

## Chapter 467

### Surge Protocols

From the deck of the cloud yacht, Jason and Farrah were standing with drinks in hand looking at the islands floating in the sky as they drew closer to the city of Rimaros. One of the three main natural islands had come into view, but since Farrah had no idea which one was the island housing the Adventure Society, Jason had arbitrarily picked the local equivalent of Aruba. Approaching from a distance, their silver-rank vision picked out a lot of colourful buildings poking out from a wealth of tropical bushes trees and flowers. The mix of rich greens and vibrant colours from buildings and flowers both left Jason with a huge grin on his face.

“I think I’m going to like it here. I can’t wait to buy some actual food. I hope they’ve got coconuts. I really want to drink out of a coconut.”

Neither Jason nor Farrah were fazed by the prospect of a monster surge, with Jason especially unconcerned. Between astral spaces, proto-astral spaces and monster waves, Jason hadn’t seen what Farrah thought of as normal monster activity since iron-rank.

For both of them, it was the prospect of the Builder invasion that held their attention, but until they found out what that entailed, they were looking forward to a relatively relaxing time. A monster had approached their boat at one point, some silver-rank creature from the depths of the ocean. Neither had wanted to go into the water and deal with it so Jason gave it a dose of his aura at full strength and it fled.

Jason narrowed his eyes as he looked into the distance.

“What is it?” Farrah asked.

“I think we’re about to meet the locals.”

Farrah followed his gaze and eventually spotted something moving across the water. It was an essence user, presumably with the water essence by the way they were riding a column of water like it was a speed boat.

“You remember the aura etiquette I taught you way back when?” Farrah asked. “It’ll matter here.”

“Of course,” Jason said.

Greenstone had been a shambles as a society of essence users, but Farrah had nonetheless taught Jason about the importance of aura control and etiquette from the beginning. She had described it as a magical handshake, as well as the first way others would judge people. The polite way to maintain an aura was to have it withdrawn but not

hidden, always under precise control. This allowed others to get a general sense of each other without seeming evasive or being obnoxious.

Jason's aura shifted from that of an outworlder to a human, its domineering aspect toning down to a general rigidity and its unusual aspects, like the lingering traces from his contact with transcendent beings, nowhere to be seen. Jason's control came across as adequate, if a little sloppy. It was much like his aura as Farrah remembered it from Greenstone, but scaled up to silver rank.

She turned to look at him.

"What?" he asked.

"Nicely done," she said. "That is some exquisite aura control."

"Thanks," he said brightly. "I think it's best if you're the one to stand out while we're here. Outworlder, guild member, back from the dead. After that, also back from the dead seems practically mundane. Should I fake some monster cores into my aura?"

"I'd avoid changing anything too much."

"Yeah," Jason agreed. "The more I tweak my aura, the easier to see through it gets. Otherwise, I'd make it look like I have friendlier essences."

"Your aura does make you seem like a bit of a marbula right now."

"What's a marbula?" Jason asked.

"It's an iron-rank worm monster that secretes a glue-like ichor with a horrid stench. It's known for being weak and hiding from combat."

"That's harsh."

"Just don't overdo the aura disguise."

"It's good like this, though?"

"Yes," Farrah said. "I think it would fool low-end gold-rankers unless they examined your aura closely, and that's not an aura worth examining. It won't fool anyone truly powerful or with really sharp senses, though."

"I imagine those people see through everyone's secrets," Jason said. "I won't be special in that regard and I don't plan on being important enough that they care."

"Yes, because plans always work out. Like when Rufus, Gary and I planned to take you to Vitesse."

"That plan can still work," Jason said. "It's just been delayed a little. Delays are normal."

The man approaching in the distance was getting closer. He didn't hide his bronze-rank aura.

“You’re going to let me take the lead here, right?” Farrah asked as they watched the essence user grow closer.

“Of course,” Jason said. “On my world, you followed my lead. Now we’re back on yours, it only makes sense for you to be in charge.”

“Don’t forget your spirit domain.”

“Oh, thanks.”

The buildings and vehicles created by Jason’s cloud flask now contained the full power of Jason’s spirit domain. He withdrew the domain’s effects, although there was no retracting the domain’s presence entirely.

Shade, piloting the boat, was already slowing it down. The man riding a plume of water slowed himself and started moving backwards, his column of water holding him in the air as it matched pace with the boat. Jason stood slightly back and to the side of Farrah, implying a subordinate position.

“My name is Vidal Ladiv of the Rimaros Adventure Society. May I have permission to board your vessel?”

He showed the respect of someone lower-ranked as he greeted them with a slight bow.

“Of course,” Farrah said. “Please come aboard.”

