

## Chapter 486

### An Old Friend That He Had No Time For

The bottom of the gorge had a small river running through it, with a wide road running alongside it. The road was stone-paved and well maintained, its purpose being for bringing people into the fort from the surrounding towns and villages, along with their provisions and whatever herds the fort could manage to squeeze in. The bottom of the deep gorge was filled with shadow, which would make it a playground for Jason's shadow jumping.

Descending through the air, Jason absently wondered how all the people and their belongings were brought into the fortress buried high into the gorge wall. It was a question to be put off for later as he landed amongst the monsters swarming over the ground below.

The bone feasters were thin monsters with dark purple flesh and toothy mouths for faces. Their signature power was to rapidly grow hard and sharp bones from their bodies in all manner of shapes. Currently, they were all but encased in bone armour to shield them from the wind blades being fired from the fortress above, although the blades had, at Jason's request, been stopped. He didn't want them chasing after him as he descended.

Jason had completely restrained his aura as he dropped, so as to avoid the attention of the monsters. They had neither eyes nor ears, so he knew their supernatural senses would be preternaturally sharp. He let gravity carry him down rapidly until his cloak slowed his fall as he neared the ground. A pair of Gordon's eye spheres manifested and started orbiting around him.

As Jason alighted on the road, the horde of monsters all turned on him. Jason conjured his dagger as he unleashed his aura, taking the bone feasters aback. In the brief moment they paused, he sprang into action, his blade quickly finding a gap in the heavy bone armour of the closest monster.

A dagger worked well against the monsters and their bone armour, compared to a spear or sword. So long as he was willing to move close to the monsters, the short blade was ideal for finding the small gaps in the armour. Unless the monsters wanted to render themselves immobile, that exposure around the joints was a necessary vulnerability.

Jason wasn't inflicting major wounds, but that had never been his style. As much as he might like to land powerful, fight-defining blows, he had always been the tortoise and not the hare. He chanted quick spells even as his special attacks bit in, leaving behind a monster suffering little damage but marked for doom.

There was no shortage of additional targets as the monsters moved in on Jason like the rising tide. He sent an orb at the first bone feaster he had dosed with afflictions, only

for it to be stopped dead by the armour. Apparently the bones the monsters grew had significant magical properties to go with the physical resilience, which wasn't especially surprising. The monsters weren't physically powerful for silver-rank, making up for it with numbers and the quality of their abilities.

He tried directing the orb to a gap in the monster's armour, but it was clearly aware of the threat. Bone filled in the joints as the orb sought a way in, rendering the monster safe, if immobile. The orb foiled, Jason brought it back to his side. As an exposed island with a hurricane of monsters bearing down, he had little time for experimentation.

The numbers weren't an immediate problem for Jason because of the armour the monsters were encased in. Their only surpassing physical attribute was speed, which the heavy shells forced them to give up. Jason didn't let himself be pinned down and the shadowy gorge allowed him to teleport essentially at will. He popped up in one spot then another, laying on afflictions and leaving before getting swamped.

He tried another approach as he was attacking another monster. He called out Gordon, who reclaimed his orbs from Jason as he manifested in the air over Jason's head, bringing four more orbs with him.

"Drill a hole," Jason directed.

Orange beams blasted from all six orbs. The resonating-force of the beams was a specific form of damage, especially effective against rigid objects. It was prized for its ability to break through armour and the beams swiftly burrowed through the bone shell of one of the monsters. Gordon immediately slipped an orb through the rent in the armour before the monster had a chance to seal it off.

While Gordon was digging through monster armour, the monsters started throwing ranged attacks his way, all made from bone. Darts, needle clusters and arrows shot from compound bows with purple sinewy strings all came his way. Despite Gordon's intangible nature, the magical bone projectiles were able to harm his ephemeral body.

As soon as he had shoved an orb through one monster's armour, Gordon turned the remaining five spheres into shields against the hailstorm of attacks. Much like the monsters and their bone shells, he took a turtling approach.

Affliction-spreading butterflies spread out from the affected monster, triggering a wave of change in the behaviour of the bone feasters. Sensing the threat, they started casting off their heavy shells, leaving behind partial armour that was not as protective but freed up their movement. It would expose them to the butterflies but they didn't give the conjured blue and orange creatures the chance to reach them. Their speed restored, the

monster backed away from their afflicted fellow, firing out needle clusters and heavy spears.

