

Chapter 911

A Matter of Mindset

As the ship approached Greenstone's artificial island, Jason and his companions were gathering in a space not unlike a hotel lobby. Aspects of the vessel were similar to a cruise ship, although heavier on amenity and utility spaces and lighter on accommodation. Even Emir only travelled around with fifty or so staff, and Jason had far fewer people on board than that.

Jason was walking towards the lobby with Sophie and Humphrey as Sophie voiced her unhappiness with the destination. She hadn't joined Belinda in their early visit to their hometown, and she wasn't keen on going now.

"I don't see why we're even here," she said. "What does this place have to offer us anymore? And I know you don't like all this pageantry, Jason."

"You've always liked your ostentation spontaneous," Humphrey pointed out. "Having it scheduled and organised doesn't seem like you."

"It's not for me," Jason said. "Or for you, Humphrey. A special event doesn't seem special to you because you're the prince of this town. It may have a Duke, but everyone knows that the Gellers are the real power here. You were born for bigger things than this town has to offer, so a triumphant return visit doesn't mean much."

"Then what is all this for?" Humphrey asked.

"Every aristocratic house in Greenstone will be represented in the crowd waiting for us. Not just some pointless nephew, either. Elders, heads of house. Organisations, too. Directors of the Magic Society, the Adventure Society, the Alchemy association. There are as many of Greenstone's silver rankers gathered here as have ever come together in one place before."

"What do you care about the nobility of some low-magic backwater?" Sophie asked, not hesitating to talk down about her hometown. "You socialise with gods and kings and diamond rankers."

"I told you, it's not about me. Right now, all those people are gathered at the Adventure Society's VIP dock. And who are they waiting for? It's not me. People haven't been talking about me for years, and I was only famous amongst Adventure Society insiders. These people are gathering for Team Biscuit. Adventuring legends and hometown heroes. For you, Humphrey, that's not a big deal. Everyone expected big things of you. But think about all those people, and who else they're here to see."

He glanced at Sophie.

“People know your story, Sophie. They’ve doubtless mythologised it well outside anything that’s actually true, but that’s not what matters. What matters is that a pair of girls from Old City became famous adventurers. And now they’re coming home, celebrated by the city’s elite.”

“I never wanted to be a role model.”

“Too bad. And it’s not just for the next little Sophie and Belinda, either. Neil’s family have been stuck as what amounts to servants to the Mercer’s for years, but now the most powerful people in the city have to show them respect. Today they get to stand tall as Neil comes home, probably dressed in his aunt’s awful clothes. And you know who else is waiting for us? A clan of eel farmers. The important people of this city would cross the road to avoid them, but today, those eel farmers will be front and centre, waiting for their boy to come home. And those important people are stuck standing behind them.”

“Does it always have to be a speech with you?” Sophie asked. “You could have just said it will be nice for Neil and Clive’s families to see.”

“That seems a little reductive.”

“I think you just like hearing yourself talk.”

“What are you talking about? Everyone loves hearing me talk.”

The Adventure Society VIP dock was on the ocean side of Greenstone’s artificial island. The expectation was that if your vessel needed a sheltered harbour, you weren’t important enough to use it. Near the dock was a large building normally used for social events, as the dock itself spent most of its time empty. This also allowed the attending luminaries to save face. They could tell themselves they were attending a social function, not standing around, waiting for more important people than them to arrive.

The building had been restructured just a couple of years ago, and most of its three stories were glass walls. Elspeth Arella looked out at the ocean from the third floor, radiating a lack of desire for company. Most of the attendees were looking to ingratiate themselves with the Geller boy and his famous team. Jason Asano was a name that hadn’t entered their minds in years, and it seemed only Elspeth herself was focused on him. If they were all very lucky, that wouldn’t change.

She had been expecting to sense the ship before she saw it, but was proven wrong as it crested the horizon. Even as it drew closer, revealing how large it was, she sensed nothing, even staring right at it. She knew that most of the attendees would not notice, let alone understand the significance. They were socialites and merchant barons, not warriors and soldiers. The Messenger War had left Greenstone largely untouched.

That vessel was a message about power and who held it, and it was not one that the Director of the Adventure Society missed. She also knew that it was not accidental; Danielle Geller was on that ship. She did not send unintended signals, and she did not like Elspeth.

As the ship neared the shore, the collective group went outside. She glanced around, watching the crowd with her aura senses as well as her eyes. She'd put reliable people in key positions, hoping to keep volatile elements under control, but the potential for disaster was very real. One moment, a lord's idiot son might be mocking the clan of eel farmers, unhappy they were given pride of place. The idiot would be hurtling out to sea at the hands of a gold ranker in about three seconds and things would only devolve from there. Elspeth's spectrum for the success of the event ranged from a brawl to a massacre.

