

Chapter 219

Beholden to No One

One of the ways Jason had made positive use of his recovery time was to get himself back into a training pattern. Rufus, Gary and Farrah had worked to instil good habits during his initial training, but the eventful life of an adventurer inevitably led to him letting things slide.

Rufus, Gary and Jason's team had often felt helpless at their inability to help Jason after his ordeal. They were forced to leave things in the hands of first Carlos and then Arabelle, who had the experience and expertise to give Jason the help he needed. When Jason expressed a desire to reformulate his training habits, then, they leapt at the chance to be useful.

The regimented training schedule also helped them maximise their own efforts, whether that was learning and developing their powers like Belinda, or making the final push toward bronze, like Humphrey and Jason.

After Clive, Humphrey was the closest to reaching the bronze-rank threshold. Like the others, he had powers to raise from scratch after completing his power set, but being a human meant his powers increased slightly, but measurably faster than Jason's, Neil's or Sophie's. He followed Clive in drawing back from the training until they knew if they would need to stay at iron to return to the astral space.

Clive had decamped for Sky Scar Lake, living in Emir's cloud palace and working with his people. Many were more experienced than Clive, even in his specialty field of astral magic, yet Clive's insightful thinking and prodigious capacity for learning never failed to impress. It was all the more so since he had gained the ability to learn the mundane things through skill books, leaving his mind free to tackle the esoterica.

Jason practiced his portal ability, visiting the domes at the bottom of the lake every day. He couldn't advance it, but aiming the portal over vast distances was a skill he worked on developing. It required a level of visualisation that made it tricky to target places he did not know very well. The ability to distinguish places in his mind with landmarks was very helpful.

The distance between Greenstone and Sky Scar Lake meant that it took Jason an hour to get there by opening a portal at his maximum distance, going through, then waiting for the ten minute cooldown before going again. To accomplish this, he first had to cross the desert in between, finding landmarks he could remember well enough to use as

waypoints. For that journey, Shade had transformed not into a horse, but a giant sand lizard to stride across the desert sands.

Each day on his arrival, he would meet with Clive and Emir's people to go over the ritual configurations they had devised. The end goal was to use his power to reopen the portal, but they were not yet at the point where they expected that to work. The astral magic involved, like that used by the Builder cult, was incredibly advanced. The astral magic theory that Knowledge had given to Jason, who then shared it with Clive, was proving invaluable.

Jason did his best to follow along with Clive's explanations as they worked. He learned a lot but it was largely above his head, even with all the magical theory he'd been studying. This was the new cutting edge of astral magic theory.

Jason frequently felt that his presence was superfluous beyond being a wand to produce the right kind of portal. The true collaborator was Shade, who was an endless source of fascination for Clive and Emir's people. His insights drove their work forward, until they declared that it was no longer a matter of if they could access the astral space, but when.

"What do you think of all this?" Jason asked Shade, after they'd been visiting the site for a week. "Does it annoy you to be dragged off every day to constantly answer questions?"

"Just the opposite," Shade assured him. "I first became a familiar to have more experiences than can be had in the bleak void of the Reaper's realm. Being affixed within the astral space for centuries left me rather desirous of company. A group of intelligent people eager to hear everything I have to say has been entirely satisfactory."

"I'm glad. I'm also glad that you decided to re-up after I went and got you killed fighting that elemental."

"My only regret is that it kept me from offering my support during your recent tribulation."

From within his soul, Jason could sense a surge of feelings from Gordon, reflecting Shade's sentiment.

"Well, I'm glad," Jason said. "As much as I would have appreciated the support, I don't know what would have happened to you if that thing had gotten into my soul."

"We would have been annihilated," Shade said. "Our true, spiritual selves, not just the vessel. Star seeds are quite destructive to familiars. I have heard of them breaking the connection of a bonded familiar, too, although summoned familiars suffer the worst of it."

While Clive worked on getting access to the astral space, Jason kept pushing off any actual discussion of whether they should go in once he did. His team largely felt that it was a pointless question with an obvious answer, confused by Jason's evasiveness.

