

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 thirty 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.