

Chapter 125:

We End Here

As a week of ongoing memorial services came to a close, the adventuring community fell into a sober silence. The Adventure Society campus was quiet and, for the first time Jason had seen, largely occupied by adventurers who didn't come from the upper echelons of Greenstone society.

Jason had learned to recognise the upper crust adventurers over time. Many he knew by sight, although the quality of their gear was an even better indicator. The people he saw roaming the campus tended towards plain, functional equipment; more value-for-money than the highest performing gear.

There was a pregnant pause in the wake of the disastrous expedition, while people awaited word of what the inquiry would choose to do. In the absence of the usual dominating forces, frequently overlooked adventurers were coming to the fore. These were the adventurers who would never have gotten a place on the expedition and, in the absence of those who did, stepped in to fill the gap. While the expedition was now back, the city's most powerful families were licking their wounds and awaiting the inquiry results. The adventurers newly flourishing in their place were left free to continue.

Belinda started working with Clive at the Magic Society. He took her in and showed her what he was expecting from her while things were still quiet for him. Once he was finally allowed access to what the expedition had brought back, he expected to become very busy. At that point, he would need her to have already grasped the basics of her new job.

For his own preparations, he reviewed works on astral magic from the Magic Society's library, as well as his own collection. Although it suited his purposes, he was rather dismayed at their availability. The people already working on the materials brought back really should have been accessing the astral magic texts quite heavily.

The incompetence of his fellows allowed Clive to put together a quick-reference library of astral magic to help his own investigation, once he had access to the materials. He also put together some theory primers for Belinda, to fill in the gaps in her patchwork education. Whenever Clive had no specific tasks for her, she could dive into the list.

Jason, in the meantime, introduced Sophie to the training cycle that Rufus, Gary and Farrah had introduced to him. Some of it, like the meditation training and the weightlifting, was new. Other things, like the parkour and the observation training, she had been doing some version of for years.

Because she could outperform him in certain aspects of the training, it was colouring her view of his ability in the others. She was self-sufficient by nature, more used to finding her own way through things than having someone instruct her. She hadn't had anything like a teacher since her father had died and was resisting it now.

In one of the cloud palace's meditation rooms, Jason was instructing her on using meditation techniques to gain better control of the mana within her body. They were sitting on the soft cloud floor, cross-legged and face to face.

"I can actively move the mana around my body," Sophie was arguing. "Taking control feels better. Stronger."

"This technique isn't about strength or control," Jason said. "It's about mapping out how the mana flows within the body. You need to be patient, sense how the mana moves on its own. Exercising control before gaining an understanding will do more harm than good."

"It doesn't feel right," she said. "It really feels like I should be doing it my way."

Jason ran his hands over his face, taking a deep, calming breath. He got to his feet.

"That's enough for today, I think," he said.

"That's it?" she asked.

"I don't think continuing will be very productive."

She lightly hopped up to her feet.

"So, if I don't do everything the way you want, you just give up?"

"Meditation is about achieving a useful state of mind," Jason said. "If we have fundamentally opposed positions on what you need to achieve then we get nowhere. Letting it go and starting fresh tomorrow will achieve more than forcing the issue."

Their respective suites were close together in the guest wing, so they walked together as they returned, albeit in silence. They encountered Clive and Belinda on the way, who easily spotted the tension. Jason gave them a curt nod of greeting before disappearing into his suite.

Clive frowned as he looked at the door through which Jason had passed through, then at the dissatisfied expression on Sophie's face.

"I think it's time we had a little talk," he said. "Do you have a moment to discuss something?"

She gave him a wary, assessing look before nodding and heading into the suite she shared with Belinda.

"She means 'of course, please do come in,'" Belinda said.

“That’s the impression I was getting,” he said, Belinda laughing as they followed Sophie inside to the main lounge in the centre of their suite. Sophie took a chilled bottle of water from a cooler cabinet and fell into a couch while Clive walked over and sat down in a chair opposite, across a low refreshments table from her.

“So what is it?” Sophie asked as Belinda sat down beside her. Clive looked Sophie straight in the eye.

“We told you that we were given a choice of awakening stones and Jason chose the one that gave you your aura.”

