

## Chapter 619

### Surplus to Requirements

Jason and his team, plus Rufus, were sitting around the conference table on the cloud yacht, looking at a projection of a map.

“We’re freer now to make our own decisions than we’ve been in a while,” Humphrey said. “That means literally charting our own path. We have a general plan of moving south, down this continent before crossing over to the Great Southern Continent. We’ll move across there, then cross north again to reach Hornis on our way to Greenstone. From there we’ll continue up to Vitesse and then Cyrion, where the other outworlders from Earth are located.”

As he talked, Humphrey pointed with his finger and a line appeared on the map. The Earth equivalent of the path he drew out would be going from the Caribbean through South America to Antarctica, then back up to Africa before reaching Europe. The Pallimustus version of Antarctica was apparently much more hospitable than the earth version, while the local version of Australia was just the opposite. The most notorious high-magic zone in the world, it was mostly a haven to diamond-rank monsters and anyone fool enough to hunt them.

“It’s not a wildly efficient route,” Rufus pointed out.

“Efficiency is counter to our purpose,” Humphrey said. “It’s time for this team to start seeing the world.”

“Even if it means wandering over most of it like a drunkard who can’t walk in a straight line,” Neil added, raising a fist in the air. “I’m all in. Team Drunkard!”

Humphrey’s eyes went wide and he let out a loud groan.

“I forgot to change the team name after the administrative restrictions came down after the surge!”

“I think that die is cast, my friend,” Jason said. “I think we’re all pretty happy with the team name.”

“Yeah!” cheered the moustachioed mouse dragging a biscuit the size of his entire body from the plate on the table.

“I’m afraid that battle is lost,” Rufus comforted Humphrey. “Perhaps we should just move onto the specifics of our journey.”

Humphrey resignedly nodded before resuming the discussion.

"The first leg of our trip is to move south. There is a great road network connecting the population hubs, whichever way we go, and our general options are the east coast, the west coast or the central regions."

"What are the differences?" Jason asked.

"The east coast is what you might call the standard route. It's the most populous, the most developed and the most stable, magically speaking. Magic strength there is in the mid-range, meaning primarily silver-rank monsters, with some large packs of bronze and the occasional gold. That's a very good starting range for where we are right now, looking to rank up long-term."

"The problem with that path," Rufus said, "is that the surge just ended. There will be a lot of Adventurers hitting the road, just like us, and that will be the road most of them take. That means more competition for the best contracts at every branch we run into. Also, the locals in each branch can get resentful of all the outsiders coming in to snake the most lucrative jobs."

"The next option," Humphrey said, "is the central region. This, I think we should avoid. There's more wilderness and fewer developed areas, which isn't inherently bad, but the magic levels are. The central region is notorious for inconsistent magic levels, so one day you're fighting iron-rank monsters and the next, gold rank."

"And the west coast?" Jason asked.

"It varies between low and medium ambient magic levels. Not Greenstone low, for the most part, but sometimes it is. There are a couple of areas that, like Greenstone, are major sites for low-rank spirit coin farms. Mostly, though, the monster level is around bronze or silver."

"That's a little too low for us," Sophie said.

"I agree," Humphrey said. "On the other hand, there will be less competition for the best contracts."

"I think east," Jason said. "We don't need the most lucrative contracts. I know the only real experience I have of standard adventuring was in Greenstone, but what I saw there was that the people who needed help the most were often overlooked. They couldn't sweeten the contract rewards over Adventure Society standard rates, so their contracts tended to languish until the society assigned them as punishment contracts."

"You want to take the worst contracts?" Neil asked.

"Worst by what metric?" Jason responded. "The unpopular contracts tend to be the ones that deviate from the standard. To me, that sounds more fun."

"Of course it does," Neil said.

"We should also look at our wider objectives," Clive said. "This is an adventuring tour. If we're going to see the world, let's see it. New towns, new people. There's more to meeting other adventurers than competing for contracts. If we want to spend the whole time slogging through unpopulated areas, we might as well fly over them."

"I'm really liking the sound of this," Jason said. "Coast roads and food markets. Yeah, I'm sold."

Humphrey looked around the table.

"If there are no objections then, east we'll go."

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The door to Jason's cabin opened as Korinne Pescos approached. It was the only cabin not below decks, sharing the upper deck with the bridge. It was spacious and ringed with windows, aside from the wall it shared with the bridge. Jason was sitting on a couch that faced starboard to enjoy the panoramic view, watching the vehicle's wake.

