

Chapter 793

Contrition Born at the Point of a Sword

Rick Geller was not happy. He had no compunction about putting his life on the line to protect people; he was an adventurer and that was the job. He'd known that when he signed up and he'd lived that life ever since. But every time he was in the same city as Jason Asano, that job got extravagantly out of hand.

He knew Jason wasn't causing these things, or even involved all of the time. Jason hadn't participated in the disastrous expedition out of Greenstone or the fortress city battles in the Storm Kingdom. But there was no escaping that when Rick and his team were nowhere near Jason, they lived a regular adventuring life. Leisurely roaming from place to place, protecting normal people from ordinary monsters.

The moment they were anywhere near Jason, a monster surge felt relaxing by comparison. Suddenly it was kings and princesses, diamond-rankers, secret cultist armies and interdimensional invasions. The only time they got a break was when he got himself killed, sent to another universe or both.

Rick found it increasingly hard to not resent Jason, despite it being mostly undeserved. It seemed like every time the Adventure Society had Jason trouble they pulled in Rick to be the reluctant ambassador to their most troublesome silver-rank member. As often as not, he arrived to discover the problem had resolved itself already, leaving Rick and his team idle. And since they weren't doing anything else, why not bring them along on the latest insanity?

In this case, it was an underground expedition culminating in an unexpected undead army and being yanked into some bizarre unreality that, of course, only Jason understood. Now Rick was separated from his team in unfamiliar surroundings that were soaked in Jason's aura like a biscuit dipped in tea. If that wasn't enough, there was a mountain looming over the town, carved into the shape of Jason's head.

He had read through the long message that Jason's interface had shown him, but he partially understood what it had to say at best. Something about fighting something and claiming territory. It fit Jason's earlier warnings of how things would work but Rick didn't care. None of it helped him find his team, and getting them out alive was all that mattered. The rest was Jason business, and he could be the one to deal with it.

Step one was getting his bearings and finding anyone else nearby. He was in a town, on a street sealed with some manner of seamless black stone. That wasn't the only material he didn't recognise in the buildings pressed together, many with glass front walls.

He suspected it was a shopping district but couldn't read the language on the signs. There was writing everywhere as if they weren't concerned that most people couldn't read.

His aura senses were tamped down, either a natural effect of the transformation zone or from Jason's aura interfering, he wasn't sure. That meant he was startlingly close to the other person when he sensed them. It was the aura of an essence user, not a Builder cultist, brightheart or messenger. He didn't recognise the aura, which meant it wasn't a member of the expedition. That meant one of the Undeath priests, which suited Rick just fine. He was really in the mood to kill something.

Whoever it was clearly sensed him as well. They started moving in the other direction at speed, and a silver-ranker's speed was very fast. Rick conjured a spear and used a leap power, hurtling through the air in the next best thing to flight. He landed on another black street and leapt again immediately, rapidly closing the gap. A third leap put him in sight of the person, who had stopped and was standing in front of a portal.

Rick landed on the street, some way behind the person he'd been chasing. He was backing away from the portal, his body language afraid. Rick looked closer at the portal to realise that it wasn't a portal at all but Jason, wrapped in a void cloak that looked like a hole in the universe.

It truly appeared less like an article of clothing than a window into some deep, distant void where stars sparkled and colourful nebulas shone over impossible distances. That Jason didn't register to Rick's senses, despite his aura pervading everything else, added to the uncanny sense that Jason was not a person but a dimensional phenomenon.

As he walked forward at a measured pace, spear still in hand, Rick watched Jason and the other man. The stranger was a silver-ranker in grey scholar's robes, bulkier than the sleek combat robes used by some adventurers. Jason showed off such robes, the colour of dried blood, when he pushed back the cloak wrapped around him. It also revealed the sword at his hip, which he drew unhurriedly. The stranger fell to his knees and started begging.

"You don't have to do this."

"You belong to Undeath," Jason said, his tone cold as the rime on a frozen corpse.

"I never wanted any of this," the man pleaded. "I had no choice! My family all worship the dark gods."

"You think that helps your case?" Jason asked.

"My name is Jeffrey Colling-Setton. My family have served the dark churches for generations. If I ever went against them, ever tried to run, they'd have killed me. And you

know that wouldn't be the end of my torment, not with what they do. You can help me! And I can help you! You can save me from them and I can tell you their plans! We can..."

The man trailed off as Jason raised the tip of his sword to the man's face.

