

Chapter 215

Nothing Speaks Louder Than Power

The return of Jason's familiars went a long way to helping him feel better. With his improved soul sense he could feel their comforting presence within him much more strongly than before, even retaining a sense of connection when they were out of his body. It didn't match the connection of a bonded familiar, like Humphrey had with Stash, but it was enough to give him a confidence that he had been lacking for some time.

He had not yet returned to adventuring but he did start making some social excursions. This started with Gary arriving at the houseboat to take Jason out to the delta, to take a look at the construction site of the training annex for Rufus' academy. They rode out using two of Shade's bodies in horse form, void black but with glowing white hooves, mane and eyes. Mist shrouded each of the hooves, leaving a trail as the horses sped along the delta embankment roads.

"So these are the horses you keep talking about," Gary said. "They're kind of like heidels, but only having one head is weird."

"Most things only have one head," Jason said and patted Horse-Shade on the neck. "Shade is quite a bit more handsome than regular horses, though."

In horse form, Shade manifested with reins and saddle, but no bit. The ride was soft and smooth, Shade not being a true animal but a creature of shadow-stuff. Shade was also able to run over the surface of water, which cut time comfortably off their journey.

They rode around the huge walls marking the edge of the Geller Estate grounds until they reached the construction site. Greenstone was to the west of the estate, while the construction site was just outside the south walls.

The Remore Academy Training Annex would primarily be made of stone, like most buildings in the region where wood was at a premium. Gary had been recruited to create metal frames and reinforcement before the stone went in, using the powers of his forge essence to create alloys heavier and stronger than steel.

"I do a lot of construction work back in Vitesse," Gary explained as he and Rufus led Jason around the site. "Being only bronze rank, we don't get the freedom to go out adventuring that we get here, so it's a nice little side earner."

"It's that restrictive?" Jason asked.

"It's not too bad," Rufus said. "You don't go out without a silver-ranker, though. Even if your team can handle a silver rank monster, if you get a whole pack of them, a bad

match-up for your team or a gold-rank monster then your team can end up dead very quickly. At higher ranks, monsters tend to be harder to run away from.”

“All that is especially true when a monster surge is due,” Gary said. “The increase in silver-rank monsters here is a clearly a surge precursor, and in Vitesse that increase is in gold-rank monsters.”

“It means the monster surge is close, right?” Jason asked.

“Maybe,” Rufus said. “It could be weeks, or even months, still, which is why we went ahead with construction.”

Jason’s friends continued to drag him out of the houseboat, to the point that he realised Arabelle had suggested they help Jason break out of his self-imposed isolation. He started taking his own steps out, including making use of the Musical Society membership he had purchased months ago, only to be too busy to really use. Making use of his own private viewing booth at the concert hall let him get out without needed to deal with other people too much.

Jason’s progress was not all forward, however. Nightmares were frequent and flashbacks could sneak up in him in unexpected moments. Arriving early for the symphony one night, something about the orchestra tuning their instruments triggered a flashback and he fled his booth, stumbling through the hall and into one of the empty rooms around the concert hall. He was leaning against a window when he felt a familiar aura draw closer. He turned, wild-eyed, to the opening door.

“Hello Jason.”

Cassandra’s face was filled with concern.

“I saw you in the hall,” she said. “You didn’t look well and your aura was all over the place.”

“It’s fine,” he said with a grimace, leaning back against the cool glass of the window.

“I heard about what happened to you,” she said softly. She stayed at a distance by the door, as if afraid of scaring off a skittish animal.

“What did you hear?” he asked

“They put one of those things in you. Like Thadwick.”

“Not like Thadwick,” Jason snarled, his face flashing anger, then regret.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I know your brother is still missing. But I wasn’t taken over.”

“I heard that too,” she said. “A lot of people don’t believe it.”

“I don’t care what a lot of people think,” he said. “Everyone I care about the opinion of knows better.”

“I’m sorry for how my family treated you,” she said. “Treated us.”

“They did what’s right for them,” Jason said. “Don’t we all.”

“No,” Cassandra said. “I heard about what happened in that village, too. Not many would stand up to a silver rank monster like that.”

