

## Chapter 506

### Idiot Plan

Farrah and Rufus watched Jason slump into the cloud house like a beaten dog. He didn't even use the doors, the walls opening in front of him and closing behind as he trudged in a straight line. They shared a look and got up, using the actual doorways to get to his room where they stood outside, knowing he would be aware of their presence. They waited, but there was no reaction. Rufus was about to call out to him but Farrah shook her head.

"Shade," she said quietly. "What happened?"

Shade answered, his voice coming from Farrah's shadow.

"Mr Asano regressed. Fell into old habits he had told himself that he wouldn't."

"That's hardly new," Rufus said. "He's kind of all bad habits. It's part of his charm."

Farrah looked at Rufus, then gestured with her head. They had a brief exchange using only expressions until Rufus shrugged and wandered off.

"Can you open the door, Shade?" Farrah asked.

"Mr Asano has given me a measure of control over the cloud house in case it is necessary during his absence."

"Then open it."

"He is not absent now, Miss Hurin."

"But it is necessary. Open the door, Shade."

The cloud house always radiated Jason aura's inside. As a mobile spirit domain, it wasn't just a soul-bound object but an extension of his soul. It didn't reflect his condition at any given moment, however, being a reflection of his aura in a neutral state. It was a stark contrast to the aura that flooded out when the door to Jason's room dissipated, no longer holding back the aura of Jason himself.

Farrah took a step back as an aura so thick it almost felt tangible washed out of the room. Although it wasn't visible to the eye, Farrah felt like she was caught in a sweltering bog, thick and heavy humidity turning the air into foul soup. She waded in to where Jason was sitting on the end of his bed, head bowed, and sat next to him. Her arm pressed into his as she leaned gently against him, not saying anything. Jason's aura subsided but neither spoke, Farrah waiting for Jason to talk when he was ready. It took a very long time.

"Why do I keep making the same mistakes?" he asked.

"Because you keep facing the same problems," she told him. "You're surrounded by people with too much power whose interests converge on you. We could just walk away. If

you want to turn this house into a boat, say screw the Adventure Society, screw the royal family, screw the Builder and sail off into the sunrise, Rufus and I will stand right beside you.”

She reached out and gave his hand a gentle squeeze.

“But we both know you won’t,” she continued. “You put up with it on Earth because of the people that would get hurt if you didn’t. I won’t pretend to know what it’s like to have a whole world of people whose life and death are in my hands. Now there are so many people hiding behind the walls this Irios family built, and if their political rivals start interfering with their affairs...”

Under her hand, Jason’s clenched into a fist.

“That’s why you’re doing it here too. I won’t say that the way you handle things is always the best. Or ever the best, really, and I don’t know what mad thing you did today. But if that’s what it takes to get you through, then do it. Be who you are and forget about everything else.”

“I wasn’t meant to be who I am. I was meant to be better, but they won’t... It wasn’t meant to be like this. It can’t just be Earth all over again. Not here.”

His voiced cracked, coming out as almost a sob.

“I won’t make it through that again, Farrah.”

His head hung lower and he held it in his hands, not saying any more. His aura was leaking out again and, to Farrah, it felt like being inside a wound.

“Okay,” she said and stood up.

“I need to go to Livaros. Open me a door?”

Jason flicked his hand and a portal rose from the floor in front of her. She squeezed his shoulder and stepped through. After a few moments, he reached out to close it with a gesture when Shade rose from his shadow.

“You may wish to leave it open, Mr Asano. A messenger construct arrived a short while ago to notify you that a contract is awaiting you at the jobs hall. It is a group contract and the group will be assembling at first light in the morning. You are requested to confirm or decline your participation by the end of the day.”

“Thank you,” he said, his voice barely a whisper. After a long while, he pushed himself to his feet as he was shrouded in dark mist. It swiftly dissipated, revealing his tropical attire to have been replaced by a combat robe in shades of dried blood. He stepped through the portal.

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Every sky island in Rimaros shared a feature: a column of water, a dozen metres across, rising from the sea to connect with the underside of the island. A solid stream, it was like the trunk of a tree, with the island as the branches. The column was the traditional pathway to enter a sky island, with only insiders allowed to move directly through the protective dome magic. For this reason, Farrah was on a boat that moved across the water towards the column beneath the royal sky island. It was a small boat with only eight seats, all filled.

The boat pushed into the column, water engulfing the force dome that sprang up to keep the occupants dry. The column carried the boat up through the air, the water pushing into a hole in the bottom of the island. With so much water going in, Farrah absently wondered where it went. A few small streams were spilling off at various points around the sides, but far from enough to offset the huge amounts pushed up by the column.

Reaching the underside of the island, the column of water carried them into a shaft that bored right through the island and up into a lake at the centre of the royal palace. This was a common design for sky islands, where buildings were constructed around a large pond or small lake that served as the entrance. The Irios-designed defences completely encapsulated the lake, invisible to the eye but overbearing to magical senses.

The royal palace was set out in a ring, which was a dominant style in Rimaros architecture spawned by the design practicalities of the signature sky islands. The areas around the lake were the relatively low-security areas in which foreign dignitaries and other visitors were hosted. The palace was designed in a series of rings, with the outer and innermost rings having the least security, while the middle rings had the most.

The boat surfaced in the lake and docked at a smaller example of the piers and marinas dotted around the lake. Moving from the boat to the pier meant going through the oppressive magical defences, which even a gold ranker would be a rash fool to attempt. Farrah was an expert in formation magic but the royal palace's defences were at a level of power and sophistication that she only touched on any understanding of.

Leaving the palace through the barriers was a much easier proposition, the air shimmering around several royal guards as they stepped from the pier to the boat and started checking the passengers. The passengers were silver-rank at most, as were the guards sent to check on them. The guards were thorough, checking documentation and testing everyone with magical devices for shape-changing or dangerous objects hidden in dimensional spaces. One of the guards arrived in front of Farrah.

"I need your entry documentation, ma'am."

"I don't have any."

“Then you will have to go back with the boat, ma’am. No documentation means no entry.”

“I don’t need any. If a certain diamond-ranker doesn’t send someone to come get me, he’s going to regret it.”

All the guards turned on Farrah, either drawing or conjuring weapons that were levelled at her throat.

“If you don’t have documents, you have to leave,” the guard said. “If you make threats, you don’t get to.”

A man moved along the pier with gold-rank swiftness and stepped onto the boat. He wasn’t in a royal guard uniform but the guards stood at attention as he boarded.

“Commander Moore. I didn’t realise you were on duty, sir.”

“Special assignment,” the gold-ranker said.

He had pale skin, jet black hair and eyes like clear fragments of ice. His gaze fell on Farrah as he handed a document to the leader of the guards.

“My name is Trenchant Moore. You will come with me.”

The guards checked the document, then swept Farrah with various devices.

“You’ll need to leave your dimensional bag, ma’am.”

Farrah unhooked the heavy pouch from her belt and handed it over, not taking her eyes from Trenchant.

“Lead the way,” she told him.

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Liara came to an unremarkable door in the royal palace and stood waiting until it opened and she walked through. Inside was a balcony lounge that looked out over the palace rooftops to the lake at the heart of the palace. Soramir was standing on the balcony, hands clasped behind his back as he looked out. Liara moved behind him, maintaining a respectful distance, and bowed her head.

“Ancestral majesty, I may have made a mistake with Asano.”

“A level of hostility was inevitable,” Soramir said. “Aura reading is not mind reading but I have seen the volatile frustration that has been building inside Asano since long before he came here. I already knew he was a pot ready to boil over.”

“He did. I’m not sure how willing he will be to accommodate our needs, now. I think I have made Vesper’s job a lot harder.”

“Why do you think he agreed to help us?” Soramir asked. “I’m sure you understand by now that he doesn’t care about the royal family or its authority.”