The needles struck down the butterflies before they could reach any more of the bone feasters. That triggered explosions as the butterflies were destroyed, but the disruptive-force damage was most effective against magical protections and did little to the monsters. As for the spears, they slammed into the bone harvester spreading butterflies. It had cast off its armour and stood still, accepting the attacks. They had turned on one of their own to shut off the production of butterflies, with the monster making no attempt to avoid the spears that left it riddled and dead.

Jason guessed that the bone feasters' ability to sense magic was their strongest sense, clearly identifying that Gordon and his powers were the biggest threat to their numerical superiority. They were also smart, decisive and committed to the welfare of the group as a whole, the afflicted monster accepting its demise without hesitation.

Jason saw that the monsters would be too wary to allow the butterflies to be effective. He could serve as a distraction, but with so many of the monsters, distracting some of them wasn't enough to risk subjecting Gordon to a storm of attacks.

Jason could have made another attempt at using the butterflies but he had other options. He wasn't averse to doing things the long way, which had been his lot ever since iron-rank. He started by spraying leeches like a fire hose, scattering them over the monsters. Colin had no trouble crawling past the armour to find flesh to bite into now that their armour was less comprehensive.

The monsters plucked leeches off themselves and crushed them but Colin used the life force he was draining from them to self-replicate. At silver-rank, the leech swarm familiar could replenish himself as fast as the bone feasters could destroy individual leeches, using the monster's own vitality as the fuel. In addition, for every leech they crushed, they suffered an instance of the sin affliction from Jason's aura. This made the necrotic poison Colin inflicted all the worse.

The battle entered a new phase as Jason was pushed harder by the monsters. Their less comprehensive armour coverage made landing hits on the move easier but they were no longer awkward and sluggish. Where he had been dancing around them with near-impunity, they were now faster and more dangerous. They reacted to his attacks not just with evasion but retaliation, quickly growing weapons made of bone and purple sinew. They had all manner of weapons, from swords, spears and axes to brutal bladed whips. Ranged weapons were of little use when Jason was always surrounded.

Jason's attributes were into the mid-range of silver-rank. That made him stronger than the monsters, whose physical power was at the bottom of what could be expected from a silver-rank monster. This was not unusual for monsters that spawned in such large numbers. Their reflexes, however, were a match for Jason's or better. Their skills were mundane and lacking technique, but those reflexes and overwhelming numbers quickly put Jason under pressure. If not for his ability to teleport around the shadowy gorge, he would have been swiftly ploughed under.

The battle continued at length, Jason a fleeting shadow, dancing through the monsters as he drizzled afflictions amongst them. Colin continued to crawl through the bone feasters, moving from one to the next. They kept futilely yanking off leeches to little effect, although their numbers were so great that it was little help to Jason in terms of a distraction.

While Jason was swift, unpredictable and evasive, the fight was anything but one-sided. For all his powers and skills made him devilishly elusive, avoiding every attack in a sea of monsters was trying to swim without getting wet. The sheer number of monsters carpeting the gorge was an inescapable reality.

The entire battle took place with an eerie quiet. For all that their entire face was a mouth, the bone feasters let out no cries of rage or pain. Neither did Jason, silent as the darkness in which he shrouded himself, even as he suffered wound after wound. The only sounds were the dull scrape of metal sliding on bone as Jason slid his dagger into a gap or the magical hum as Gordon's shields intercepted a bone weapon.

The bone feasters had stopped climbing the wall, leaving the fort for after they had dealt with the shadowy interloper. Even using two of Gordon's orbs as shields, he was struck by weapons from all sides. Slashed by swords and stabbed by spears, the humanoid monsters and their weapons brought Jason's martial prowess heavily into play.

As it had in the past when fighting monsters in massive groups, Jason was eventually able to fall into a combat trance. It was not an unconscious or unthinking condition but a state of profound focus that drew out every scrap of his power, training and experience. He avoided strikes by a hair's breadth with deft and subtle movement. Acrobatic leaps made the most of his superhuman agility and strength, creating space and time to act as one acrobatic kick led into another, treating the monsters themselves as if they were solid ground.