The massive vessel pulled up at the dock, larger than the building in which people had been waiting for it. Elspeth couldn't help but remember the similar scene of Emir Bahadir's arrival. This ship was different, in that the cloud material of the vessel was only visible in sections between large panels that covered it.

Elspeth wondered if the different ship signalled a different outcome. Emir Bahadir wasn't easy to handle, but the treasure hunter knew how to navigate the locals on a visit like this. Jason Asano was smooth as sandpaper, always rubbing people wrong. During his time in Greenstone, he'd somehow befriended every person who was powerful and independent enough to make Elspeth's job hard, and annoyed everyone else.

Clouds wafted from the ship to create a wide bridge, and a gap opened in the side of the ship. The Gellers emerged, Danielle and her son who was becoming as famous as she was. Next to the Geller boy was a man who looked similar enough to be a younger brother, but with silver hair and eyes.

It was only after Humphrey Geller left Greenstone that Elspeth discovered that he'd been wandering around with an actual gods-bedamned dragon the whole time. She'd known he had a shapeshifting familiar, of course, but an actual, true blood dragon? His mother had told her it was a lyre drake, but Elspeth should have known better than to trust Danielle Geller.

She catalogued the rest as they came over the bridge. The thieves she'd once tasked her society branch to hunt down, not knowing the chaos that would ensue. Asano, the main perpetrator of that chaos. The Magic Research Association's archchancellor. The uncultured cheering that arose from the grubby-looking farmers at the appearance of the refined man of magic was a strange incongruity.

Elsbeth's gaze moved back to Asano. He caught her gaze for a moment before looking away, chatting amiably with the Devone boy. Then she felt a strange shimmer of aura around her and the sounds around her deafened. Asano's voice came out of nowhere.

"It's not me you have to worry about, director. I'm not the one you tried to sell to Lucian Lamprey as a means to slake his deprived appetites. But you don't really have to worry about Sophie, either, because she's dedicated herself to being a good person. She has this friend, though. You might want to check under your bed for alchemical bombs until we're gone again."

Elsbeth was at the front of the line for meet and greets. Asano was polite, as if meeting a passing acquaintance after a long time.

"I'd like the chance for you and I to talk, Mr Asano. Adventurer business."

"Of course, director."

What came next was a lengthy and tedious sequence of introductions and reintroductions, carefully orchestrated in order and length. After her experiences with Asano in the past, she was amazed that it all went to plan. There was none of his signature disruption or anti-authoritarian antics. It seemed that he had learned some diplomacy in the last couple of decades. As for who had managed to wrangle the lunatic, she noticed Danielle Geller throwing glances his way.

By the time it was all over, the one thing Elspeth least expected to happen had taken place: everything had gone to plan. No aristocratic feuds flaring up. No spoiled rich kids had made trouble out of arrogance and pride. Asano hadn't decided to take umbrage with anyone and start throwing people into the ocean now he was gold rank and no one could stop him.

As she made her way back to her office, she felt a strange relief, even as a new worry plagued at her mind. She would need to look closer into those former thieves, and she had just the person to ask. On reaching her office, she changed into a hooded outfit that would not look out of place in the Old City, then headed out to see her father.

Adris Dorgan was a happy man. Once a powerful crime lord, he found that legitimacy sat very well with him. As mayor of Old City, he'd dragged it kicking and screaming from the old days into a new era. Aristocratic families, as it turned out, were far more criminal than the old crime families, and with none of the sense of code or community. Now that Adris could shield the people from at least some of that, Old City was becoming a better place for its people.

His daughter was less happy. She had wanted to leave the city and rise through the ranks of the Adventure Society, and that had all come to nothing. Once, that had angered him, but those days were long gone. Greenstone was quiet, far from the Messenger War. The days of the Builder cult and the strange monster surges were almost two decades gone, and Greenstone was safe. Having his daughter safe and close were treasures to a father.

Walking through his library, he stopped dead. His mind flashed back to an encounter twenty years ago, where he found a young man staring at a picture in the library of his old home. The library was different, but it was the same man doing the same thing now, having once again ignored his security. Adris moved to where the man was staring at the painting.

“A long time ago,” Asano said, not looking from the painting “you offered to help me get my hands of a work or two by Moher. Said he was a family friend.”

“He still is.”

“I might take you up on that, if the offer is still open.”

“I suppose that depends on what your intentions are otherwise.”

“I gave your daughter a little prod and she’ll be coming to see you. I thought it might be a good idea for her and I to have a little chat.”

“I once warned you about interfering in my daughter’s affairs, Asano. I don’t care if you’re some all-powerful gold ranker, and I’m just a politician who got to silver with cores. If you do anything to her, I’ll find a way to kill you.”

Asano finally turned from the painting to flash a smile.