“We promised to bring his team here.”

“That is what he asked for, but he would have helped us anyway.”

“Why?”

“I have my suspicions, but we have a guest who I believe can hand us definitive answers.”

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Trenchant led Farrah through the royal palace.

“You are here about Jason Asano,” he said.

“You met him, right? They had you playing nursemaid on his airship ride.”

“Silver-rankers do not make demands of Soramir Rimaros, Miss Hurin.”

“You don’t know Jason well, then. I’m just doing what he would do. If he was in better condition.”

“Something happened?”

“Something has been happening as long as I’ve known him. What did you think of Jason?”

“He wasn’t intimidated by my rank.”

“He isn’t intimidated by gods. Do you know what a person has to go through to get to that place? He’s been in over his head as long as I’ve known him, burying the fear and panic under snark and mad bravado. This was meant to be his chance to stop dealing with diamond-rankers and great astral beings, but now he’s neck-deep in the royal family’s mess, with a whole fresh set of people way more powerful than him to deal with.”

They reached a door that opened itself to let them in. Inside were Liara and Soramir Rimaros, standing out on an opulently appointed balcony lounge. They turned to face Trenchant and Farrah as they entered, Trenchant dropping to one knee.

“Ancestral majesty,” he said solemnly.

“Please stand, Commander Moore,” Soramir instructed.

Trenchant stood up, mirroring Soramir’s stance with his hands clasped behind his back.

Farrah did not have Jason’s experience in dealing with diamond rankers. She had met them, most notably Rufus’ grandfather, Roland, but confronting them was an entirely different matter. She steeled her resolve in the full knowledge that everyone in the room would sense her struggles by reading her aura.

“Perhaps you could explain why you have come, Miss Hurin,” Soramir said.

Farrah clenched her fists at her side.

“I’m not here to explain myself,” she said, drawing raised eyebrows from Trenchant and Liara. “I’m here to tell you that you are going to give Jason what you promised him.”

“You don’t come to our home and make demands,” Liara said.

“He came to ours,” Farrah said, still staring at Soramir. “If a diamond-ranker comes to people like us and asks for something, it’s always a demand. But you’re just the latest in a very long line of people and things who want something from him and he doesn’t have anything left. He’s ready to crack like an egg, so if you want to get what you need from him, you’re the ones putting up first.”

“It’s not that simple,” Liara said. “You might have noticed that there’s a monster surge on.”

“Noticed it? I started it. Jason and I set it off in the first place and you think we care about your family’s reputation? You look down on us and think we’re small, but we’re looking right back, thinking the exact same thing about you.”

Soramir stepped forward, his aura spreading out a feeling of calm that oppressed the agitated Farrah and Liara.

“I will keep my promise to Jason Asano,” Soramir said. “We are working on that.”

“You don’t work on things,” she told him. “You do things. If you want something enough, how many people in this world can stop you from getting it?”

“Everything has a price, Miss Hurin.”

“Yes, it does. And it’s time to pay the price for Jason’s help or you won’t be getting it.”

“That’s Asano’s decision to make,” Liara said.

“You’ve looked into Jason’s aura,” Farrah said to Soramir. “You might know him better than anyone other than me.”

“As I told Princess Liara shortly before you arrived, aura reading is not mind reading.”

“But do you know what he’ll say if I go to Jason and tell him to stop helping you without asking me why?”

“He’ll say yes,” Soramir said.

“You’re damn right, but that doesn’t even matter. You people found a beaten dog and started kicking it. Now you expect it to do tricks. We all need to do something or he won’t be in any kind of state to help you, which means you have two options: Forget about Jason, or do what it takes to bring his friends here and hope that’s enough that he doesn’t walk into the ocean and not come back out or just start murdering everyone.”

Liara was agog at Farrah’s brazenness but took her cues from Soramir and remained silent. She could feel Farrah’s aura tremble under Soramir’s, but her face was unflinching as she stared at the diamond-ranker. Liara was unsurprised that Farrah and Jason were close, both willing to stand in the face of significantly greater power and rail wildly against it. Even with Soramir’s aura pressing down with a sense of calm that bordered on mind

control, the air was tense. Farrah's fierce gaze was returned by Soramir's unreadable expression as silence extended between them.

"Before you came in here," Soramir said finally, "the princess and I were discussing why your friend Jason chose to help us. It is undeniable that we have dragged Jason Asano into events he never asked for and I know this has poked a wound he came here to heal. My family is used to getting our way because of our power, authority, and the respect people have for them, but these are the very things that aggravate Asano the most. Would you do me the favour of explaining why?"

Farrah frowned.

"When I met Jason, he was doing something insane to help a bunch of strangers, because that's what he does. Jason has god-awful flaws, makes god-awful mistakes and is way too slow to learn from either. But from the day we met, he's been putting everything on the line to protect people with no power – like the ones your political mess will hurt – from people with power – like you. As far as I'm concerned, you can all burn. But he'll keep stepping up until it breaks him and that's the point he's just about reached."

"You think we don't want to keep people safe?" Liara asked.

"I'm sure you do, so long as it doesn't cost you too much. Jason doesn't want to protect people; he just does it. He pays the price every time because people like you won't, but he's running out of things to pay. It's cost him his family, his life more than once and it's on the edge of costing his sanity. I spent the last two years watching every hope he had turn to ash because of the things he had to do and the things he had to become. I'm not letting that happen again. If that means walking into a royal palace and yelling at a diamond-ranker the way he would, then that's what I'm going to do."

Farrah had been stuck outside two transformation zones on Earth, knowing what he was up against and the price of failure, but unable to help. She had watched him come back each time, victorious but a little more broken. She was done waiting and watching, so she'd chosen to do the exact thing he would do: go somewhere she shouldn't to yell at someone she shouldn't and hope that by some miracle it accomplished something.

Farrah and Soramir continued to lock eyes. Finally, Soramir gave a small nod.

"I'll do as you say," he said. "I will see to it that Asano's team is here within the next few days. In the meantime, Princess Liara, please go and take Mr Asano's name from the list of participants of the contract he's been assigned."

"Ancestral majesty," Trenchant said. "That contract has already begun. Scouts reported that the target aperture was sealed and the expedition was sent early. I took a

message for Princess Liara and was bringing it to her when Miss Hurin arrived and you directed me to bring her.”

“Was Asano with the expedition?” Liara asked.

“Unknown, your highness. The message was directed to you in your capacity as a member of the Builder response unit. Asano was not mentioned either way, but Princesses Vesper and Zara were both noted as having departed with the expedition.”

“What?” Farrah asked. “Who came up with that idiot plan?”



## Chapter 507

### The Days They Sing Songs About

Trenchant returned to Soramir's balcony lounge after escorting Farrah away, finding the diamond-ranker mid-conversation with Princess Liara. He stood at attention, remaining quiet.

"I would have like to ask more on what she said about starting the monster surge," Liara asked. "I didn't sense any lie from her, but is that even possible?"

"I had already suspected something along those lines," Soramir told her. "There has been speculation of interference in the natural process of the monster surge for some time. A possible scenario is that Asano and Hurin found a means to negate that interference. I would very much like to know more about their absence from our world, but I'm sure you'll agree that this was not the moment to push."

"I do, ancestral majesty."

"Commander Moore, what is your opinion of Miss Hurin?"

Trenchant spent a moment collecting his thoughts.

"She is passionate. Loyal. Brave. She was terrified to come here and confront all of us but she did so unflinchingly, knowing we could feel her fear and see through any lies. She has steel running through her."

"Do you think it was a sensible move, coming here and talking to us like that?" Liara asked him.

"They don't write songs about sensible, your highness."

A smile crossed Soramir's face as he turned to gaze out over the palace rooftops.