Even at the peak of his prowess, however, it could only take him so far. For all his capabilities, not every blow could be dodged and not every weapon deflected. Blades still

cut his body and spears still pierced his limbs. Pain was an old friend that he had no time for, plucking weapons from his flesh without so much as a pause.

One of the bone whips managed to catch him out, wrapping around a leg still extended from kicking away a monster. It dug into the limb, grinding flesh and arresting his movement, exposing him to further attack. The two orbs switched from shields to beam attacks, severing the bone whip and freeing Jason, although at a cost. Even being momentarily stuck in place, especially without the shields, opened him up to attack. He was quickly on the move again, but with a bevy of fresh lacerations and puncture wounds.

Every so often, Jason would escape from the horde for a precious few moments. Sometimes he would disappear into the deeper shadows at the base of the gorge wall. Other times he would dash over the surface of the river, his cloak deflecting smaller projectiles and Gordon's shields the larger ones. Jason took these moments to chant out a spell critical to his survival.

*"Your blood is not yours to keep but mine on which to feast."*

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#### Ability: [Feast of Blood] (Blood)

- Spell (drain, blood).
- Base Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.
  
- Current rank: Silver 4 (03%).
  
- Effect (iron): Drain health and stamina. Only affects targets with bleeding wounds or who are suffering from the [Bleeding] affliction.
  
- Effect (bronze): Drains additional health and stamina for each instance of poison on the target.
  
- Effect (silver): Increasing the mana cost to very high and the cooldown to 2 minutes allows this spell to target all viable targets in a wide area.

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The incantation was not strictly accurate, the spell draining blood-red life force rather than actual blood. It did look like streams of blood pouring through the air for Jason to consume, however. With so many bloodied and poisoned enemies, Jason's life force skyrocketed past what he should have been able to hold, courtesy of his Sin Eater ability. This, along with his formidable regeneration and constant life-drain attacks, was how he could continue endure the constant rain of assaults.

After draining so much life force at once, Jason's vitality reached levels comparable to that of large monsters. It was the advantage such monsters had over essence users,

although it paled in comparison to possessing essence abilities. Even the most exotic monsters lacked the cornucopia of powers that essence users enjoyed, which was why a well-trained adventurer could handle many monsters of the same rank. Jason was amply demonstrating that exact principle.

What monsters did have was a vitality that exceeded that of almost any essence user. Even the superhuman endurance of a silver-ranker didn't compare to that of a monster, although the bone feasters were far from the best example.

The bigger a monster was, the fewer powers they tended to have, but all the greater was their vitality. Even so, the small and numerous bone feasters outstripped ordinary essence users. They had killed one of their own by turning it into a spear porcupine. If it hadn't stood still and accepted the attacks, killing it would have taken far longer.

Jason was not unique in bolstering his life force, although it was most frequently found amongst guardian specialists. Like Jason, they tended to focus heavily on recovery powers, some even taking a secondary healer role. Jason's goal was enduring so many attacks that he was painted in his own blood, although it was barely noticeable. It blended with his blood robe and was covered over by his ephemeral cloak, his face hidden in darkness.

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Above the battle was the fortress town of Arcazitlan. In its military command post, the commander of the fort's militia was watching a projection of the battle taking place below. There were magical sensors throughout the gorge and its surroundings that warned them of approaching monsters and allowed them to observe from safety. They could even deploy tiny magical drones that were an advanced variant of recording crystals.

The commander, Mordant Kerr, was surrounded by many of his militia officers as they joined him in observing the battle. With the monsters having paused their attack on the fort, its defenders were taking some much-needed rest. Even those that had not been operating the fort's defences had been on high alert since the first approach of the monsters.

Only the militia's core leadership gave up rest to observe the combat on which the fate of their fort relied heavily. While the adventurer's defeat did not mean the fall of their fort, it might mean the loss of their resupply. They watched the battle from a floating crystal, high above the fighting. Seen from overhead, the adventurer fighting with the monsters was a flickering shadow.

"This fight is weird," said the logistics officer, Luis. "There's barely any noise. It's creepy. And no one is killing anyone else; there's just fighting and fighting and nothing

dies. The adventurer isn't, which is good since they seem to be stabbing him a lot. He just seems to be running around, though. None of the monsters are falling over."