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Vidal leapt from his column of water to the open deck of the boat. It had the looks of an ordinary pleasure yacht but there was a deep magic that his senses couldn’t penetrate, and not just because the yacht was silver rank. There was some kind of aura to it, understated but powerful, giving him a strong sense of being in a territory to which he did not belong. Although it didn’t impinge on him at all he could feel an ominous presence behind it, like seeing a vast, dark shape passing beneath a boat.

There were two people on the deck and his casual senses couldn’t push any further into the boat. He suspected it wouldn’t work even if he pushed, which would be a large breach of etiquette in front of two people higher rank than him.

One was a woman, clearly the leader of the two. She was relaxed and composed, clearly in a casual mode with her light blouse, loose pants and sandals. She had pale skin and her shoulder-length, strawberry blonde hair was loosely cinched at the back of her neck. Her aura control was pristine, revealing carefully controlled undertones of fire, earth and raw power. Vidal guessed her to have the powerful volcano confluence. He was also surprised to sense she was an outworlder, which would make a second one in the city.

The man standing behind her was less impressive. His features were unfamiliar, so Vidal had no sense of where he was from. His dark hair was glossy and he masked an overly prominent chin with a neatly trimmed beard. Vidal couldn't help but wonder what his chin had been like if even reaching silver rank hadn't smoothed it into normalcy.

Compared to the woman, the man's aura control was sloppy, giving even bronze-rank Vidal more insight than it should. The man deliberately showed off darkness and blood, while inadvertently revealing a core sense of self-preservation. His aura gave the impression of someone who would hide from potential dangers while opportunistically taking for himself.

The man also had small but definite scars on his face, which Vidal had seen others fake to make themselves seem like hardened adventurers. It suggested that the man's magically modified eyes were fake as well. Vidal read the man as a petty and inconsequential figure who likely bullied the weak while sycophantically clinging to the strong.

"As I said," Vidal told them, "I am an official of the Rimaros Adventure Society, although today I also represent the Rimaros Civic Authority Council. I am here to notify you that full monster surge procedures are in effect in the city of Rimaros and all associated territories."

Neither the man nor the woman looked surprised or worried at the announcement.

"As monster surge procedures have been enacted in Rimaros," Vidal continued, "all potential adventurers are being met as they enter the city and being informed of their responsibilities. If you will permit, may I ask a few questions and take notes?"

"By all means," Farrah said, gesturing at the door into the yacht's lounge cabin. "Would you like to come in?"

Vidal's instincts warned him against going further into the boat but he was already in arm's reach of two silver-rankers, so there was no escape if they turned on him. He could most likely escape the man, being on the water where Vidal was strongest. He had no such illusions about the woman, however. If she wanted to trap him, he was trapped.

"Thank you," he said and followed them inside. "I'd like to start with your names and whether you're adventurers. If you aren't, this will be a swift formality."

"We are both adventurers," Farrah told him as they moved into the lounge. "I am Farrah Hurin, out of Vitesse. Burning Violet guild, although I don't have a guild pin on me right now. This is Jason Asano, out of Greenstone. Guild unaffiliated."

That made sense to Vidal. She seemed every inch the guild level adventurer, and from a city with high standards like Vitesse. Asano being from someplace Vidal had never

heard of explained his lack of capability, but not why this woman was letting him follow her around. If the man's one true skill was seduction that might make sense, but she should have no trouble seeing through the man's emotions, given the disparity in their aura control.

Taking out a notebook and pencil as they walked, Vidal was jotting details into it before they even sat down. Although the armchairs in the lounge were plush and comfortable, he sat stiffly upright.

"I need to take down your details," he said. "Then I shall explain the basic requirements placed upon you by the monster surge protocols. Of course, registering for monster surge activity is not mandatory."

"We both intend to register."

"Excellent," Vidal said. "The Rimaros Adventure Society prefers if outside adventurers register within one day of being notified that the surge procedures are in effect. Consider this your notice, which means that you will ideally register by the end of tomorrow. The Adventure Society will be fully staffed at all hours during the surge, so you can do so quite late should that suit your needs. Are there any other adventurers aboard?"

"It's just us," Farrah said. "No one else, adventurer or otherwise."

"And are you two a formally registered team?"

"No," Farrah said. "We've both been separated from our teams for some time. There may be some issues with our records since we are both likely to have our status listed as deceased."

"Why is that?" Vidal asked, not looking up as he took notes.

"Because we died," Farrah said.

"You should know that part of registration will be having your identities confirmed, along with several other tests to weed out Builder infiltrators. I recommend you visit the temple of Death prior to registration and have them formally confirm that you are the people you claim to be, returned from death. Cases like yours are unusual but not unknown and we've found that involving the church of Death greatly accelerates the process. Given how busy things are likely to be, I venture you'll appreciate having done so."