Jason’s aura was settling. Her’s was a calming presence, intermingling with his in an echo of their former connection as lovers. She moved closer, slowly making her way across the room.

“Your aura is so different,” she said. “I can barely recognise it.”

“A lot has happened since we last met.”

Her smile carried the bitterness of their last encounter.

“You got your promotion back.”

“Impatience seems to be a Mercer family trait.”

“It has cost us, more than once.”

She arrived in front of Jason. After a brief pause, she wrapped her arms around him comfortingly and he didn’t resist, resting his head on her chest.

“We could have been something, couldn’t we?” she said sadly.

“Maybe,” he said.

“Probably for the best,” she said. “I would not be putting up with that beard.”

Still leaning into her chest, he burst out laughing.

Danielle had Humphrey drag Jason and his team to a large social gathering at the Geller townhouse on the Island. For Belinda and Sophie it was the first time attending such an event without a plan to steal from the attendees. In an elegant white dress, Sophie garnered no small amount of attention. Humphrey, who was raised in such settings, helped her navigate the new waters, adroitly driving away the sharks. If not for his social expertise she would have had to resort to her own, which was not event appropriate. She had made sure, that if it came to that, the slit in the leg of her dress would free up her high kicks.

“I robbed that guy,” she said quietly as they circulated. “And that one. Good thing Belinda is good at making disguises.”

Jason found himself in an odd social position, due to the various stories and events he had been caught up in. His success in the Reaper trials, along with his closeness to the gold rankers every social climber in the room wanted to connect with lifted up his prestige. The rumours floating around after his kidnapping and the aura projection incident made the waters rather murky, however.

At one point in the evening, the bronze-rank scion of an aristocratic family approached Jason, his breath reeking of drink and his aura reeking of monster cores.

“You shouldn’t even be allowed around decent people,” he slurred in Jason’s direction. “How do we know you don’t still have one of those things in you? You could be working for them.”

“That’s enough brother,” a woman said, stepping out to try and lead the man away. Jason recognised her as Liana Stelline, a member of mid-tier aristocratic clan. She had been part of Jason and Humphrey’s field assessment group, joining the Adventure Society alongside them.

“Kyle, it’s time to go home.”

Her brother shrugged her off, pointing a finger in Jason’s face.

“What do you think you’re doing, coming into our city? You were probably one of them from the start. I bet you set up all our people that died on the expedition!”

The room went very still. The high society of Greenstone had pushed their way onto the expedition, with Sophie and Belinda being the only ones in the room other than the serving staff not to have lost someone close to them.

Kyle was the only one not to sense the shift in the atmosphere, despite it being pointed at him. His aura senses were too addled by drink to feel the auras around the room grow fierce and hard.

“You should take your sister’s advice and go,” Jason said, restraining his own aura. With the fury burning inside him, he didn’t trust what he would do with it if he let it go. The rage he had built up over recent events was more than some drunken idiot deserved to have unleashed on him. Unfortunately, the idiot in question took Jason’s restraint for weakness.

Not sensing any aura, despite the provocation, Kyle used his own aura to push down on Jason. His aura control was sloppy, but still had a bronze-rank soul behind it. There was a limit to Jason’s tolerance, however, and Jason’s own aura rose out like monster from the deep. It devoured Kyle’s bronze rank aura projection with ease, biting down like a vast maw until Kyle felt its teeth against his naked soul.

Jason stopped himself before following through with the soul attack. Kyle’s expression had become stricken with fear and he collapsed to the floor, Jason stepping forward to stand right over him.

“You should be very careful about accusing me of getting my friends killed,” he said, his voice a jagged blade of ice. “Liana, take your brother home.”

Jason retracted his aura and Liana quickly shuffled off her wide-eyed sibling, his resistance now gone. Oddly, this encounter had the opposite effect of what Jason anticipated, bringing the approval of many who had been uncertain about him. In a world of adventurers, wealth and influence were fine but unadulterated magical potency made their acquisition an inevitability. Jason's display made it clear that his potential was blossoming into capability.