"Take a closer look at the monsters," Kerr said in his distinctive northern drawl.

"They're dying, sure enough; they're just taking their time about it. Our new darkness-loving friend is an affliction user."

"Since when do affliction specialists dive into the middle of monster hordes?"

"I said he uses afflictions," Kerr said. "I didn't say he uses the good sense the gods gave a plate of candied fruit slices. Ain't many as would take on that many monsters. I don't know what they're thinking, sending guild folk our way, but I'll take it."

The first time that streamers of blood flew out of the monsters and into a shadow to be absorbed by Jason, the room stirred.

"You're absolutely sure that this guy isn't worse than the monsters?" Luis asked.

"You'd best hope that he is, logistics officer," Kerr said. "He's the one with the resupply you've been complaining about all week."

## Chapter 487

### Never Underestimate Adventurers

Despite his mana-efficient abilities, Jason's reserves depleted as the fight dragged on. He and Colin had tainted dozens upon dozens of the monsters carpeting the bottom of the gorge, pushing Jason's mana towards empty.

Jason was uncertain of how many monsters were swarming around like ants. Well over a hundred, maybe twice that. The earliest afflicted were ready to drop. He hadn't loaded them up heavily and they boasted silver-rank endurance but without cleansing, Jason's afflictions made their deaths an inevitability. He vanished into the shadows again, this time not draining life force but the afflictions from one of the monsters closest to succumbing.

*"Feed me your sins."*

He only drained the afflictions of a single monster to replenish his mana and give his regeneration a boost by converting the afflictions into self-healing boons. This was useful as he continued to be hammered by attacks. While the monsters he already attacked were slowed down by his rigor mortis affliction, Jason was always going for the untainted ones, who were happy to pound away at speed.

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"How is he still going?" Luis asked. "How long has it been, now?"

"You should never underestimate adventurers," Kerr said. "Any fool can take in some essences. Using them properly takes training and experience."

"This guy must be the best adventurer ever."

"Nope," Kerr said. "Never seen guild adventurers in action, have you? This feller's good, sure enough, but that's how the good ones are. That aura's a bit much, I'll grant you, but it takes more than that to get the job done."

"You're saying that any guild adventurer could kill all these monsters?"

"Of course not. You have to match the powers to the monsters but this guy wouldn't have saddled up if it wasn't the right fight. These affliction types may not kill fast, but they'll keep killing all day if you feed them enough monsters to be getting on with. I'll admit that they normally do it from behind a wall of other fellers, but it takes all sorts."

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Jason was monitoring the monsters with his aura. Every single monster had finally been tainted and one in every seven or eight had died already, with more dropping fast. He could have vanished and left the rest to die but there were two problems with that. One



was that he didn't want the monsters resuming their attack on the fort. The other was that it was a long, slow grind to gold-rank and Jason had powers to level. This wasn't like Earth with its monster waves and proto-spaces. He needed to make the most of the monster surge.

Jason vanished into a shadow and reappeared from another, halfway up the side of the gorge. He kicked off the rocky wall and moved through the air, his cloak unfurling into starlight wings to keep him aloft. Gordon emerged beneath him, all six orbs turning into shields as bone projectiles were flung at them.

With so many monsters, the shields would only hold for a few moments but Jason didn't need long as he cast his spell. This time, it was the wide-area version.

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From their bird's eye viewpoint, the militia officers watched as Jason took position high in the air. With the bizarre quiet of the battlefield, he was close enough to the sensor that they could hear him chant his spell.

*"Feed me your sins."*

Red life force emerged from the monsters like a sea of blood, the dark magic of Jason's afflictions swirling within it. The black and purple taint erupted from the red sea like a giant monster, an outpouring of sinister power so thick as to obscure the monsters entirely. All that dark energy stormed up to Jason, driving into his body as he drank it all in.

"Sir, are you *really* sure he isn't—"

"Don't say it, Luis. Just don't."

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The first thing the Feast of Absolution power did was to swap out every poison, disease and unholy affliction plaguing the monsters for the burning light of transcendent damage. As the holy afflictions annihilated the monsters from the inside out, all the original afflictions flowed into Jason and were converted into boons. One was the resistance effect that didn't help Jason in his current fight. The other very much did.