"Thank you for the advice," Farrah said. "We will take up your suggestion."

"Good," Vidal said. "That is everything I need at this stage, but be aware that when you register, you will be put through a more rigorous assessment."

"Because of the Builder cultists," Farrah said. "We completely understand."

“So consider yourselves formally notified that surge protocols are in effect. Your names will be given to the local society branch and they will be expecting you. Do you have any questions before I go?”

“Which island is the Adventure Society on?” Farrah asked. “We know it’s on one of the main islands but we don’t know which. Or even which one we are approaching.”

“The three public islands are called Livaros, Arnote and Provo,” Vidal explained. “They’re situated in a line running roughly east-west. We are currently approaching Arnote, the westernmost island. It’s home to many of the wealthier citizens who do not have access to private islands. It is primarily residential and the least densely populated of the three. While there is not a lot of high-rank activity there, I do not recommend trying to throw your weight around as adventurers.”

Vidal turned his gaze on Asano.

“There is a certain relaxed lifestyle on Arnote that is an important part of the Rimaros cultural identity. If you make trouble, you’ll find that we are quite protective of it. There is also a minor branch of the royal family who maintain their primary residence on Arnote, so while you may not see the power hidden on the island, it will see you.”

“Thank you for the guidance,” Asano said, speaking for the first time since Vidal’s arrival. Vidal turned back to Farrah.

“You are looking for the central island of the three, Livaros. How are you navigating?”

“Jason here has a mapping ability,” Farrah explained. “It’s useful but doesn’t show details until he visits a location; just landmasses. Along with his storage and portal abilities, it makes him useful to keep around.”

Vidal finally understood something that had been bothering him. Asano didn’t fit the company or the setting he was in. Farrah Hurin was clearly a skilled, guild-level adventurer and, from the presence of the boat, a well-resourced one. Someone like Asano was a liability unless he brought something unusual to the table. If he represented a series of excellent utility powers collected into one person, it made sense that she would use him as a glorified magic item. Even so, he marked Asano in his notes for a more critical assessment on registration, just in case.

With that annoying curiosity solved, Vidal had everything he needed and was ready to leave. With the surge protocols in effect, he was one of many officials sent out to collect initial data, direct adventurers to register and notify them of the upcoming surge.

“Livaros is the primary destination for adventurers,” he explained, “to the point that may just call it the adventurer island. Along with the Adventure Society campus, the island boasts the bulk of the services and businesses that adventurers and other essence users

require. Every port around the island has an Adventure Society office and I strongly recommend you seek one out. Their entire purpose is to help adventurers find what they need in the city. They will help you find a berth for your vessel for the duration of the surge, as well as help you find any amenities and services you might need. They can also direct you to the campus administration for registration, of course.”

Vidal stood up.

“If there’s anything else you need, please remember the society offices. As I said, every port has them and they’re easy to find.”

“Thank you,” Farrah said. “I think that is everything we need for now.”

“Very well,” Vidal said. “And please, remember to visit the Adventure Society by the end of tomorrow.”

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“Thank you,” Jason said to Farrah as they watched Vidal ride away on a plume of water. “He was suspicious because you’re too good for me. This aura disguise thing might not be as effective as I thought. I may have attracted more attention than I avoided.”

“How many times did I tell you that this isn’t Greenstone? The Adventure Society officials here aren’t just the daughters of crime lords, moustache enthusiasts and a random selection of Berts.”

“I miss the Berts. I’d love to get a new wardrobe from Gilbert.”

“You’ll find a perfectly satisfactory tailor here,” Farrah said. “I think you’ll find Vidal was underselling how impressive the adventurer island will be. We should go straight for Livaros.”

“I knew you’d say that,” Jason groaned. “Look at Arnote, right there.”

Jason waved his arm in the direction of the nearby island as if Farrah had somehow failed to see it.

“Look at the trees,” he said. “The lush, green plants. The bright flowers, the colourful houses. Imagine yourself wandering down a sleepy street, drinking chilled fruit out of a coconut and feeling the ocean breeze on your face.”

“We can go there once we’ve settled in. First, we get the lay of the land. Register with the Adventure Society and do some proper shopping. I haven’t seen a properly-stocked trade hall since before you and I met.”

“I don’t want to live at some marina again,” Jason said. “I want to find a nice little spot, maybe buy an out-of-the-way plot and put my cloud house on it. Arnote is perfect for that.”

“Livaros will have crystal wash.”

“SHADE! We’re changing course!”