Danielle swooped in to lock elbows, reminding everyone that she had the foresight to support him when others were overlooking him.

"Nothing speaks louder than power," she told him.

She wasn't foolish enough to miss a social opportunity when it presented itself and guided Jason around the room to make introductions she had previously been avoiding. One of these was to the Duke of Greenstone, who was talking to his brother and his sister-in-law, Beaufort and Thalia Mercer.

"Beaufort, Thalia," Danielle greeted. "You know Jason, of course."

Thalia knew Jason better than her husband, but Jason had met the man during his relationship with Cassandra.

"I believe this will be your first time speaking with him, Duke," Danielle continued.

"A pleasure, Duke," Jason said, shaking the man's hand. "Naturally, I've seen you at various social functions but I daresay you never noticed a little iron-ranker like me."

"Well, everyone noticed you now," the Duke said with a wry smile. From what he had heard of the man, Jason hadn't anticipated liking the Duke. To his surprise, he found the man very personable, not looking down on Jason at all for his rank or station.

"We've been discussing the issue of Old City," the Duke said. "The infighting in the Silva family as it looks for new leadership is escalating into street violence. The organisation built up by the late Clarissa Ventress is looking to go the same way. It was stable for a while, but her replacement isn't keeping things together and is unlikely to hold his position. Fortunately, Adris Dorgan is keeping quiet instead of fanning the flames. If he changes his approach, however, the streets of Old City may well become a war zone. At that point I will have no choice but to step in to restore order. I'd rather avoid that outcome so soon after the Builder cult purge."

"I still say you should just do it now, before things get out of hand," Beaufort said.

"Perhaps you can offer us some insight, Mr Asano," the Duke said. "You have some experience with the Big Three, do you not?"

"I've met Adris Dorgan and I liked the man. I've heard good things from people I trust that know him better. I never met Clarissa Ventress or her replacement, but again, I know

people that did. They were less flattering. As for Cole Silva, well... if you spend four days hanging from a ceiling with no pants on while a guy stands there watching you the whole time, I guess you could say you know him.”

“How colourful,” the Duke said with a chuckle. “So, what insights can you offer?”

“Well,” Jason said. “I haven’t really been paying attention, so I may be missing some of the political nuance, but the solution seems obvious.”

“Oh?” the Duke prompted.

“It’s time to end your hands-off approach of Old City and take direct control. At this point, Adris Dorgan is essentially the mayor of Old City, so you might as well make it official. Between his daughter running the Adventure Society and his rising level of influence after his assistance flushing out the Builder cult, he’s heavily invested in legitimacy at this point. Place him under you officially and you’ve got a handle on the one man who has a genuine chance to take the pot off the fire before it boils over. It’ll also send a signal to the people scrabbling over the vacant positions in the Big Three. Once they realise that era of criminal overlords is over, they won’t be willing to fight as hard. There will still be crime bosses, obviously, but they won’t have the power they did in the past, which will de-escalate the infighting.”

The Duke raised his eyebrows, turning to Danielle.

“Is this you?” he asked. Danielle held up her hands in a display of blamelessness as Jason looked between her and the Duke.

“You told him the same thing?” Jason asked her.

“She did,” the Duke said. “She also used the word obvious.”

“That’s just my uninformed opinion,” Jason said. “I have no doubt there would be a slew of political obstacles to navigate. And, of course, nothing will prevent the violence altogether. To be honest, I’m biased because I think very poorly of the lack of actual civilian authority in Old City. The Big Three may have done some good to keep order as a de facto government, but they are ultimately a predatory one. They operate in a gap left by the inaction of existing civil authorities.”

The Duke chortled.

“You do realise that the existing civil authorities is essentially me?”

“My friend Humphrey likes to say that privilege comes with responsibility,” Jason said.

“He’s a good boy,” Danielle said.

“I have to say, Mr Asano,” the Duke said. “You certainly live up to your reputation.”

Jason shook his head sadly.

“When you’re this handsome,” he bemoaned, “of course people are going to talk.

Why won’t they let a guy live his life?”

Danielle ran a hand over her face.

“You just can’t help yourself, can you?”