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- **[Integrity] (heal-over-time, mana-over-time, stamina-over-time, holy, stacking):** Periodically recover a small amount of health, stamina and mana. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
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Despite the all-devouring light inside of them, the monsters didn't let up their attacks. Gordon's barriers shattered under a barrage of spears, arrows, needles and darts and Jason called him back. This left Jason suffering the attacks himself, although his cloak was an admirable shield. The weaker attacks were stopped dead, even in massive numbers as

clusters of bone needles were flung his way. Spears punched through his cloak, although many missed as it bent space to deflect them. The remaining attacks landed on Jason's body, but he could take the hits.

Jason already had a huge store of life force and the weapons left him unharmed. His interface ability measured his wellbeing with a small humanoid figure at the periphery of his vision that marked damage to his body with colour-coding. He rarely paid it attention, since he generally didn't need help to know he'd been stabbed. The excess life force, beyond his normal maximum, was now indicated by a red line over the little figure's head, like a hit point bar.

The attacks on Jason left him unharmed, his hit point bar diminishing rapidly as the attacks landed. It didn't even hurt, a spear ramming into his torso bouncing off with no more sensation than a finger poke. The health bar climbed back even faster, though, with the absurd regeneration from more than a thousand instances of the self-healing integrity boon.

Integrity was a short-duration boon but it dropped off one instance at a time. With so many instances, it would take a long while to get through them all. His conjured robes were not as resilient and he replenished them as he dropped towards the ground.

As for the monsters, they were lighting up from the inside, burning with transcendent light. Those who had been afflicted the longest started dying even faster, their dead growing to a fifth of their original number before Jason had even descended to the ground. He dropped quickly, superhero landing amongst the largest field of dead, close to where he had first started fighting the monsters. The earliest afflicted, many had not survived to receive the holy afflictions. As the monsters surged his way, he cast a spell, still on one knee.

*"As your lives were mine to reap, so your deaths are mine to harvest."*

The dead monsters were withered with rot, the freshest kills missing chunks dissolved into rainbow smoke as transcendent damage finished them off. Whatever remnant life that remained rose from the corpses and was stolen away by Jason's spell.

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#### Ability: [Blood Harvest] (Blood)

- Spell (drain, boon).
- Base cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Silver 4 (04%).

- Effect (iron): Drain the remnant life force of a recently deceased body, replenishing health, stamina and mana. Only affects targets with blood.
  - Effect (bronze): Affects any number of bodies in a wide area.
  - Effect (silver): Gain an instance of [Blood Frenzy] for each corpse drained, up to a threshold determined by current rank. After reaching the threshold, gain instances of [Blood of the Immortal] instead.
  - [Blood Frenzy] (boon, unholy, stacking): Bonus to [Speed] and [Recovery]. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, up to a maximum threshold.
  - [Blood of the Immortal] (boon, healing, unholy, stacking): On suffering damage, an instance is consumed to grant a powerful but short-lived heal-over-time effect. Additional instances can be accumulated but do not have a cumulative effect.
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Jason's life force was reaching a point where any more was overkill, but it was not the life force that he wanted from the Blood Harvest spell.

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- You have gained multiple instances of [Blood Frenzy].
  - [Blood Frenzy] has increased your [Speed] and [Recovery] attributes.
  - Your [Speed] and [Recovery] attributes have reached the maximum threshold for your current limitations. Additional instances will be converted to [Blood of the Immortal].
  - You have gained multiple instances of [Blood of the Immortal].
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Jason stood up, the monsters almost upon him. Instead of rushing out of the way, he held out the hand still holding his sinister black and red dagger. What looked like a sacrificial knife morphed into a holy sword of gleaming silver, blue glowing runes engraved down the length of the blade. The runes were the same symbolic language that the brand Jason's mark of sin burned into his enemies. In this case, they depicted the name of the blade.