"These are exciting times," he said. "The days they sing songs about. Such days belong to the bold and the courageous."

"And the lucky," Liara said. "Most of the bold and courageous die early and easy."

"Yes," Soramir said. "But Asano has already done that. Let's see where he goes from here."

"What will you do about his team?" Liara asked. "We've committed to bringing them here as quickly as we can, now. Will you push the Adventure Society? I don't think Vesper wants things escalated to the point of your intervention becoming widely known. It will also burn some of the family's goodwill with the Adventure Society."

"One of the reasons I agreed was that Miss Hurin all but confirmed a suspicion of mine that may help us in that regard. It requires my owing a favour, but that can be an

advantage in and of itself. A favour owed to the right person can help you establish a valuable connection.”

“You founded the Rimaros dynasty,” Liara said. “Who is qualified to even be owed a favour by you? And what connection can't you make just by turning up?”

“Both Jason Asano and Farrah Hurin have been telling us that there are larger interests in play than those of our dynasty. I think, perhaps, it is time we started to listen.”

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Jason was striding across the Adventure Society campus in his blood robes, heading for the jobs hall. Shade's voice spoke from Jason's shadow.

“Mr Asano, another messenger bird has arrived at the cloud house.”

Adventure Society messenger birds were small construct creatures, the written messages they carried were unlocked by the aura of the intended recipient, or destroyed if the bird was tampered with. For people like Jason, impervious to the bird's tracking magic, they were less efficient and had to be sent to fixed destination points. Jason has his destination assigned to the cloud house, where the Shade body left to manage the building could contact him at need.

“The timetable for your contract has been moved up,” Shade continued. “You have been directed to attend the jobs hall by the turn of the hour or you will be deemed non-participatory in the contract waiting for you. The message directs you to the Jobs hall's priority contract office instead of the main centre.”

Jason didn't respond other than to change the direction in which he was walking.

“Perhaps you should decline this contract, Mr Asano.”

Jason still didn't respond.

“Mr Asano, I feel obligated to point out that you can sometimes enter a certain frame of mind where the choices you make are ones you ultimately come to regret.”

“What's one more regret?” Jason snarled, then his expression softened. “Thank you for your concern, Shade. But that is concern enough.”

Jason found the priority contracts office within the jobs hall, where he didn't have to wait long.

“Sorry for the last-moment change, Mr Asano,” the Adventure Society functionary told Jason as she handed over his documentation. “If you head out that door, past Trade Hall C and turn left, you'll come to Marshalling Yard H. It's the smaller one on the right; there are signs posted.”

Jason nodded, stowed the documents in his inventory and left.

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Unlike Greenstone and its single marshalling yard, the Rimaros Adventuring Society had many. It was functionally no different, just a gathering place for adventurers about to head on contracts. Marshalling Yard H was one of the smaller ones, set amongst the gardens that spread through most of the campus. There were benches around the edges, although only two of the gathered expedition members were using them.

The gold-rank expedition leader, Jeni Kavaloa, was checking her pocket watch. The guild team had arrived, along with the bulk of the independents. She wasn't happy about being saddled with the mixed group, especially since the late inclusion of two princesses told her that the reasons behind it were political. She detested people playing games with Adventure Society activities, which were life and death affairs.

There were still three people who still hadn't arrived, presumably missing the notification of the time change. The eleven they had, plus Jeni herself, were enough that they didn't need to call on supplementary forces. There was also a little time until the portal specialist arrived at the turn of the hour for more people to arrive.

The six-person guild team were standing easy and relaxed. They were typical of their kind. Young and at the low end of silver-rank, they were still flush with their team's first successes independent of gold-rank supervision. Being back under a gold-ranker for this expedition had them chafing at the bit and looking for a fight.

Stuck waiting, the place they had to look was with the loose adventurers assigned to the expedition. It was unusual to mix guild and non-guild except for large operations or specific reasons. The fact that two of the other adventurers were royalty made the political games being played even more obvious.

The guild members were not fool enough to mess with a pair of princesses, who were the only expedition members sitting on the available benches. Instead, the guild people were harassing the other three for fun.

The unaffiliated expedition members were not gullible enough to let themselves be provoked. They had their own ambitions of guild membership and, without family or political connections, that meant showing their professionalism. It wasn't the brash young guild members they wanted to impress but the gold-ranker and the two princesses.

One member of the guild group stood out from the others, standing impassively aside while his fellow guilders teased the independents. Jeni noted that he seemed to know one of the princesses, at least in passing, having nodded greetings on their arrival.

Jeni wasn't happy with this strange soup she had been assigned to supervise. It was a volatile mix that reeked of politics, leaving her with a sense of another shoe, waiting to drop. When she sensed the approach of a strange aura, she felt that it was about to. A

man in dark red robes entered the marshalling yard. His eyes weren't normal, blue and orange with black sclera, and he had scars on his face.

For a silver-ranker, his aura was hard to make out. She was certain that none of the other silver-rankers could see past its façade. Even Jeni herself could barely sense what lay within, but even that disturbed her. Trapped behind the rigid control, it was a maniac in a cage, howling into the dark.

Jeni felt reactions from some of the other adventurers as he appeared. The two princesses recognised him, as did the quiet guild adventurer. She read curiosity and surprise from the guild adventurer, while one of the princesses was wary. The other was an odd mix of trepidation and shame, standing up and staring as the man arrived. This did not go unnoticed by the other adventurers.

The man didn't so much as glance at any of them as he strode up to Jeni. He plucked his contract documentation from a dimensional space and held it out for her inspection. She took it and read it over.

"You only confirmed your participation a few minutes ago."

He met her gaze evenly, not intimidated by her rank.

"At least you aren't late," she said. "Barely. I would recommend that you be more prompt when it comes to contracts, Mr Asano. When you are not, it makes things more difficult for the administration. They have enough problems to deal with already without unnecessarily adding more."

Jason nodded, moving to an empty bench away from everyone else and sat, gazing down at the ground in front of him. One of the guild members, deciding that the other trio were no sport, sauntered in Jason's direction.

"What about you, new guy? Think you've got what it takes to—"

The guild member skittered back like he'd touched a hot stove when Jason raised his head to meet the guild member's gaze. Only the man himself and the gold-rank Jeni had felt the spike of aura lance through the man's aura defences, although everyone felt the result. The man lost his composure as his aura was popped like a soap bubble. It immediately snapped back up, radiating shock, shame and the anger of a man startled by an unexpected moth flying in front of his face.

"Weak," Jason mumbled, his voice gravel as he turned his eyes back to the ground.

Fury covered the man's face and Jeni was about to step in when someone beat her to it. The guild member who recognised Jason stepped forward and placed a restraining hand on his companion's shoulder. The quiet man's aura was calm and stable, helping the angry man settle.

“You know this guy, Orin?” the angry man asked.

“Complications,” Orin said. “Best left alone.”

The leader of the guild team, Korinne, moved up to them.

“That guy spiked one of ours, Orin,” she said. “We’re going to need more than that before we let that pass.”

Orin looked from Jason to Zara, then back to Jason.

“He’s like my uncle.”

Apparently deciding that was enough, Orin walked back to his original position. The other two looked a little pale as they gave Jason another glance.

“Let it go,” Korinne said to her still-angry team member. “You don’t want to make an enemy of the next Amos Pensinata.”

Jeni was glowering at the exchange. Whoever had assembled the expedition roster was like a mad alchemist, throwing volatile ingredients in a pot to see what happened. She narrowed her eyes on Vesper Rimaros, suspecting her of being the alchemist in question.

“Oh yeah,” she muttered to herself. “This is going to go great.”

The hour came and the last two members didn’t arrive before the gold-rank portal specialist. Jeni knew the man in passing but, also knew how in-demand his time was at the moment, so they didn’t exchange more than quick nods before he opened a portal and she ushered the group through. The portal user was not tasked to follow them, so the group would need to make its own way back.