“I remember.”

“Jason is an affliction specialist and that stone was almost certain to give you some ability that would be bad for him if you ended up on the opposite sides of a fight again. Which is exactly what it did.”

“So?” Belinda asked.

“He wants me to ask why,” Sophie said.

“Yes,” Clive acknowledged. “I asked him why he would choose that stone myself.”

“And?” Sophie asked.

“He said that three men had gone to considerable lengths to control your destiny. Cole Silva lost his chance when Lucian Lamprey became involved. Lamprey lost his chance when Jason claimed your indenture. I didn’t know who the third man was, though.”

“Asano is the third man,” Sophie said.

“Yes,” Clive said. “He told me the same thing. And that’s why he chose that stone. It makes it a little harder for him to enforce his grip on you.”

“I never asked him to be my protector,” Sophie said.

“He doesn’t want to be,” Clive said. “He’s giving you the tools to you need to protect yourself.”

“He thinks he’s my hero?”

“He is your hero,” Clive said. “Throwing you through a portal and never thinking about you again would have fulfilled whatever responsibility he felt toward you, and not many of us would have done that much for you. But he doesn't think like me and he's decided this is the right thing to do.”

He shook his head disbelievingly before continuing.

“Do you even understand what he's paid, literally and figuratively, to put you in the position you are now? He stood up to the directors of both the Adventure Society and the Magic Society. He actually stood in front of each and told them that he was taking you out of their hands. I wouldn't have done that. The idea of doing that would never have entered

my head. I don't think you're worth what he's done for you, but when Jason decides to do something, he goes all the way. He decided to help you, which is why you're here instead of chained to a bed somewhere with a glazed look in your eye."

"I didn't ask for any of that," Sophie said.

"And you don't deserve it," Clive said. "Not everything he's done for you. It's past time you started to show him some gratitude."

"You make him out like he's this great guy," Sophie said, "but I've seen plenty of lying, scheming manipulators. He fits right in."

"Yes, he does," Clive said. "And look what his schemes and manipulations have done."

Clive stood up.

"I've said my piece; take it or ignore it as you please. I'll see you tomorrow, Belinda."

He walked out of the suite, leaving Sophie and Belinda alone.

Belinda looked at Sophie, caught up in thought. Sophie turned and met her gaze.

"What do you think?" Sophie asked.

Belinda thought for a while before answering.

"Maybe Asano needs to feel powerful. To prove to himself he can make something a little less awful when awful is in abundant supply. We both know what it's like to be stuck in the mud, powerless to do anything about it."

"People don't help other people to feel in control," Sophie said. "They push those people down."

"Jory doesn't," Belinda said. "Look at what he's done to help people. I think maybe Asano is like that. And if he is, then what he's done for us is really incredible."

"So I should go fawning after Asano, now?"

"No," Belinda said. "But maybe not treat everything he says and does like it's part of some scheme to screw you over. He's had every chance to hurt us but everything he's done has helped us. At least give him the chance to prove he's actually trying to do right by you. Maybe even let him do it."

"If he's such a good guy, then why does he always act shady?"

"Maybe he realised you'd find a good-guy even more suspicious and didn't want you running for the hills."

Sophie's brow furrowed as she thought it over.

"Yeah," she acknowledged with a nod. "I guess I would have."

She got to her feet.

"I'll go talk to him," she said. "Maybe I can clear the air a little. Hear him out with an open mind, at least."

Belinda gave her an encouraging smile.

"That sounds sensible," she said. "I think we've been scrambling for so long that we may have lost the knack for sensible and patient."

Sophie went out into the hall, seeing Rufus just leaving Jason's suite.

"Is he in?" she asked.

"He is, but I'd leave him be, just for now. I just let him know that he's been demoted to one star."

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"It means that he just went from the highest rank he could have to the lowest."

"Why?"

"The inquiry in the Adventure Society."

"I thought they were just looking at that expedition," Sophie said.

"They're doing a full audit of the local branch, looking at everything and everyone. They just announced a sweeping wave of demotions, including Jason's."

"He doesn't seem like the kind that would bother."

"Yeah," Rufus said. "Not seeming bothered is something he's good at."