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Item: [Penitent, The Blade of Sacrifice] (silver rank, conjured)

*Conjured holy sword for those willing to pay the price for victory in battles to the death (weapon, sword).*

- Effect: Attacks refresh any wounding afflictions on the target. Those wounding effects require additional healing to remove.
- Effect: Attacks inflict an instance of [Price in Blood]. This affliction is applied equally to the person it is inflicted upon and the person who inflicts it. This affliction cannot be cleansed while a person who shares it is alive and is immediately negated if the person who shares it dies. Dismissing [Penitent, the Blade of Sacrifice] does not remove this affliction.

- [Price in Blood] (affliction, holy, blood, stacking): Damage between people who share the affliction is increased, including damage sources in place prior to this affliction taking effect. Damage from holy sources is further increased by an additional amount. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
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It was a sword that escalated a fight with every strike by increasing the damage inflicted by both the recipient and the wielder. This meant that the monsters burning with holy afflictions would die all the faster, but every hit on Jason would be all the worse. With so many monsters bearing down on him, even his absurdly bolstered life force might not be enough if he kept taking hits the way he had been up to that point.

There was only a brief moment between Jason casting the Blood Harvest spell and the monsters converging on him. With his speed attribute boosted into a range rivalling the lower reaches of gold-rank, though, it felt almost luxurious.

As he moved to meet the approaching monsters, Jason was still immersed in the feeling of battle, slipping back into a combat trance state.

The speed of the bone feasters was their strongest physical attribute and they relied on quick reflexes over skill. That speed had led to Jason being wounded over and over, but now he was a ghost, passing through their midst untouched. Their movements now seemed to him as sluggish as they were inept.

Jason fell back into the combat trance that drew out every scrap of his potential which, with the increase in his speed, had taken a qualitative leap. Spears, swords and whips missed him by impossibly thin margins, while others seemed to land yet bizarrely slipped past as his cloak bent space around him. This was Jason in the full swell of power, immortal and untouchable.

Jason's holy sword flashed out again and again. Each time it bit into flesh, the transcendent power burning in the monster it struck grew more violent. The most afflicted monsters were already falling dead, so Jason focused on those who were the least impacted. It was no longer a battle but an execution as Jason started using his Verdict spell to finish doomed monsters. Every time he used his execute ability, a column of transcendent light struck down like a sword from the heavens.

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Pulling out a bottle of crystal wash, Jason cleaned himself off. He luxuriated in the sensation of being truly, thoroughly and easily cleansed, which he had long missed in his time on Earth. The crystal wash in his cloud house running out was not the reason events on his homeworld had turned truly grim. It had been a milestone in things going so very

wrong, though, with everything from food shortages to monster waves to vampires bringing misery and death.

With crystal wash back in hand, purging the filth from his body, it felt like a chance to wash off the gloom of the past. There were more than enough troubles to be found locally, but Jason was determined not to fall into the same patterns of grim malaise. Having Farrah had held him together and now he had Rufus back as well. His team would follow and he was resolved to move forward with a renewed hopefulness, whatever he faced.

While Jason washed himself off, Shade's bodies moved through the dead monsters. He touched each of them so that Jason could loot them all at once. Jason didn't do so immediately because it would fill the gorge with the foul stench of rainbow smoke and he didn't want to be standing in it at the time.

He looked up at the small magical sensor he could sense floating in the air, knowing that the inhabitants of the fort had taken a bird's eye view of the battle. They no doubt had seen adventurers at work before but he decided that toning down the spectre of blood and death look would probably help with community relations.

Jason's outfit-switching mist shrouded him, vanishing to reveal more casual attire. To keep things mellow he went with shorts closer to beige than tan, with a relatively subdued floral print on his shirt. Unlike earth, where he'd kept his clothes buttoned up over the scar at the base of his throat, Jason now went happily open-necked.

One of Shade's bodies floated up the fort's balustrade and Jason shadow jumped to it, arriving outside their force wall. He took out an argy fruit to eat, enjoying the juicy tropical treat after the exertion of battle.

A handful of defenders watched him warily from the other side of the force wall. They were clearly militia conscripts; bronze-rankers with plain uniforms and the touch of monster cores in their auras. He gave them a casual nod as he waited for a commander to arrive, which only took moments.

The man who arrived was a silver-ranker, also touched by cores but with a grizzled, middle-aged appearance. That meant he was old enough to have been around the block more than a few times and Jason wouldn't underestimate the man's experience.