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The small expedition emerged from the portal into an abandoned village, surrounded by jungle. The population had been evacuated to a fortress, the livestock they were forced to abandon left behind now mostly-devoured carcasses. The quadrupedal lizard creatures were similar to cows in nature, used for milk and meat. Common practice was to set them loose, to draw monsters away from the empty village, but these had wandered into the township instead of the wilderness. Whichever monsters had roamed through and killed them hadn't done much damage to the buildings, so the residents would return to largely intact homes.

The town’s emptiness reminded Jason of the rural towns of Earth, abandoned during the monster waves. He had seen plenty of them as he roamed around, hunting for the right nodes to recalibrate the link between worlds. That task was not entirely complete, but until the monster surge was over the dimensional forces at play would make any attempt to modify the link on this side pointless.

Jeni gathered the group together to update them on the contract.

“As you know, we were going to investigate potential Builder cult activity around an astral space aperture. The scouts monitoring the target site sent updated information that a group of Builder cultists did, indeed move in on it, which is why they backed off and sent work back. The timeline was stepped up and here we are. Unfortunately, the cult has had that intervening time to get in, start whatever they are up to and fortify against people like us coming to stop them.”

An icy cloud formed at her feet.

“We are going to be moving fast as we can without risking drawing monster attention,” she announced. “Asano, I’m told you have communications and scouting abilities.”

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➤ [You have received a party invitation from \[Jason Asano\]. Accept Y/N?](#)

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Seven Shade bodies rose from Jason’s shadow and dashed off into the jungle. The guild team’s leader, Korinne, spoke up.

“Ma’am, our team scout is reliable. Perhaps we should use her instead of relying on an independent’s familiars.”

Jeni didn’t let her unhappiness show. She had seen that the stoic Orin held an amount of respect within the guild team and she’d been hoping his influence would keep a lid on things. Korinne, however, was unwilling to let Jason’s blow to the pride of her team member slide. Jeni looked at Korinne, then turned to the woman she knew to be the guild team’s scout.

“Rosa Liselos, isn’t it? What do you say, Liselos? Can you do better than Asano’s shadows?”

Liselos glanced at Orin, then flashed an apologetic look at Korinne before turning back Jeni.

“No, ma’am. My senses are sharper than most and I’ve already lost track of them. I can’t hide any better than that.”

Jeni turned back to Korinne.

“Anything else to say about how I’m commanding this expedition?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Correct.”

Jeni then addressed the group at large.

“We’re moving out,” she ordered. “Keep those auras restrained; no point letting them see us coming until we have to. We’ll rely on scouting to keep us secure. Liselos, you’ll sweep our wake to make sure nothing is stalking us.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The expedition members took out various means of personal transport, from powers like Jeni’s floating ice cloud to construct creatures kept in dimensional storage. Shade took the form of a saddled panther-like creature with a long body and eight legs. It had glowing white fangs, claws and eyes. Jason slid into the saddle on its back and the group moved out.

## Chapter 508

### The Source of the Madness

Jason knew from his map that the expedition had been portalled to somewhere in the north of Colombia, which in this world was in the southwest of the Storm Kingdom. They headed south, on the same wide, well-maintained roads Jason had travelled on during his delivery contract.

The group experimented with the chat features of Jason's party interface, the guild team clearly having used similar abilities before. They explained them to the unaffiliated after some basic functionality tests, so Jason remained silent and let them.

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➤ Party member [Zara Rimaros] wishes to open a private chat channel. Accept Y/N?

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Jason declined, not so much as casting a glance at the princesses. Zara was on a cloud, similar to that of Jeni, but instead of ice, hers was a volatile roiling of air and water. It looked like she was standing in a small, very contained tropical storm. Vesper rode a construct version of a heidel that looked like a two-headed horse made of sapphires. Of all the transportation modes, it was the most eye-catching. Some of the others didn't bother with transport, using movement powers to keep up on foot.

Others in the group, especially the guild members who had been watching the royal members of the expedition, noticed her looking at him. Jason noted the resulting hostility in their auras but offered no more reaction than he did to the princess. The only one that interested him at all was Orin. As well as being the most steadfast of the group, he was fresh from a rank up. All of the guild team were in the earliest part of silver-rank, but Jason had met Orin just days earlier when he'd been at the peak of bronze. Orin was one of Kasper Irios' friends, being the quiet member of that group as well.

It was typical of adventurers to push themselves to the peak of their current rank before a monster surge. Using the surge itself to cross the threshold and get a jump on the next rank was a practice Jason had been told about during his earliest days as an adventurer. With how delayed the surge was, he had no doubt that many people were prepared and either had or were about to join Orin in crossing the line. Vesper Rimaros, for example, was at the very high end of silver rank.

A dozen people moving through the jungle at a goodly speed did not go unnoticed and the expedition was attacked by a large pack of silver-rank monsters. They came from the rear but the expedition was ready, having been alerted by the guild scout trailing the



main group. Jason had already sensed their approach when the warning came and was certain that the gold-rank expedition leader had as well. More than forty flying snakes with flickering insect wings came over the jungle canopy and into the open space above the road. With darting movements, like giant dragonflies, they spat poison globules before diving in to try and land venomous bites.

Auras erupted out from the dozen adventurers, an overlapping slew of powerful effects. Not all of them were useful to every person, like one that enhanced lightning-based damage, which did nothing for Jason. But there were also speed and strength enhancements, damage reduction effects and boosts to sensory powers; a cornucopia of augmentations demonstrating the advantage of essence users acting in concert.

Jason didn't bother to act, sitting on his mount and watching the others. Jeni did the same, observing the team in action. Whenever a monster targeted either, they responded with a savage aura spike that persuaded the beast to move on to other targets.

The three unaffiliated adventurers were capable, acting quickly and decisively, but were outclassed by the others. Vesper was moving like a dancer, sword in hand as she chanted a sonorous song that disoriented the monsters. The effect was slight but telling, even the minimal advantage something the expert adventurers could capitalise on.

Zara used a combination of wind and water powers to attack the monsters and control the environment. She conjured walls and blades of water and slammed the snakes through trees with focused blasts of wind. With so many adventurers around, she left the monsters for more damaged-oriented allies to finish off while she set up the next monster for slaughter.

Most impressive was the guild team, their six members a chorus of power and synergy. When they all fired off abilities at once it was almost simultaneous, staggered just enough to land in the optimal sequence. Jason was forced to acknowledge that the famous arrogance of the guilds was not without basis as they took the monsters apart. The guild team was a well-oiled machine, and that machine was a meat grinder.

Jason might have it all over them in terms of adventuring experience, but their training regimens had started before they got their first essence and continued through iron and bronze rank. The results of that were playing out in front of Jason as he watched. If things went wrong, that's when experience like Jason's was valuable. In their element, though, even a relatively inexperienced guild team showed Jason adventurers as he'd never seen them.

Korinne, the team's leader, sent orders swiftly, her efficiency only enhanced by Jason's communication power. There was no sign of the unruliness she had demonstrated

earlier as her training kicked in and she relayed orders that were followed to the letter. Once the fight started, her whole team showed the discipline that had been lacking as they fooled around back in the marshalling yard.

Monsters were pinned by control abilities, weakened by debuffs and hammered with a flurry of damaging powers. There was a clockwork precision to the process that had the guild demolishing the enemy at an incredible pace. Jason had never seen silver-rank monsters slaughtered with such speed and efficiency.

As the fight played out, Shade notified Jason that his long-deployed scouts had found the target site. As Shade relayed that information, Jason slowly and carefully diminished his aura, so as not to alert the gold ranker.