"I try to be merciful when I can," Jason said, his voice still cold but also faintly apologetic. "But these are not circumstances where I have the luxury of giving you a chance. There is too little time and too much risk. Contrition born at the point of a sword is not to be trusted."

The man scrambled into a run, sprinting away from Jason to find Rick in his path. Rick didn't waste time, dashing forward with a charge special attack to impale the man. Another power then shot barbs out of the spear, further digging into the man from the inside. Jason followed up and they made short work of him; he wasn't much of a fighter.

Jason flung off his cloak, the blood splattered on it falling to the ground as it vanished. He took out a vial of crystal wash and handed it silently to Rick. Rick's barbed spear powers were messy, leaving him covered in gore so he tipped the vial over his head. The liquid flowed over him, spreading to coat his entire body and wash off all the filth.

"Jason, I'm going to be honest and tell you that I don't care what nonsense you've got going on this time. I just want to make sure my team comes through it alive."

Jason nodded.

"I can respect that. There's a good chance that most of the people in this transformation zone are still unconscious, scattered around the territories," he explained. "You and his guy probably came through awake because I modified this territory as we entered it. It's more stable than the unclaimed ones. I need to expand it methodically, claiming one territory at a time. You're more free to leave this territory and search than I am. You can go looking for more of our allies, your team included."

"I'm all for that, but there are gold-rank threats out there. If I go alone, with no plan and no precautions, I'll get myself killed before I find anyone."

"Agreed," Jason said. "I might have a solution for that, but you're not going to like it."

"Not to sound unkind, Jason, but I've gotten used to not liking what's happening when I'm around you."

Rick looked down at the remains of Jeffrey.

"I think he was telling the truth about his family," he said. "Maybe not about wanting to leave, but I've heard of the Colling-Setton line. They crop up in every forbidden power group you can think of. Dark temples, necromancer covens, the Red Table, experiment programs into restricted list essences. In a lot of ways they're an evil counterpart to my family, and we've been clashing for centuries."

“Should we have kept him alive for questioning?”

“No, we couldn’t trust anything he said. So, what’s this plan I’m not going to like?”

“Well, you know those messengers I have prisoner?”

“The ones the Adventure Society wants you to hand over? The ones they want me to convince you to hand over?”

Jason’s expression grew awkward.

“Those are the ones, yeah. They have some gold-rankers amongst them. I want to put them under your command, to roam the territories, collect anyone on our side and bring them back.”

“You’re right; I don’t like it. You want to send me off with some messengers — including gold-rank messengers — under the assumption that they won’t turn on me the moment they’re clear of whatever hold you have on them?”

“I do assume that, yes. They don’t care enough to kill you because we’re not their enemies. The astral kings they used to serve are. Also, they know I’m a good ally and a bad enemy, especially here. I’ve got an avatar in my soul space explaining things to them already, so they understand that making an enemy of me before they’re free of the transformation zone is suicide.”

“Jason, your word is all well and good, but what if you’re wrong? Or only partly right? They may not kill me, but they could easily stop listening to me. Drag me around, doing whatever they like, or leave me behind entirely.”

“If you don’t want to do it, I won’t force you, but at least let me talk you through it. The leader of the messengers we’re talking about is named Marek Nior Vargas. For all his faults, he does care about his people, much like you care about yours. That’s going to be important.”

“That doesn’t sound like a messenger.”

“Not the messengers you know. Just sit down with me and him. We can talk it out and then you can make a decision.”

“Alright,” Rick said. “It’s not like I’m looking to go out there alone.”

The inside of Jason’s head-shaped mountain fortress was no less villainous on the inside than the outside. Imposing stone walkways looked out over massive chambers where lava flowed in channels along the floor for unclear purposes. More lava flowed through tubes that poked out from the dark stone of the walls and ceiling, providing the facility with ominous illumination.

In a massive conference room, Jason gathered with Rick and a panoply of messengers. He sat at the head of the table with a window wall behind him through which a lava waterfall could be seen spilling past. Rick sat in the first seat to his right and Jali to his left. Tera Jun Casta sat next to Jali while Marek Nior Vargas sat next to Rick, leaving the adventurer uncomfortable.

What came next was a lot of talking. Explanations of what was happening and why. Much of the time was spent giving the newborn messengers insight into their own kind and the unconventional circumstances of how they came into being. They introduced them to the messenger factions and the motivations of Marek Nior Vargas and his people.

The discussion process was extremely long, running into a third, fourth and fifth hour, but proved far more civil than Jason had anticipated. Rick took a mouth-closed, ears-open approach that Jason could never quite master. Or even get close to, if he was honest with himself.