"G'day, bloke. I'm Jason Asano, delivery boy."

## Chapter 488

### Better Strange Than Scary

The fortress town of Arcazitlan favoured defence over comfort, with its stone chambers and claustrophobic corridors dug right into the stone wall of the gorge. This was worst in the spaces set aside for the civilians sheltering from the monster surge, with people crated-up like animals on a truck.

Living underground required specialised infrastructure, all of which ran on magic. Magic lamps were required to light up the dark and air needed to be brought in, filtered and circulated, with the old air pumped out. Magical plumbing for water was crucial for both people and animals, for drinking and hygiene. Latrines and showers, food preparation and storage all needed magic to stay in operation. Without them, the underground fortress would become a crypt.

As for the actual animals, herd beasts were also stuck in the tight underground confines. This made keeping them calm important since a stampede when there was nowhere to go was a horrifying meat grinder. There had to be magic to calm the animals or they would not accept being stuck underground, shoulder-to-shoulder, for weeks on end. Although they were penned up in stone boxes, illusions of the sky, complete with the warmth of the sun and a gentle breeze were matched with an artificial aura of calm. Their rooms were also shielded against aura penetration so they didn't panic if some monster or passing adventurer washed a menacing aura over the fort.

All in all, the price of safety was extreme discomfort throughout a monster surge that would last weeks, possibly even months. People were crammed together almost as tightly as the animals. The areas set aside for the militia were much more open, with wider, higher corridors and generally more space to move around. Their off-duty spaces were just as cramped as those of the civilians but the operational areas were large enough that they could move quickly and in numbers at need.

Mordant Kerr, the militia commander, was marching through the corridors from the command centre to the top of the fortress. That was the spot where the fortress wall and the gorge wall had a gap plugged by a magical barrier. Flanking Kerr was his second in command, Miranda Ramos, and his logistics officer, Luis Garzón. Their feet carried them swiftly through the fort, although Luis' mouth was moving faster.

"...I'm just saying, pick one and stick to it. Do you have evil powers or holy powers? You can't just run around being a plague-bringer of doom, then turn around and start smiting people with the fist of the heavens. Also, I definitely heard him say he was eating

sins, which is not a thing you can do and it's very weird to try. Also, what were their sins, exactly? They're monsters; eating people is what they do. It's like saying an apple is sinning for being juicy and delicious. Everything he sucked out of them was something he did to them in the first place. Who does all those horrible things to someone, calls them sinners and then absolves them by killing them all with the light of wrath?"

"Gods," Miranda said.

"Since when do gods do any of that?" Luis asked.

"Try reading their books," she told him. "Pretty much any of them. Those early chapters are all violence and smiting. Lots of sinning and punishment until some prophet or whatever comes along to ask the god to stop murdering people. Then we're supposed to be so grateful they stopped killing us left and right that we worship them forever?"

"Randy," Kerr said, his tone gently admonishing. "You can think what you like, but I've told you about that kind of talk amongst the troops."

"He literally asked," she said. "You never complain about anyone else's religious beliefs."

"I've got enough problems with monster hordes and sinister adventurers and their bloody holy fire—"

"Told you," Luis said.

"Mouth closed, ears open, Luis," Kerr said. "Randy, what I don't need is some ticked-off god knocking on my door because my right-hand woman is turning all their followers into heretics and infidels."

"That's not how it works," Luis said. "Otherwise, she'd have been squished by a giant sky fist long ago. The pamphlets alone..."

"Luis," Kerr scolded. "What did I just say about mouths and ears?"

"Sorry, Mord."

Kerr gave him a side glance.

"Sir," Luis corrected. "I meant sorry, sir."

They reached the bottom of the stairs leading up to the top of the wall.

"Do I really have to go with you?" Luis asked as they moved up the stairs, immediately violating his implicit promise to shut up.

"You're the logistics officer and he has the resupply, Luis. So, yes, you really have to go with us."

"But he creeps me out with all the darkness and the blood and the smiting."

They emerged from the top of the fortress and spotted the man in question. The on-duty defenders were arrayed in front of him, standing on the other side of the lightly

shimmering force barrier. Instead of the expected sinister figure, shrouded in darkness, they had what looked, at first glance, like a lost civilian.