Once the last of the monsters were finished off, Jeni realised that someone was missing. She had seen Jason staying out of the fight at the start, but hadn't pushed him. She was worried enough about his stability that she might have even preferred if he did nothing during the whole expedition. This was reinforced when she realised that he had slipped away during the latter part of the battle. Despite her gold-rank senses, in the mess of overlapping auras, Asano's had smoothly vanished. He and his mount had disappeared with it.

"Did anyone see Asano go?" she asked.

The rest of the group all looked around, blank-faced. Jeni closed her eyes and winced.

"I knew I was going to hate this job."

She spoke to Jason through voice chat.

"Mr Asano, what are you doing?"

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➤ **Party leader [Jason Asano] has set his incoming voice chats to mute.**

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She shot a flat glare in Vesper's direction.

"I hate politics so much."

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Shade, scouting ahead, had found the aperture and the Builder cult force guarding it. Jason had shadow-jumped directly to his familiar and was now observing the cultists from hiding, crouched in the thick jungle growth.

The aperture was inside a small cave, little more than a deep indent in a stone outcropping. Outside the cave, the cultists had cleared a huge section of jungle. The resulting fallen trees and scrub was still in the process of being burned away. The tools

being used were whirling saw blades and flamethrowers incorporated into the bodies of hulking construct creatures and people converted into half-construct abominations.

The constructs were a wild mismatch of designs, from crabs to centaurs to humanoids. The centaur constructs had two heads, despite the top half being humanoid and Jason realised they were based on half-heidels instead of half-horses. The semi-construct converted were downright disturbing, with much of their bodies replaced with artificial parts like magical cyborgs.

There were centaur variants among the converted as well, although these were single-headed because the top halves were all living celestine torsos. They were grafted onto construct bodies for the lower halves and not just heidel bodies. Others were in the form of large cats, scorpions and spiders.

Other flesh abominations had artificial limbs replacing or in addition to their own, emerging from almost any part of the body. It would have been comical if it hadn't been so grotesque, filling Jason with revulsion. These weren't prosthetics used to help people overcome injury or disability. These people had been butchered to create monsters, many quite likely against their will. That was how the Builder had done it when Jason and his team fought them in the astral space and there was no reason he wouldn't do it again.

The constructs and the magic cyborg converted were the bulk of the force, some eighty at bronze rank and another twenty at silver. Although their numbers were high, they needed to be, as individually they were no match for an essence user. That might be less true in Greenstone, but the guild team Jason had just observed would land on them like artillery fire.

The key to creating both the construct creatures and the converted were the clockwork cores inside them. The purpose of the clockwork cores was to rapidly expand the Builder's forces, producing constructs and converted at a greater pace than any equivalent power could be assembled. As invaders, the ability to rapidly expand their initial forces was of incredible value.

The sources of the cores were clockwork kings, which Jason had only seen one of. It was an ancient and crippled one, dug up on Earth by the Engineers of Ascension. They had used the damaged cores it could still produce as part of their human augmentation project.

Before his death, the EOA leader, Noreth, had given Jason access to a vault filled with EOA secrets and resources. The clockwork king counted as both and Jason had destroyed it himself, making sure no one would be able to use it again.

Clockwork kings were gold rank and Jason didn't sense any auras on that level. The kings weren't built for stealth and, even if they were, it was very hard for the Builder's power to escape Jason's attention. As such, any clockwork king in the vicinity would have to be on the other side of the aperture, inside the astral space. Jason turned his attention to the forces he was certain of.

Leading the small army of constructs and abominations was a cadre of essence users. Jason could sense the star seeds worming through their bodies and souls. There were five silver-rankers and a dozen bronze.

"Mr Asano," Shade said, next to Jason in the undergrowth. "While I fear the answer is obvious, I am obligated to ask if this is truly the approach you wish to take. I know you wish to assess the effectiveness of your ability to influence objects related to the Builder. My concern is that, in another state of mind, perhaps, you might come to regret using people – even these people – as subjects of weapon experimentation."

Jason turned his head to look at the shadow creature beside him, then back out at the enemy.

"At this point, what's one more regret?"

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Clockwork cores and star seeds were the two kinds of artefacts the Builder used to invest power into its minions. Clockwork cores were the lesser, being produced by other minions rather than the Builder itself and not direct conduits to the Builder. Because they were not, it was even possible to use them outside of the Builder's influence.

Jason had already tested his power against the damaged, modified variants that the EOA salvaged. The effects there had been extreme and lethal. Now, he was going to test his influence over the undamaged, unmodified variant.

He didn't bother to hide, stepping out of the jungle, shrouded in his starlight cloak. His aura washed out like a flood over the Builder's minions and Jason used it to reach into the constructs and abominations.

Jason had hoped his influence over the clockwork cores would allow him to shut them down entirely. What he found was that he could do far more than that, at least with the weaker bronze-rank enemies. He had experience erasing the Builder's imprint from the dimensional door and absorbing it for his own, plus the power the door gave him in influencing other Builder artefacts with his aura. This allowed him to seize control of the bronze-rank constructs entirely, erasing their Builder's imprint and making them his own.

As for the silver-rank constructs, he lacked the strength to take them over. The best he could do was impede their coordination and speed while directing the bronze-rank ones to attack them.

The results with the cyborg-like converted were different and much more horrific. Seizing control of the artificial parts of their bodies through the cores inside them left the flesh fighting the steel. The abominations started ripping themselves apart, the artificial parts yanking themselves off the flesh to which they were macabrely welded. Whirling saw-blade limbs and flame-spitting orifices turned on the very bodies they were attached to.

Like their construct equivalents, the silver-rank abominations were more resistant to control than the bronze-rankers. The fleshly part of them resisted Jason's efforts, but that flesh also made them vulnerable. The freakish bodies of the abominations were kept alive by the magic of their artificial parts. Rather than try and take full control, Jason focused on shutting off the magic in the artificial parts that kept the living parts alive. The converted were soon gasping for air and bleeding from their eyes and the points where flesh met steel.

Within moments of his appearance, and without so much as raising a hand, Jason had turned the construct army into a gruesome and chaotic spectacle of death. He walked slowly across the torched clearing, stepping over smouldering logs and around still-burning brush that threw smoke up and out over the jungle.

The essence users escaped the sudden and gruesome chaos, fighting their way free of the army that, moments ago, had been under their control. Their attention locked on Jason, whose aura was unhidden and obviously the source of the madness. As the essence users moved towards him, the five silver-rankers tried exerting suppressive force with their own auras to negate Jason's influence on their army. The attempt was a miserable failure as their auras shrunk back from Jason's as if stung.

The auras of the essence users were thick with the Builder's energy, shaped by the star seeds in their souls. Jason knew that power, which was scored onto his soul in the Builder's attempts to torture Jason into accepting a star seed. As a result, there was no power that Jason knew better how to fight back against.

Jason poured his rage onto the essence users, smashing their auras to nothing. He didn't stop there, attacking their very souls the way their master had once attacked him. In doing so, the Builder had invested in Jason the very same ability, effectively handing a powerful weapon to his enemy.

Their souls were as inviolable to Jason as his own had been to the Builder. Unless they opened themselves up to him, which they never would, he could only do what their master did to him and scour their souls, inflicting a pain that transcended the physical.

Pain, as it turned out, was enough.

The bodies of the bronze rankers were unable to handle it, collapsing to the ground. The silver-rankers were stronger, but not strong enough, stopping dead in their tracks. That was when the Builder stepped in personally.

Star seeds had two elements: the physical element in the body and the spiritual element in the soul. Jason felt the Builder's power flood through the spiritual element and into the physical element, allowing it to take control of their bodies, bolstering them with power. Jason had once fought such a vessel and knew how strong they were, but to become one was a death sentence.