"Please join me, Miss Pescos," he said, neither getting up nor turning around. She moved slowly through the spacious cabin, which was more like an open lounge. There wasn't even a bed, but she had seen him manipulate the structure of the ship by changing the cloud-substance it was made of, so he could make one at need.

Korinne moved around the long couch and sat, the impossible plushness of it slightly leeching the hard edge with which she had entered. She wondered if this was incidental or something Asano did deliberately to engineer his interactions. She had been warned that his seeming frivolity would often hide deceptively deliberate manipulation.

"What can I help you with, Miss Pescos?" Jason asked. "Refreshments?"

"No thank you. Spirit coins are food enough for me. The plainness helps keep me sharp. It fosters an efficient mind."

"I can't argue with the results," Jason said. "I've seen you in action. I'd been told about the strength of guild elites for some time, but yours was the team that truly showed me what that meant, when we went on that expedition together. It was deeply impressive. If I'm being honest, even with my full team around me, we couldn't match the overwhelmingly comprehensive speed and power with which you tore through that pack of monsters. It was a large pack, too, yet you were clean and controlled the entire time. The benefits of an efficient mind, I imagine."

"You don't consider your own mind efficient?"

"Oh, I don't think anyone does, so I might as well indulge."

With a gesture, a low table formed in front of him and he pulled items from his storage space to place on it; a tray of assorted baked goods and a pitcher of iced tea. He took out

two plates and two glasses, but only filled one, which he sipped from appreciatively. He then moved one of the colourful baked slices from the tray to a plate, which he picked up. Korinne watched in silence as he went through the slow and deliberate motions of setting out snacks. Finally, Jason bit into his slice with an appreciative moan.

"I'm so glad this world turned out to have coconuts," he said. "I do hope you won't begrudge me indulging."

"It's fine."

"So, what brings you to my cabin?" he asked.

"Do you genuinely not know?" she asked. "I was warned by your team that you know everything that happens on this ship."

"I'm not a god who can pay attention to every follower at once, Miss Pescos. I might realise that your team is discussing something, but unless I give it my direct attention, I don't know what it is. Think of it like looking down from a tower. I can see what the people below are doing in general, but without paying closer attention, I can't see the details. Did my team also tell you that they've started using privacy screens in their cabins for private moments?"

"They did, but also that they couldn't be sure if the screens actually blocked your power to observe. Do they?"

"I don't have an answer that can satisfy you, Miss Pescos. Be it yes or no, I have reasons to lie either way, which means that you can't trust what I have to say."

She nodded, acknowledging the point.

"This was all very last-moment, Mr Asano. If I'm being honest, I would prefer that my team had our own, separate transport."

"That is between you and Amos Pensinata. My understanding is that you are here because his nephew is here, and Orin being here was the condition of his uncle being here."

"And why exactly is Amos Pensinata joining you?"

"A friend of mine asked him to teach me some things. He agreed, in return for help giving his nephew some seasoning as an adventurer."

"And what makes your team qualified to instruct mine?" Korinne asked. "By your own admission, we are guild elites that can outstrip your team."

Jason smiled with infuriating self-indulgence, but didn't answer immediately. He took another bite of coconut slice, then washed it down with a sip of iced tea.

"Are you sure I can't tempt you, Miss Pescos? These refreshments are well-described in this humidity."

"Your boat does a fine job of keeping that outside, Mr Asano."

Jason nodded.

"Your question was what my team has to teach you," he said, finally getting back to the point. "As your tone so clearly implied, we have nothing to teach. What I would like to correct is your claim that I have admitted the inferiority of my team. What I said was that we could not equal the speed and power you demonstrated in destroying the large pack of monsters that attacked our expedition. That is not the same thing."

Korinne let out a snort.

"You're going to talk about Rimaros-style adventuring versus Vitesse-style, aren't you? Specialisation versus generalisation."

"I've only ever been to Rimaros. Once we reach Vitesse it will be my first visit, so I won't go speaking to the way they do things there. For that, you should seek out Rufus Remore. He trained me, and is steeped in the Vitesse approach. You know his family runs a school there?"

"He mentioned."

Jason smiled.