“I like you, Mr Dorgan. Family is important. Nothing will happen to your daughter from my people, even if she does have it coming. That’s not what we’re here for. I’d like to clear the air, now the power dynamic has shifted since my last stay in Greenstone. Also, there’s something she wants to discuss with me, and I thought it might be awkward in a room where she once dangled me in the air by the throat.”

“And you’re sure she’s coming here?”

“She’s crossing the bridge to Old City now.”

“You’re having her watched?”

“No, I’m just tracking her with my aura senses.”

“How do you extend your perception that far without washing the city in your aura?”

“Practise.”

“Well, can I offer you a cup of tea while we wait?”

“That would be lovely, thank you.”

Jason sat across from Elspeth in one of her father's entertaining courtyards. It had enclosed walls covered in plants growing out of alcoves, and was open to the sky. The furniture was ornate wrought metal, with plush padding. A tea set occupied most of the table between them, complete with scones with gemberry jam and huge dollops of whipped cream. Jason paid more attention to those than he did the Adventure Society director.

"What can I do for you?" he asked as he dabbed at the cream around his mouth with a napkin.

"How familiar are you with Boko, Mr Asano?"

"A city to the north of here. A lot older than Greenstone, with a population native to the area. If I recall correctly, most of Greenstone's people are descended from the original Estercost immigrants, I think, only a few centuries ago. Boko is a city of academics, if I recall correctly."

"Scholars of the arts. Painting, poetry, sculpture, dance. People travel from across the continent and beyond to visit their theatres."

"I only passed through briefly. A portal stop, in the aftermath of that disastrous expedition. It's pretty, as I recall. Lots of gardens."

"Do you happen to recall a group of raiders that came south during your time here?"

"I do. I was part of the group that dealt with them. They were rural tribesfolk, weren't they? From the areas around Boko?"

"That's what we thought at the time. As it turns out, their origins were in Boko proper. It began as some kind of anti-intellectual movement amongst low rankers and escalated from there. Moved out of the city and into areas where education was less of a priority. There, it festered like a sore. Getting back to primal manhood, that kind of thing. It thrives on low-rank, disenfranchised young men."

"I'm familiar with the basic idea."

"We had thought this particular movement had died out, but there has been a resurgence in the last few years."

"Why bring this to me? Isn't this a low-rank problem?"

"It's not your rank that makes me want you involved. I've been keeping an eye on this alongside my counterpart in Boko. Our initial belief was that this was a naturally arising, decentralised movement. It probably was, in the beginning, but we're starting to suspect some manner of organisational force behind it. Whether they were there at the beginning, or co-opted an emerging cultural phenomenon, we believe they are using it building a

powerful political block, the arms of which don't even realise they are heads of the same hydra. They keep their hands hidden, using populist groups as their face. Now it controls large portions of the rural areas around Greenstone, Boko and the Veldt. If we tried to reach out and quash it, we'd have towns and villages across half the continent in borderline rebellion."

"Do you have any sense of their objective?"

"Industry, to start. The production of spirit coins and our signature green stone is a lot of money, when taken as a whole."

"You think someone is looking to control small local governments? Extort shady tariffs on everyone operating in the region?"

"Something like that. If money is their end goal, we live with some graft. It's not like the aristocrats are any better. Our concern is if they have a larger and more sinister agenda. Moving their power base into Greenstone and Boko, maybe. Or quietly supporting more traditional problem groups in other regions. Illegal magical research requires funding, after all, just like the legitimate research. Whatever the ultimate purpose, it's an ongoing concern."

"So, why not go in and clear them out?"

"We haven't seen an approach like this before. It's a matter of mindset. On this world, we always think top-down first. Rank hierarchy, which is why you get to come into my city and make a giant mess. The golds do what they like, the silvers run most of it and the bronze rankers do what they're told."

"I never had much time for that."

"Oh, I remember. This operation, movement, whatever it is, they think differently too. Bottom up. People barely think about the iron-rankers and the normal. Even in a low-magic zone like Greenstone they don't hold a lot of influence. This movement takes the people our way of thinking ignores and melds them into a power built not on magical strength but ideological indoctrination. Taking disenfranchisement and isolation and turning it into a sense of belonging, welded to cultural concepts that make them easy to manipulate."

"You're saying that whoever is behind this isn't operating like someone from your world."

"Back when you were living here in Greenstone, even I kept hearing about your endless pontificating about how our society was all wrong. People were dodging you in the admin building so they didn't have to listen to it. And I remembered my horror at hearing that more of your kind had arrived. That was two monster surges ago, and I never heard anything else about it. But when we heard you were coming back, Vincent Trenslow

remembered enough of what you would talk about then to put things together. Power derived from large groups of the weak.”

“That’s not how I put it.”

“But I think Vincent was right. He suggested that whoever is behind all this might come, not from our world, but from yours.”