Any unprepared vessel could only embody a greater astral being for minutes before burning out. The vessels Jason had seen in the past, like Thadwick, had gone through weeks of preparation and even they lasted only so long. The vessels also embodied the Builder's power, meaning they were no longer allowed to take action. Even before Dawn had gained concessions from Shako, The Builder had conceded to the World-Phoenix and the Reaper that it would no longer use vessels on Pallimustus. By embodying the essence users through their star seeds, he had rendered them unable to act. Like Dawn representing the World-Phoenix, Builder vessels could do no more than talk.

The bronze-rankers got to their feet and the silver rankers moved forward, forming a line in front of Jason. Their synchronized voices were cold and mechanical as they spoke in a perfect chorus.

“Asano.”

## Chapter 509

### A Fair Fight

Jason looked at the vessels of the Builder arrayed in front of him. Yet again, the Builder was pushing the boundaries of its agreement with the other great astral beings, reinforcing their unreliability. It reminded him all over again that none of them cared about the welfare of one mortal. Their only concern was how he could impact their agenda or, perhaps, their pride as higher beings as they looked down on mortals.

Once again, Jason found himself in front of some vastly more powerful entity, and he was tired. Tired of ranting. Tired of anger. Tired of challenging powers he had no business standing in front of. He wondered what the Builder even wanted from him, this time. What did it get out of talking?

Jason looked towards the shallow cave with the aperture inside.

What the Builder got from talking to Jason was Jason talking back. While Jason made another speech full of threats he couldn't possibly carry out, the Builder would have time to direct his forces within the astral space and converge on the aperture, waiting for Jason's arrival.

Jason didn't say anything to the Builder's vessels, instead, sinking into his own shadow and reappearing in the dark mouth of the cave. The aperture was a glowing, circular portal, flickering like a television with bad reception.

"Keep an eye on it," Jason said as a Shade body left Jason's shadow and Jason stepped into the portal. Astral spaces were too stable for him to enter from anywhere, the way he could with a proto-space, but his power did allow him to ignore the seals on apertures.

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The Builder's vessels turned in unison as Jason vanished from in front of them and reappeared in the cave, moving directly into the aperture. A shadowy figure moved out of the cave, slipping from shadow to shadow through the still-fighting constructs and semi-construct flesh abominations. It exited the melee unaccosted and approached the Builder's vessels. They were already showing signs of breaking down, their skin turning stony and starting to flake.

"Reaper spawn," the vessels chorused in perfect unity with cold, mechanical voices.

"Great being," Shade greeted respectfully. "I have spent some time on Mr Asano's homeworld, as you know. They do not have any gods that I am aware of, yet it is a world rife with stories of them. The gods in most of these mythologies are very mortal in their

failings. They have story after story of petty, vain and cruel deities, using mortals as proxies in their conflicts, always to the suffering of the mortals. I had thought this a reflection of their own inadequacies; a collective social assertion of higher beings just as flawed as they, thus excusing their own shortcomings. Now I find myself wondering if I was incorrect. Many of these myths stem from a period in which one of your clockwork kings was entombed. I do not know what it was doing there, but perhaps whatever your involvement in that world inspired the pettiness, cruelty and vanity of their mythological deities.”

“You are impudent, spawn.”

“And you are thirteen billion years old, yet somehow the same sixteen-year-old boy who was ascended to his position. I do not know how you were chosen, but the great astral beings have made enough other mistakes that I know their decisions are not infallible.”

“You are limited, spawn. Measuring me by the time reference of this petty world only makes it plain.”

“Yes, that is what limits me,” Shade said. “The arbitrary value by which I chose to account for time. I shall take it as a lesson learned and consider myself appropriately admonished.”

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Jeni Kavaloa was moving swiftly, rushing towards the aperture with the rest of the expedition. They had spotted the smoke in the distance and left the road, heading through the jungle towards it. Jeni had given up on any kind of delicate process, sending out a wild storm of ice blades to open a path. The fast-moving and razor-sharp cloud annihilated every obstacle in the group’s path as they dashed behind it on their various means of transport. Trees were smashed to splinters and undergrowth was sliced to confetti. The ice blades even went through a rock the size of a house, the group riding through a dust cloud as pebbles rained down on them.

Jeni was not straining her senses, since the aura projection required to do so could alert monsters at even greater range than the noise her demolition cloud was making. Even so, her gold-rank perception picked up what was happening in the clearing well before they reached it, although none of it made any sense. She had fought the Builder’s forces before and recognised the auras of their construct creatures and macabre converted. What she had not seen before was them fighting each other.

That barely entered her attention, however, compared to the other auras on the scene. Most were bronze-rank with a handful of silvers but there was something inside all



of them that was more dangerous than their rank. It was a power like that of a manifested god, but also different and alien. She could only assume this was the presence of the Builder, as she had heard of it taking vessels, but none had been seen since the early days of the cultist conflict. Whatever the power was, she could sense it rapidly eating the people containing it from the inside out.

What she could not sense was Jason Asano.

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Jason was moving before he had time to even sense his surroundings as he emerged from the portal. Even so, he was riddled with attacks. His cloak intercepted the weaker ones, but a flaming projectile seared through his robes to scorch his torso and a spear pierced through his gut and out the other side.

The astral space was some kind of sweltering, subterranean space and Jason easily disappeared into the shadows, even with a spear still lodged in him. He didn't bother to look back, moving fast but silently through what turned out to be an ants' nest of volcanic tunnels, complete with lava-spitting ants.

Jason lost his pursuers in a vast cavern containing a lake of magma. He was grateful that he didn't need to breathe the scorching air because he wasn't sure he could have. He could move stealthily past the many ants, and since they went after any Builder minions that encroached, he had time to stop and remove the spear impaling him. The corrosive lava spit of the ants was highly effective against the metal constructs, making them trouble for the minions. The only light came from the glowing magma lake, an orange-tinted gloom, like being inside a smouldering ember. Jason moved through undetected, his cloak was dimmed to void black as he used it to fly over the lake.

There was something inside the lake, submerged in lava. It was bigger than the ants, or perhaps their queen, if they had one. It was still only silver rank, although definitely in the upper range. Jason stayed high, near the ceiling, so as to not tempt fate.

Jason didn't extend his senses far but could feel the unhidden auras of the Builder minions as they rushed in the direction of the aperture. After coming through the aperture to the expected ambush, Jason had been forced to dash off and take stock, but the cultists waiting had chosen not to chase after him for long once he disappeared into the magma cavern. Instead, they gravitated to the place they knew he would need to go eventually. At some point, he would have to go back to the aperture.

Unfortunately for the Builder's minions, Jason had inadvertent allies in the ants. Jason could easily hide from them as their aura senses were poor and Shade could deceive their insect vibrational sense. There was also the issue of the entire astral space

being a lava tunnel maze. Jason's map ability was a boon, helping navigate a path and track the enemies along it. As he made his way back towards the aperture, he took every chance to bait the ants in the direction of cultists with pinpoint bursts of aura.

The cultists were right in thinking Jason would return to the aperture. His advantage was that he could scout it out instead of walking in blind, but time was against him. The Builder had been sending his cultists in the direction of the aperture since Jason's arrival in the clearing. Fortunately, the constructs and semi-construct flesh abominations were more liability than asset.

Jason's ability to hijack their clockwork cores made them worse than useless when fighting him, so they had been sent back. Jason spotted them engaging ants to clear a path for essence-using cultists more than once, but resisted the temptation to take some over. The cultists were connected to the Builder through their star seeds, which linked them in a similar fashion to Jason's party interface. Once any of them found where he was, they all would, so every time he was spotted they would get closer to boxing him in. Jason did not want to give up the strategic advantages of speed and stealth, returning to the chamber containing the aperture within minutes of leaving it.

