comparison, given that he kept coming back from them. The World-Phoenix wouldn't let Jason go until it was done with him, which was how he ended up safely on Arnote while the rest of the Kingdom was fighting for their lives.

"It feels a little odd," Jason told Arabelle as they sat inside the cloud house. "I'm used to being in the middle of these events. Of being the one to struggle and sacrifice. I've complained about it being me so much, but now I'm at the periphery, it feels wrong somehow. I don't want any part of that, yet I'm somehow frustrated that I'm not. Am I lying to myself? Am I some kind of misery junkie?"

"You're not addicted to misery, Jason. You've become used to having an influence on affairs of a magnitude that you shouldn't even be involved with. Your frustration is from feeling a lack of control."

"I never have control. I'm always dancing to someone else's tune. Always too weak; always desperately leveraging someone else's power just to survive the path someone else put me on."

"I don't believe that," Arabelle said. "And neither do you."

"Excuse me?"

"You have been making choices all this time. You and Farrah have both told me about Earth. You chose to step in, time and again. No one forced you to work with people who betrayed you over and over again. You chose to do that because of what would happen to innocent people if you didn't."

"If it's between letting people die and working with people who suck, that isn't a choice."

“Yes, Jason, it is. It’s just an unpleasant one. And for all that you were kept from the battle, your influence was undeniably felt. It was your intervention that convinced Dawn to move, and you brought Travis into the fold to produce the weapon that destroyed the flying city. You were critical in felling two of those cities.”

“By leveraging other people’s power,” he said. “Again.”

Arabelle gave him a sad, tired smile.

“Jason, we have a long way to go, you and I. A very long way.”

Jason didn’t spend any more time than necessary on Livaros, just picking up and handing in contracts. Events had made his position in Rimaros politics fairly pointless. Anyone playing political games at the moment was being directly and savagely slapped down by Soramir. Even if he didn’t, the Irios family had stepped up in a big way during the defence of Rimaros. Many of their members had fought and died, and their defence infrastructure had been critical. Petty games of young people and marriage no longer mattered.

What little downtime Jason had was spent in training or working with Arabelle, starting the long road to getting his head straight. He spent a lot of his training time working on his swordsmanship with Rufus, who praised Jason’s improvement while trouncing him repeatedly.

Only remnants of the Builder cult remained in the Sea of Storms, and one of the most regular contracts Jason’s team was given was rooting them out whenever they were found. In case they encountered a clockwork king or other gold-rank minion, they usually did so in the company of Liara or Keel from the Builder-response unit.

Despite this task, the Builder cult was gone from the region for most practical purposes. The same could not be said for the rest of the world as news rolled in of other battles with the Builder’s terrible fortresses. The results were never great, with even victory coming at a heavy price while defeat brought cataclysmic disaster. Stories came in of major cities annihilated, leaving the region’s astral spaces ripe for seizure. That led to even more destruction as those astral spaces were plucked from the world.

There were only a few small mercies in all the destruction and chaos. One was that with the current state of the world’s dimensional membrane, the loss of astral spaces was less destructive than it had been in the past. With the dimensional barrier already weakened and damaged, the removal of astral spaces didn’t create the same level of dimensional disturbance.

The other good news was that the Builder cult was forced to accept the same limits as everyone else. The same low levels of magic in Greenstone that had prevented Emir's cloud ship from flying restricted the power of other things. The fortress cities in the sea of Storms would have fallen out of the sky, sunken to the ocean or even collapsed under their own weight in Greenstone. Each region was only faced with power commensurate with the power already there, making the Builder cult a challenge, but one that could be met on all fronts. They weren't always successful in stopping the Builder's ambitions, but more often than not, they were.

Even in the other high-magic zones, the Storm Kingdom successfully repelling three cities at once was a remarkable feat. Their success buoyed other nations around the world, rejuvenating morale that was continuously being chipped away. If one of the world's great adventuring cities had fallen, the news could easily have led to a dangerous collapse of morale that fed the Builder cult's success.

A month after the Builder's cities in the Storm Kingdom were destroyed, things were getting into some manner of tentative order. Mass memorials had been happening regularly; the fallen deserved better than to be sent off in job lots but there wasn't time for anything more. The jobs hall had adventurers streaming in and out, grabbing fresh contracts the moment they handed in the one they just completed. The old biases between guild and non-guild fell away in the scramble to meet the challenges of the monster surge. Guild elitism fell by the wayside as need and the shortcomings of training only in high-magic zones highlighted the importance of experience.

These were the shortcomings that the Geller family had understood for centuries; the very reason they had maintained Greenstone as their family seat even as their power and influence spread across the world, generation after generation. Rufus had recognised this and had spent most of the last few years working to incorporate this practice into his family's academic institution.

Stories abounded of people stepping up; unknown individuals shining even as young adventurers vaunted for their potential cracked under pressure. This caused problems from both the higher and lower ends of society. In the upper echelons, some noble scions fell short after years of training and countless resources had been poured into them. Most aristocratic families were wise enough to brush the issue aside and quietly work on getting their young people the experience they needed to live up to their potential. The Geller family in Rimaros quietly made it known that they would help in this regard.

A few houses took a different tack, however. In the rush to clean what they saw as stains to their pride, they made bold, short-sighted moves. Some casting out young people

like lizards dropping their tails, while others staged pre-emptive political smears in an attempt to maintain the very reputation their actions were tainting.

That small minority of aristocratic houses that made those decisions were mostly minor ones, panicked by their relatively limited power bases being harmed by the One Day War and its aftermath. Fearful of losing their influence in the royal court, they made moves that only cast that influence away as other houses and the royal family came down on them like a hammer.