Marek behaved himself after a warning from Jason about not attempting to recruit the new messengers to the Unorthodoxy. Jason's verbal rebuke was mild but the pinpoint spike of aura he sent Marek's way was a much sharper message.

Jason's largest concern had been Tera Jun Casta, who continued to hate him with a passion. She was the only member present who still venerated traditional messenger authority, even if that authority would have killed her on sight. Like Rick she sat and listened, contributing neither questions nor answers to the discussion. Jason quietly hoped that everything she heard would help open her narrow mind, even if by just a crack.

What all the discussion ultimately led to was the next step for each person at the table. Tera Jun Casta would be returned to Jason's soul realm and left there. She had no interest in contributing and couldn't be trusted if she did. Most of Marek's people would go with her. Marek agreed to aid Rick with his gold-rankers and some of his silver rankers. Rick reluctantly went along because most of Marek's group would be left with Jason who wished Rick hadn't used the word 'hostages' but took the win.

The new messengers would, for the moment, reside in Jason's mountain fortress. They were the most adrift and he had no doubt they would spend yet more hours talking amongst themselves about everything they had heard. He made Jali his liaison to them and could do little more than hope they didn't decide to found a new messenger empire or something equally unfortunate.

When the discussion was finally done, the various participants departed. Rick left with Marek and his people while the still-nameless messengers stayed in the conference room to talk amongst themselves. Tera and the rest of Marek's people returned to his soul

realm. Jason moved outside, sitting atop his massive stone head and soon found Jali joining him.

“At some point, they’re going to want names,” she said and sat down next to him. Her wings vanished as she shrank down to human size.

“Any idea on how that will go?” he asked.

“No. Normally they come into being with a name. I think the lack of a proper and situated birthing tree stopped that.”

“Then they’ll have to name themselves?”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps their names will come after you decide what to do with that.”

She pointed to the vast tree looming over the horizon.

“Even if this does all go right, I don’t know that I’ll get to choose. It may be that whatever happens is going to happen and I don’t get a say.”

“Either way, we can decide then.”

“What about until then? Are they just going to refer to each other by numbers?”

“Messengers communicate through auras as much as other people do body language. They will differentiate themselves through that.”

“That doesn’t help me, so I might have to number them. I could make them all shirts.”

“You’ll be fine. You already communicate with your aura as we do. It’s one of the many reasons you unsettle us.”

“Wait, I do?”

“You didn’t notice? Haven’t you seen the extreme way people tend to react to you? That’s your aura at work.”

Jason tilted his head in thought.

“I guess I do,” he said. “I must have been doing it unconsciously. For years, maybe. I think it started when I started learning aura tricks to affect others more subtly, from a vampire I know. Huh.”

“It certainly helped you control that meeting we just had,” she told him. “I’ve never seen messengers interact like that before.”

“It seemed pretty normal to me,” Jason said. “What made it strange to you?”

“That we spoke as equals. For the most part. Your rebuke of Marek was the only interaction I saw that felt familiar. Messengers only enter discussion because a leader wants options or is playing her subordinates against one another. There’s always a hierarchy.”

“I don’t like hierarchies.”

“Which is odd coming from the one person who stood above all others in that room.”

Jason went to deny it but stopped, admitting to himself that it would have been a lie.

“I’m mentally exhausted after that,” he said instead. “I came up here to clear my head but I don’t have time. I need to set things in motion. Start expanding. As soon as I do, anomalies will start pouring in from the territory I’m invading and we’ll have to deal with them.”

“I’ve watched messengers push the people they enslave to their limits and beyond. Most of my kind care more about wielding power than doing so efficiently. If you rush because you think you should — or someone else thinks you should — then not only will you work slowly but you’ll work badly. If you rest, you’ll work better and make fewer mistakes.”

“Yeah,” he said, giving her a smiling side glance. “I know, yet I always seem to need someone to remind me in the moment.”

At the edge of the territory, Rick stood in front of a shadowy wall that marked the border between Jason’s domain and the unclaimed one beyond. Before he stepped through, he turned and looked back, his silver-rank vision picking out Jason on top of his fortress. He was sitting next to the messenger girl he’d been running around with, Jali. Without her wings and shrunken down, she was indistinguishable from a fair-skinned, brown-haired human.

“Even with messengers?” he muttered.

“What was that?” Marek asked.

“Nothing,” Rick said. “Let’s go.”