Five silver-rank essence users were waiting near the aperture. Jason had hoped for less but expected more, but lower-rankers with construct and converted to help them had been left to watch the sealed aperture. They had all been sent away at the Builder's warning after Jason's display outside. They knew that only silver-rank essence users posed any kind of threat, at least amongst the forces at hand.

The cavern in which the aperture was located was not large compared to the magma lake chamber. Light came from natural orange crystals growing out of every surface of the natural cavern. Walls, floor and ceiling, if the uneven chamber could truly be said to have the distinctions, all featured them. So did the stalagmites and stalactites. The uneven cave floor and pervasive shadows meant that anyone without enhanced agility, reflexes and perception would quickly break a leg. The only place the floor had been worked flat was directly under the aperture, where a sealing ritual had been set up. That was what Jason needed to undo to give the rest of the expedition access.

The terrain was ideal for Jason to skirmish through if it came to a fight, but with five silver-rank enemies, he would prefer it didn't come to that. It was not Greenstone and five-on-one odds were something he'd rather avoid, even if the environment was favourable and he could overwhelm their auras. If just one or two of them was at a guild level, their numerical advantage could easily spell death.

Following his defeat at the hands of the Purity priests, Jason has made additional purchases while restocking his equipment. At the top of that list was a set of the most powerful cleansing potions his body could handle, having learned his lesson about being too reliant on his resistances.

Another purchase was something he made after considering the fights in his future. Most of Jason's battles had been against monsters and he needed new strategies that prepared him to face essence users. This was especially true when he was outnumbered, which seemed to be most of the time.

After considering his options and advantages, Jason had devised a tactic using one of his strongest tools and a set of items he had picked up quite a lot of over the years. He only had a few that were as strong as he needed, but a few was enough. Because the items were on the Adventure Society's controlled list, Jason's one-star rank did not allow him to buy more.

Familiars were unable to join Jason's party chat, but Jason and Shade could still converse safely. Shade could hide Jason from various senses, including masking his sound, but that sound was not masked from Shade himself.

"Time to try the new strategy," Jason told his familiar. "Get into position."

Five Shade bodies slipped away, moving through the dark to hide in the shadows of the five essence users. Once they were in place, Jason's aura dropped on the cultists like a bomb. Without the Builder actively boosting them, which would just make more pointless vessels, Jason's aura suppression was especially effective.

In the same moment that Jason suppressed their auras, a Shade body rose from each of their shadows, pulling silver-rank suppression collars from within Shade's storage space. Only with suppressed auras would the suppression collars be able to take effect, which was why they weren't often used in combat. Only with the rank or numerical disparity for powerful aura suppression was it a viable method for shutting down the powers of opponents. Unfortunately for the cultists, their master was the primary factor in Jason turning into a one-man force multiplier.

Shade acted quickly and four collars snapped around four necks. Only one of the essence users reacted quickly enough to prevent the sneak attack, sending out a wave of force that knocked back Shade's body, even though it was intangible, along with the man's collared fellows. That left one cultist facing off against Jason. The others weren't helpless, but locked out of their powers, their impact would be limited. It was, ostensibly, a fair fight.

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Jeni hesitated in her mind with what she sensed waiting in the clearing but didn't slow as she led the expedition group onward. They reached the clearing and surveyed what was on display, which was bizarre on every front. The Builder's forces were fighting one another, constructs and flesh abominations in a wildly destructive melee where they attacked not just each other but even themselves at times.

The other scene in the clearing was very different in its stillness, yet no less strange. One of Asano's shadow familiars was facing a plumb-straight line of Builder cultists who were visibly in the process of dying as their bodies broke down around them. Even so, the cultists didn't react to their own conditions, standing like troops at inspection.

Every member of the expedition sensed the power inside the cultists and how dangerous it was. Every member of the expedition had seen gods appear in worship squares and religious ceremonies and knew the feel of divinity. This was similar, but like a mannequin that was both a little too human and not quite human enough, there was a disturbing, uncanny valley aspect to that power that put them all on alert.

The bodies of the essence users were drying out and crumbling away. Cracked and desiccated like the mud of a long-dry riverbed, it was falling off in flakes, dust and bloodless clumps. The bronze-rank cultists were nearing the end of their endurance even as the expedition arrived, one of them collapsing to the ground. None of the others showed any reaction, turning their attention to the newcomers with eerily uniform precision.

"Adventurers of Rimaros," the vessels addressed them in impassive harmony. "I am the Builder and I have a proposal for you."

## Chapter 510

### Put the Mask Back On

The collared cultists were effectively non-threats without powers, but Jason wasn't taking chances. Holding a hand out to the side, blood spilled out to take the form of Colin in his blood clone form.

"Watch the packaged meat," Jason instructed. "If it starts going bad, eat it fast."

The cultist still free didn't try to look out for his fellows. He did just the opposite moving out of the way as the familiar approached them with slow, methodical steps. The cultist never took his eyes from Jason as he sidestepped out of the apocalypse beast's path, remaining alert to attack.

The collared cultists tried to run, only for blood-soaked leather straps to shoot out from Colin. They grabbed the disempowered cultists and dragged them back to the familiar's feet. Jason felt the surge of power from the star seeds within them as they tried to self-detonate and locked them down with his aura.

This was a trick Jason had instinctively picked up after ejecting the star seed placed in his own body. He hadn't understood how the ability truly worked when he first used it back in Greenstone, but he had changed a lot since then. Jason was no longer a dual entity of body and soul, the way most physical beings were. For him, body and soul was the same thing.

This was extremely unusual, even on a cosmic scale. While the specific components of different physical beings varied, the underlying pattern that made them up was the same. Be it a normal person or an essence user, monster or familiar, physical beings were comprised of a physical component that served as a vessel for a spiritual component. Exceptions to this, where the body and spirit did not exist in a state of duality but in a unified, physical and spiritual gestalt were extremely rare. This was what made entities like the messengers and the vorger so extraordinary.

Jason's adoption of that state had given him significant insights into the way the connection between body and spirit functioned. It helped him understand the underlying mechanisms of things he'd been doing by instinct, like using his aura to prevent star seed detonation.

The soul of any being was inviolable unless it opened itself to penetration. If a being like the Builder, with practically infinite power, could not overcome this limitation, then Jason certainly couldn't. This made a star seed inside someone's soul untouchable,

however strong his ability to influence the Builder's artefacts. Not all of a star seed was held within the soul, however.

While each great astral being used its own kind of star seed, they were all, by necessity, a reflection of the basic patterns of physical beings. They were made up of both physical and spiritual components, which lodged themselves in the physical and spiritual aspects of living beings. For this reason, messengers and similar beings, which now included Jason, were immune to star seed implantation.

Jason was unable to do a lot with the physical aspect of a star seed, as the protected spiritual component was the part that controlled it. The most he could do was lock down the physical component and prevent it from enacting commands sent from within the soul.

Jason's understanding of the dual nature of most physical beings wasn't generally useful. The two aspects were like perfect halves of a sphere, seamlessly sealed together, with nowhere to take purchase. When Jason used his ability to attack a soul, all he was doing was scratching at the exterior or squeezing it like a ball. There was nothing to grab hold of and really go to work, but a star seed changed that considerably.

Jason locked down the physical aspects of the cultist's star seeds, so as to stop their self-detonation. It was something he hadn't done in years, during which time he had gone through considerable changes. This led to a revelation as he grabbed at the star seeds: the physical aspect of a star seed was like a handle sticking out a cultist's soul. A handle that he could grab.

Looking at the uncollared cultist through a new lens, Jason didn't see a man. He saw a sphere with a great big handle poking out the side. Half of that sphere was untouchable, but what if he grabbed that handle and used it to wrench off that half that wasn't? He couldn't rip the man's soul out of his body, but maybe he could tear the body off the soul.