Titles were stripped and assets seized from any family that too openly defied the royal family's edict that politics would be set aside through the current crisis. There were always those who thought the rules did not apply to them, or they were too clever to be caught out in their ambitions. In the case of one minor family, their entire sky island was seized by the royal family. The aristocratic house in question mounted protests until Soramir and Zila Rimaros came to the island, smashed through the defences and threw anyone who would survive directly off the side of the island. The rest of the family departed very swiftly.

Adventurers shining bright during dark days were welcomed into guilds hungry to replenish their numbers and add experienced adventurers to their roster. Families whose members had stepped up in the battle or the aftermath, either as adventurers or through more logistical contributions were raised to the status of minor nobility.

At the lower end of the social spectrum were those who saw this and viewed the current conditions as a prime chance to move up in the world. While most realised that those being recognised were doing so through earnest effort, many couldn't see past selfish ambitions or that the old ways were changing.

As with the noble families who had shot themselves in the foot, many failed to see that a fundamental shift was taking place in both the adventuring and aristocratic realms of Rimaros society. They stuck to the old ways of backroom influence-trading and putting more effort into looking like they were contributing than actually doing it. They tried to move up by pulling others down, sowing mistrust at a time when unity was critical. The royal family did what they could to stamp it out but, being less prominent, the lowly and ambitious were harder to notice and identify.

"How long before you're back on a contract?" Arabelle asked Jason.

"We're going in this evening," Jason told her, looking out the cloud house window at the early afternoon sun.

“Not much of a break. You only got back this morning. You won’t even spend a night at home.”

“There’s not a lot of Builder cult left to mop up,” Jason said. “We’ve been getting a lot of missions to reinforce Fortress towns, now that I have a lot of them as portal destinations. I’m guessing they’re keeping you busy too.”

“Yes. With greater risks being taken, the need for healers has risen commensurately. That’s not an excuse to avoid these sessions.”

“It kind of is.”

“We have the rest of the day, then.”

“All day? Arabelle, I need rest and relaxation too, you know.”

“Just a little longer, then, but it has to be about something I want to go back to.”

“What?” Jason asked warily.

“You told me that your family stayed in the cloud house after you lost control of your aura during a flashback nightmare.”

“That’s old news,” Jason said. “They’re back on Earth.”

“Did they ever go back into your spirit vault after that?”

“That takes trust,” Jason said. “We just... we never talked about it again. We all knew they wouldn’t be able to go in anymore.”

“How did that make you feel?”

“Alone. That was when I knew they weren’t coming back with me. It took longer to admit to myself, but that was when I knew.”

“And what about your team?” Arabelle asked.

“What about them?”

“Have they gone into your spirit vault?”

“I haven’t told them about it.”

“Why not?”

“You know why not.”

“Tell me.”

“You’re going to make me say it?”

“Some things you have to go through to get to the other side, Jason.”

He stood up and paced around the room. Arabelle remained seated, patiently waiting. More than once he paused to glower at her before he resumed his angry pacing. Finally, he leaned up against the wall, pressing into it with both hands as he glared out the window.

“Jason,” Arabelle said.

"Because if they can't go in, I'm done!" Jason yelled, wheeling on her. "If, after everything I went through to get here, they can't trust me, I won't have anything left. Nothing to go towards and nothing to go back to. Is that what you want to hear?"

"Yes," Arabelle said calmly. "This fear is what's stopping you from moving forward. But you already know that."

"You're saying I have to do it?"

"Jason, you need to understand that just because something is one way in any given moment, that doesn't mean it's that way forever. My understanding is that your spirit vault requires a deep and unreserved trust in you before someone can enter."

"Yes."

"Then do you genuinely believe it's strange that your team might have some reservations about you coming back from the dead, so very different than you were before? That trust you once had was built over time. Strengthened in fire, like a pot in a kiln. If they don't have that full and absolute trust today, you need to understand that it's not the end. You have the time and the chance to build that trust again. So, yes, I'm saying that you have to tell them about your spirit vault and let them in. You don't have to tell them about the trust component. You can see how it goes."

"You think it's that easy?"

"No. But you're in a place where you have to confront what is, in your mind, the worst possible outcome, before you can see that it isn't the end of the world and you do have a path forward. You've faced the literal end of the world, Jason. Are you going to let a metaphorical one stop you?"

"So, it's not a portal," Neil said. "It's a personal storage space except that people can go in?"

"Something like that," Jason said.

Jason and his team, along with Rufus, Gary and Farrah, were standing in the waterfall room, looking at a portal arch. Rufus looked at Jason, who seemed normal and light-hearted, but saw that Farrah was watching him with concern. He knew there was something about the arch that they weren't telling the rest of them.

Clive was the most eager, curiosity driving him to vanish through the portal first. Gary quickly followed. Farrah nodded at Rufus and he followed suit. Humphrey was next, Sophie right on his heels. Belinda followed right behind, Jason's inner tension loosening just a little. Belinda was one he'd been unsure of, but that just left Farrah and Neil. Neil shrugged, bit into his sandwich and walked through the portal.

Left alone with Farrah, Jason staggered, as if a cord that had been pulled tight within him had suddenly loosened. Farrah flashed him a grin and grabbed him up in a hug. Tears Jason's magical body shouldn't have been able to shed welled in his eyes. Farrah was almost holding him up when Neil came back out of the portal.

"Are you two coming or..."

He saw them holding one another.

"Ha, I knew it. Lindy, you owe me a... oh, she probably can't hear me."

Neil turned to go back through the archway when Jason rushed over and bundled him into a huge hug.

"Uh...?"