Jason looked out from his terrace, the late afternoon sun shining over the ocean. He had been expecting to lose one star, but two was a blow. Rufus had once again told him that it didn't matter, that soon enough he would be bronze and could start over at a new rank. It still felt like a repudiation of everything he felt he'd achieved. He knew he'd done some contentious things but he believed he was a good adventurer. Until the moment Rufus walked in, he had the stars to prove it.

Jason vaulted over the edge of the terrace, his cloak appearing around him. After floating down to a lower level of the palace he made his way to the shore and set off through the Adventure Society campus.

When he reached the marshalling yard he found a throng of people. Rows of bulletin boards had been set up, listing out demotions. A large notice at the front instructed the demoted to go to the administration building to have the stars removed from their badges. Jason went through the rows, shoulder to shoulder with people as he looked for his name. He didn't think Rufus had gotten it wrong, but he needed to see for himself. He noticed as he browsed through the names that many weren't just demoted but had their membership revoked entirely.

He found his name. Jason Asano. Old rank: three stars. New rank: one star. He let out a weary breath, then extricated himself from the crowd. He looked in the direction of the Adventure Society and saw that not many people heading there to confirm their demotion. He overheard talk that people wouldn't stand for it and the decision would be overturned. He heard more than one assertion that they would refuse to confirm the demotion until all the politics had played out.

Jason made his way to the administration building where a long bench had been set up. There were four Adventure Society officials behind it, with people queuing up in front. The officials were each using a wedge-shaped magical stone to remove stars from badges. None of the queues were long and Jason joined the one that led to Vincent.

"Rufus found you, then," Vincent said when Jason reached the front.

"He did."

"Sorry about this."

Jason handed over his badge, watching the third star, then the second disappear as Vincent touched it twice with his stone. Jason took it back and left. Standing outside the admin building, he had no interest in going back to the cloud palace. Setting his feet in the direction of the jobs hall, he strode off. He wanted to kill something.

After four days in the delta, he met a member of the Geller family and discovering that people thought he had gone missing.

"No," Jason had told the man. "I'm just doing adventure notices. Tell them I'm fine."

It was another week before he returned to the city. He went straight to the jobs hall, handing over the contract he had originally taken, along with a stack of completed adventure board notices. As he made his way across the Adventure Society campus, he heard Cassandra call out his name. She was rushing to catch up to him but became hesitant as she drew closer.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I've been trying to find you," she said. "I heard you were out in the delta."

"I was."

"Jason, I..."

She looked around. They were standing in an open area of grass, with very few people in sight. Ever since the expedition, far fewer people were to be found at the campus, with the demotions only making it worse.

"What is it?" he asked, as if the distance she kept between them didn't tell him what she was about to say.

"I have to end things. Between you and I."

He was going to ask why, but his brain beat his mouth.

"The demotion," he said.

"I've received a lot of privileges, being part of my family," she said. Her beautiful face was sunken, reluctant, but determined. "There are responsibilities that come with it, too. I have to find a match that makes the family stronger."

"I see."

"Your lack of background always made it hard to convince the family. Mother helped. Your connections to the Gellers and the Vitesse adventurers were good and your rapid rise silenced a lot of voices. Dropping to one star, though. I have to find someone reliable."

"You think I'm unreliable?" he asked.

"You know I don't. I argued against it, but it was decided. We end here."

"Just like that."

"I didn't want this," she said. "They're being short-sighted, I know."

"But they're family," Jason said.

"Yes," she said softly.

She was holding her hands in front of her, vulnerability showing in what was usually an unassailable countenance. He stepped closer, gently taking her hands in his.

"Alright," he said.

"Alright?" she asked.

"Not really, but yes."

"Just like that?"

"What did you expect?" he asked.

"I don't know. Maybe I thought you'd say that nobles are stupid and do something reckless and impulsive."

"That would only hurt you and accomplish nothing," he said. "Take it from someone who let a failed relationship drive a wedge between him and his family."

He leaned in, gently kissed her and stepped back, letting go of her hands. His eyes glistened with tears but he had a familiar, impish grin.

"You're going to miss me, Cassandra Mercer."

"I know."

He turned walked away, without looking back.