"What Amos Pensinata asked was not training, but seasoning. Be it in Rimaros or Vitesse, the problem with training low-rank adventurers is that their experiences must be heavily curated or the local monsters will kill them. Forgive me if I'm mistaken, but my understanding is that you and your team were quite orthodox in that regard."

"We spent the majority of our iron and silver ranks under gold-rank supervision," Korinne conceded. "But we're silver rank now. We operated alone through most of the surge."

"And that's what Lord Pensinata wants more of. Experience, away from the safety of your guild. Facing the consequences of your choices with no recourse but yourselves. He will be there if you truly are in need of rescue, but he won't be following you around and is likely not to make it in time if you find yourselves in truly desperate straits."

"We're hardly free of gold-rank supervision, Mr Asano. There are four of them in just this tiny convoy."

"Yes, but the only one you need to concern yourself with is Lord Pensinata. Carlos was never an adventurer, and while Arabelle Remore certainly was, she'll only help my team, and even that's a maybe. I think you'll find both she and Pensinata giving us all enough room to live with our mistakes. They have the resolve for that; ask Arabelle's son."

“Even accepting that we are on our own, or close enough it, how exactly does being with your team benefit us? Why does Lord Pensinata see value in bringing Orin on this journey?”

“It’s a matter of experience.”

“And why do we need your experience? You already said you aren’t going to teach us.”

“And we won’t. Don’t look at myself and my team as instructors.”

“You don’t have to be concerned on that front,” she said, making Jason laugh.

“We are peers,” Jason told her. “Avail yourself of us as such, and expect us to do the same. Advice from those who already have experience is always valuable when going out to have those experiences yourself. I met Rufus Remore because he and his friends realised that they needed experience they could not get in Vitesse. He ended up founding a satellite school in a low-magic zone based on that very principle.”

Korinne didn’t respond for a long time as she processed what Jason had said. For his part, Jason ate baked goods and watched the rain pouring down outside, heavy enough that he could barely see the other vehicles.

“I’ve heard things about you,” she said finally. “The veracity of what I’ve heard seems spurious at best.”

“Try living through them,” he said, shaking his head. “I can’t speak to what you’ve heard, and telling my own story doesn’t seem helpful. Words are easy, after all. All I’ll say is that my team and I have faced situations where we had no one but ourselves to fall back on, even when the stakes were high.”

“That’s what Orin intimated.”

“Intimated?”

“He’s not a big talker. But he said he saw into your aura once, unfiltered. He said it told a story that he believed.”

“Right,” Jason said. His first encounter with Orin was when Vesper Rimaros had arranged a ‘coincidental meeting’ with Kasper Irios. It was part of her political machinations that, like Vesper herself, died when the Builder conflict reached Rimaros. Orin had been a friend of the man and Jason had picked him out as the sensible one of the group, showing him a glimpse of his real aura so they would back off quietly.

“Actually,” Jason said, “I didn’t show him the full thing. But if you’d like to see it, I can show you.”

“You’re a skilled aura manipulator,” she said. “That much I’ve heard and believe. You could put up a façade to impress me.”

"I don't need to impress you, Miss Pescos. Not to put too fine a point on it, but your team's presence is a favour for a favour for a favour. Surplus to requirements. Officially, I'm going off with Soramir Rimaros, but you and yours can't be here without knowing that's a lie, so you've been brought into that circle."

He grimaced.

"I didn't want you here, Miss Pescos, but to get Amos we needed Orin, and to get Orin we needed you. Apparently. Someone who means a lot to me left this world recently. Literally left; not a death metaphor, but I won't see her again for some time. She was the one who wanted to connect Lord Pensinata and myself. Otherwise, I'd cut my losses and take none of you. I don't need what Pensinata has to teach that much."

"Then why put up with us? Why not stash us in the bottom of the ship in our cabins instead of letting me in here to question you like this?"

"Because you're on my boat, which makes you my guests. If you're more comfortable buying a vehicle of your own as soon as we reach a place that will sell one, you are welcome to do so. I might recommend it, in fact."

He leaned back into the plush couch, laying his arms along its back and letting them sink in.

"Cloud furniture can be hard to give up," he told her with a grin. "And if your team will be eating spirit coins, watching what the rest of us enjoy will be bad for morale."

Korinne looked at him thoughtfully, then picked out a baked slice, put it on the other plate and claimed it, taking a bite. She contemplated the taste for a moment.

"You're right," she said. "I don't want my team getting used to this."