He dodged the discussion until finally calling the group together, including Clive who was portalled back to the city by Hester. They met on the deck of the houseboat, where Jason had put on an impressive lunch spread of spring salads and ingredients to build sandwich wraps. They were sat around a long table, talking as they ate.

"Why have you been putting this off?" Sophie asked. "I don't think there are going to be any surprises, here. We all want in on this astral space."

"It should be you and I, at the very least," Clive told Jason. "As we continue to unravel how the seal on the astral space works, we've confirmed that only iron-rankers will be able to get in and we don't know if there will be problems getting back out. Your portal ability may well be necessary, and I'm the only iron-ranker with the requisite knowledge of the seal."

Jason turned to Sophie.

"I was waiting for you," he told her.

"Me? I've been bugging you about this for two weeks. Why would you be waiting for me?"

Jason took a thick document envelope from his inventory and handed it over. She frowned as she opened it up and pulled out the contents.

"This is my indenture contract," she said, looking over the first page.

"Yes," Jason said. "The contract expired today."

"It finished?" Sophie asked, surprised. "Honestly, I haven't even thought about it since..."

She trailed off, looking at Jason apologetically.

"Since I was taken and you didn't know who would end up with it if I died," Jason finished.

"Sorry," she said.

"No," Jason said. "You don't owe me an apology for having a reasonable concern. But now, you're free. Completely. Beholden to no one but yourself. From today onward, you are a member of this team for no more reason than you want to be."

He flashed her a grin.

"Welcome to the team, adventurer," he said and rest of the team echoed Jason's congratulations. Humphrey then apologised after giving her a clap on the shoulder that

made her grunt with pain. His strength-enhancing power had reached bronze and he was still getting a handle on his increased might.

As Sophie looked around at the sincere, smiling faces she made a rare bashful expression.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

Brash young adventurers moved into one of the Adventure Society’s instruction halls. It was remarkably similar to a lecture hall from Jason’s world, complete with a projector screen on the wall behind the lectern to display images from recording crystals. Traditionally there had been little formalised instruction in Greenstone, with Danielle Geller and Elspeth Arella’s joint initiative a very new development. The sudden increase in demand for venues was something that was still being sorted out.

Some of the adventurers were nervous, quietly taking their seats, while others were brash and overconfident, lounging back with their feet over the seat in front of them. They ranged from their mid teen through their early twenties, many older than normal iron rankers because they only just received the chance to be essence users.

“Is this Asano guy even qualified to teach us?” someone asked. “He’s been an adventurer for what? A week?”

“A lot of us have been adventurers for literally a week,” a young woman said. “I’ll take any good advice I can get.”

“No, he’s right,” another guy said. “This is just another example of favouritism. They give the good trainers to the big name families and leave some nothing guy for us.”

“The big families don’t need this training, idiot. This whole thing is for people like us.”

“Which is why some iron-ranker to teach us. How is that guy’s aura any better than ours?”

“That’s easy,” a powerful, confident voice came into the room, followed by it’s owner. He was tall and handsome, broad shouldered and walking in through a side door with easy confidence to stand next to the lectern. “Jason has had excellent training and some experiences I don’t wish on any of you. For those who don’t know me, my name is Humphrey Geller. You may have heard of my family, or perhaps just my mother, Danielle. I’m here to assist Jason, as well as make sure he doesn’t do anything too outrageous. If you want a more specific example of his qualifications, then I’m sure you all heard about the aura blast incident in Marina North. Some of you may have even experienced it for yourself.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” someone called out. “We aren’t exactly the pleasure yacht crowd.”

“That was Asano?” someone else asked.

“It was,” Humphrey said.

“Can’t you just teach us instead?” someone called out.

“I’ve only been asked to assist,” Humphrey said. “Also, to make sure he doesn’t get carried away.”

“Carried away?” someone asked. “How would he get carried away?”

“Well, you never can be sure, with Jason. There’s a chance he might try and recruit you into some kind of underground movement and overthrow the existing political structures. Or a sandwich business.”

“That’s sounds very far-fetched,” someone said.

“Yes, but I’ve found that assuming Jason won’t do something just because its crazy or impossible is not a sensible approach.”

“You aren’t concerned about undermining his authority, here?” the same person asked.