The cultist and Jason were still in a standoff, staring one another down. Neither had moved since Colin tied up the other cultists, who were now bound up in wet red leather straps like insects in a web. From the cultist's perspective that was fine, buying time for reinforcements to arrive. For Jason, it allowed him to concentrate on forging a new weapon in his soul arsenal.

Jason projected his aura in twin talons that dug through the cultist's aura. One gripped the man's soul while the other gripped the physical element of the star seed. Then, Jason started to twist. The man froze, eyes wide as he felt something try to wrench apart the very foundation of his being. For Jason, it also felt like a physical struggle, as if he were trying to yank the man's soul from his body with brute strength. The difference in soul strength between the two silver-rankers was like a bodybuilder fighting a child.

Jason was certain that unless the Builder stepped in and turned the cultist into a vessel, he could not be stopped. Since doing so would go far beyond simply using some vessels to talk, Jason didn't think that he would. The two men struggled while standing dead still, staring at one another. The other cultists lay where they were tied up, watching in fear and confusion. Despite having their aura senses being sealed, the collared cultists were able to sense the powerful aura reactions coming from within the cultist Jason was spiritually attacking. Even people without magic and the aura senses that come with it would have felt it. It was not enough that they were clear as to what was befalling their companion, but they could tell that it was happening on a level that no wound should be able to reach.

"Mr Asano, I recommend against this course of action."

Jason ignored Shade, his face warped with hate as he felt the strain he was placing on the bond between the cultist's body and soul. The man wasn't even resisting anymore, swaying and starting to twitch. Shade rose up from Jason's shadow.

"Mr Asano, I *strongly* recommend against this course of action."

Jason continued to twist and wrench, feeling the cultist's spiritual foundation beginning to tear.

"JASON, STOP IT!"

Shade never yelled. Shade never told when he could suggest and Shade never used Jason's first name. Doing all three at once had finally broken through. The cultist dropped to the ground, frothing at the mouth as Jason released him and turned to his shadowy familiar.

"Mr Asano," Shade said, his composure restored. "If I ask you to do something, will you do it?"

"Anything."

"Then I will ask you not to do what you were about to do. Ever. Because—"

"Why doesn't matter," Jason cut in, his voice soft. "If you want it, that's all the why I need."

Jason's shoulder's slumped. Shade had shaken the twisted rage from his expression he suddenly looked exhausted. Something festering inside him had finally rotted through and collapsed. He looked over at the cultists. The free one was having a seizure, the foam in his mouth tainted red. The others showed an expression Jason wasn't familiar with on the face of a Builder cultist. He'd seen arrogance and disdain. He'd seen fury, madness and the slack-jawed blankness of a puppet. Fear was new. Even collared, they felt what

Jason had been doing to their companion and it chilled them to a depth only the star seeds within them had ever reached before.

“I almost crossed a line there, didn’t I?” Jason asked.

“Yes, Mr Asano.”

“Or maybe I already did. If you hadn’t stopped me, I’d have torn that man’s soul out.”

“But you didn’t. There is still a path home for you.”

“And where’s that? I don’t think I know anymore.”

“It’s the same place it’s always been, Mr Asano. The place where people are waiting for you.”

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The exterior of the aperture changed, the rainbow portal stopped flickering as the seal on the other side was broken. Figures started emerging from it; first the collared cultists, then Jason, who immediately locked down their star seeds again. He wasn’t able to maintain the suppression while passing through the portal. Following them was Colin, who looked like a blood-red copy of Jason and had the last cultist slung over his shoulder, still unconscious. Colin’s bloody straps shot out to wrap around the cultists again and he walked them behind Jason like dogs on a leash.

As he arrived from the astral space, Jason immediately sensed the presence of the expedition. They were arrayed in front of the Builder’s vessels, who had broken down considerably in the short time he’d been gone. Jason arrived as the vessels were using their cold, mechanical harmony to address the wary expedition members.

“...have a proposal for you.”

“Not interested,” the expedition leader, Jeni Kavaloa, told the vessels.

“If Jason Asano dies,” the Builder continued, “my forces shall abandon the Storm Kingdom, never to return. The underwater city will depart. Everyone and everything that serves me will either leave or destroy itself outright. All it will cost you is one silver-rank head. It must be the silver-rankers amongst you who take it, however. The gold-ranker cannot intervene herself.”

The words arrested Jason’s attention and he stopped inside the mouth of the cave. How many times had he been thrown under the bus by someone in power that was ostensibly an ally? Lucian Lamprey of the Magic Society. Elspeth Arella of the Adventure Society. The Network more than anyone. They had turned on him over and over, with the gall to ask for things in between, passing the blame onto rogue elements and hostile factions. Jason didn’t think he could be surprised anymore, only to be proven immediately wrong.



“Stick it up your ass,” the guild team leader, Korinne, yelled. “Asano might be an asshole that takes himself way too seriously, but he's our asshole, and we don't turn on our own assholes.”

Even with the Builder's vessels arrayed right in front of them, the expedition members all turned to look at her.

“Shut up,” she barked defensively. “I'm not good at speeches, alright?”

The Builder ignored her.

“What say you, gold-ranker?” the vessels asked. “You are the foremost representative of the Adventure Society here and command these silver-rankers. You do not even need to spill the blood on your own hands. How many lives can be spared in return for one silver-rank head? Are you willing to pay the blood price of war when I offer you peace?”

“We're not handing anyone over to you,” Jeni said.

“And what of you, Princesses? The monster surge will be long and when it is gone, and I with it, a new storm will come. Will your kingdom be rested and ready to weather it or battered and tired when the time comes to face it?”

Vesper stepped forward, panning her gaze across the row of crumbling vessels.

“If having Asano dead is worth more to you than our entire kingdom,” she declared, “then the most important thing our kingdom can do is make sure he stays alive.”

“That may be harder than you think,” the vessels announced. “You may know that Asano has come back from the dead more than once. What he has hidden is that he cannot do it anymore. Until he reaches gold-rank, no power in the cosmos can revive him again.”

Taking the last word, the vessels died as the power inside them vanished and they collapsed to the ground. Jason left the cave with an unfamiliar sense of gratitude to the members of the expedition. He walked through the still-fighting constructs and abominations, those he controlled pushing those he didn't out of his path to open the way.

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The expedition watched Jason and his entourage of bound cultists pass through the still-fighting Builder minions. Jason looked at the dead vessels as he walked past them. Because they hadn't been properly prepared as vessels, they had collapsed entirely into piles of dry dirt. At least it meant they were too broken to revive as magic-sucking ghouls, the way vessels had in the past.

Jeni looked at Asano, whose aura was now a closed book to her. She hoped that it was because he had gotten a handle of the madness that had been bubbling out of him

and not just that he'd gotten better at hiding it. Whatever he had been up to, the look of restrained anger on his face since she had met him had been replaced with a sunken weariness.

"Mr Asano, you and I need to have a discussion."

Jason nodded.

"I don't make a very good subordinate," he acknowledged. "It's not a new failing."

"When you chose to join this expedition, there was an expectation that you would follow directions."

Jason looked from Jeni to Vesper and then back to Jeni.

"I apologise for that. In my defence, I was following directions."

Jeni took her turn looking to Vesper, then back to Jason.

"Politics," she said, making a dirty word of it.

"Tell me about it," Jason sympathised. "Silent and brooding was what you said, wasn't it, Vesper? Oh, and Zara, if you're still looking to get married, we'll have to talk about that later. I shut down the sealing ritual on the other side of the aperture but there's still plenty of bad guys in there and we should get going before they close it off again."

Jason turned and wandered back in the direction of the cave.

"Okay," Korinne said. "Who was that guy and what happened to the other guy?"

"Same guy," Vesper said happily as she set off after Jason. "He just put the mask back on."