“Jason has his own way of doing things, and he can establish his own authority once he comes on stage.”

“What’s he like?” a girl asked hesitantly. “I’ve heard some stories that almost made me stay home.”

“He’s sneaky,” Humphrey said.

“Sneaky?” the girl asked.

“That seems harsh,” the previous person said. “I’ve heard he’s very handsome.”

“I didn’t hear that,” someone else said.

“Me either.”

“I’ve picked a lot of stories about him and that never came up.”

“I’ve seen his face in recordings and it’s kind of pointy. Especially the chin.”

“He’s started wearing a beard,” Humphrey said. “What I meant by sneaky is that he’s the kind of person that, after agreeing to teach a group of new adventurers, would mix in with them and start bad mouthing himself to see how people reacted.”

Most of the group looked confused, while the ones quicker on the uptake turned to the man who had started the conversation.

“Seriously?” the man they were all looking at said. “There’s nothing wrong with my chin.”

Jason stood up and walked down to the front of the stage. As he went, his loosely controlled aura grew tighter and stronger, transforming from a weak, glob of power into an unyielding steel sphere.

“Aura disguise,” he said, turning around to face the group, “is an advanced technique beyond the scope of this foundational course. To be honest, I’ve only just started to learn it myself. What we’ll be going over are the basics. Projection, retraction, suppression. Mastery of these three things will have a transformative effect on your adventuring career.”

“Even I know those are the basics,” someone called out. “If that’s all you’re going to teach us, what good is all this.”

Jason panned a predatory grin over the group like he was sweeping them with a laser.

“You should all be able to sense the auras in this room. Look at all of you, and then look at Humphrey and myself.”

He waited a moment, then pointed at the nervous girl from earlier.

“What’s your name?”

“Janice.”

“Alright, Janice. How do mine and Humphrey’s auras feel compared to everyone else’s?”

“They’re solid,” Janice said. “They don’t fluctuate.”

“And what do you think when you sense an aura like that? Don’t think about it now, just say the first thing that pops into your head. When you sense an aura like ours on someone, what is your first thought about that person?”

“That they know what they’re doing.”

Jason pointed at Janice again with an approving gesture.

“Exactly, thank you, Janice. You sense someone with their aura under tight control and they seem to know what they’re doing. That is your foot in the door. If you want to be respected in this business, then that is your first step. If you’re looking to find yourself with a big name, standing next to a Cavendish or...”

He gestured at Humphrey.

“...a Geller, then you need to realise that your aura is the first thing another adventurer will know about you. If your aura control is sloppy, it will also be the last thing. If you get a contract, one of the juicy one with the extra incentives, and you turn up to meet the client and he can see through you like a window, then you’ll find those contracts drying up.”

“Obviously,” Humphrey took over, “there is a lot more to being an adventurer than just putting up a good front. But if you can’t manage even that, then you may never get a chance to show what else you can do.”

“That isn’t all aura control is good for,” Jason said. “But it’s important, and they don’t always tell you what’s important when you’re starting at the bottom, do they?”

“Damn right, they don’t,” someone called out.

“Well, you have us, now,” Jason said. “We’re here to teach you how to use your aura, and maybe you’ll pick up a few tricks along the way that the big boys have been keeping to themselves.”

“We’ll be starting with projection,” Humphrey said. “It’s the most basic form of aura control and the easiest to learn.”

“It’s also, arguably, the most important,” Jason added. “Not only does it determine how the adventuring world will look at you, but good projection control will better equip you to resist suppression.”

“Is that such a big deal?” someone asked.

“It is,” Jason said. “Over the course of this program, you will all experience having your auras fully suppressed. Good aura projection makes suppressing your aura that much harder.”

“I’m sure you all heard about the recent bandit issues,” Humphrey said.

“We had the chance to see one of the bandit camps subdued almost entirely by someone using their aura,” Jason stepped in. “Those bandits all had auras like yours are now. If they had had the training that we’re going to impart, that wouldn’t have been possible, not on more than twenty at once.”

“Then why didn’t they send that person to teach us?” someone called out. Humphrey turned to look at Jason.

“They did,” Humphrey said.