The man had open-toe sandals, shorts and a shirt with a flower pattern. He was casually biting into a fruit as if he was at a market stall instead of a fortified stronghold halfway up a mountainous wall. He had dark, glossy hair and a neatly trimmed beard. His sharp features and prominent chin showed the polish of multiple rank-ups, although he hadn't reached the ethereal beauty many silver-rankers possessed. His most striking feature was the eyes that gave away his true nature.

The man's eyes looked like the orbs they had seen floating around him during the fight, like a blue and orange nebula. The strange irises and void-black sclera undercut his otherwise casual appearance, marking him as an adventurer.

Powers that changed the look of a person's eyes were far from unheard of, but for reasons unknown, it was rarely seen in monster core users. Even if they possessed the same power that changed an adventurer's eyes, a monster core user's eyes would usually remain untouched. The reason for the difference was something that even the Magic Society had yet to discover. As far as every known test could determine, the appearance didn't impact the nature of the powers in question. Many times it wasn't even a perception power that triggered the change.

The other features that caught Kerr's eye were the scars the man had. A narrow blemish bisected one eyebrow and another marked a line in his beard on the side of his chin. A third was at the base of his neck, implying an impaling wound that would take at least a silver-ranker to survive. They were possibly affectations, but Kerr had seen plenty of fakes and these were either authentic or very well done. Most people willing to fake it went for big and impressive marks that stood out and told a story.

The trio arrived in front of the man, the militia troops parting to let them through. The adventurer's eyes fell squarely on Kerr. Kerr could no longer sense any trace of the intimidating aura displayed in the fight. Having the man standing in front of him while his aura senses picked up nothing was slightly unnerving. As if sensing Kerr's unease, which he almost certainly did, a neatly controlled aura appeared around the man as if it had always been there.

"G'day, bloke. I'm Jason Asano, delivery boy."

"Mordant Kerr, fort commander."

The roof platform was a narrow strip where the aeronautically capable could arrive at the fortress. It was the only ingress point unless someone forcibly made a new one through the magically reinforced brick. A shimmering force wall cut off a third of the



rooftop, reaching from the dark yellow brick underfoot to the hewn rock overhang above. Jason was standing on the outside third, the militia defenders inside.

“You’re our resupply?” Kerr asked.

“I’m all loaded up. Do you want to crack a window so I can pop through, or should I leave everything up on the roof here so you can come out and grab it once I’m gone? I won’t take it personally; you never can be too careful.”

“If you were a bandit, there wouldn’t be much point coming after us. If you can do what you just did, the Adventure Society will pay you more than you can get raiding little towns for random supplies.”

“You can’t be sure about that,” Jason said. “I can’t go to them if I have a restricted essence combo, and after what you just saw, I can see how you might be wondering.”

Luis opened his mouth to speak but closed it again at a sharp gesture from Kerr.

“We will check that you’re not a shape-shifted monster,” Kerr said.

“You already are, I can sense it,” Jason said. “Shade, please stop blocking their magic sensors.”

“It is impolite to use invasive detection magic without consent, Mr Asano,” a dignified voice came from somewhere around Asano.

“He kind of asked.”

“Telling is not asking.”

“He lives in a rock fending off monster hordes,” Jason said. “Cut the man some slack.”

While they watched Jason argue with the mysterious voice, one of Kerr’s people came upstairs from the sensor room.

“Sir,” she reported, “something is blocking our sensors.”

“Nothing new for someone with stealth abilities,” Kerr said. “Just wait a moment, Adelina.”

“See?” Jason asked. “Now you’re making things hard for the nice lady.”

He gave Adelina an apologetic look.

“He’s very protective,” Jason explained.

“Someone has to stop you from getting killed,” Shade complained. “You’re demonstrably not doing so.”

“It’s not like I’m trying to get killed.”

“Perhaps your memory is failing you, Mr Asano. All you had to do was show Shako a little deference, but you had to be insolent to a diamond ranker.”

“He works for the Builder! Also, he’s kind of a prick.”

The militia members shared odd looks as they watched Jason continue to argue with the disembodied voice, seemingly oblivious to their presence.

“Look,” Jason continued. “We're meant to be reassuring these people and now they think I'm a weirdo who talks to himself. Just let... Adelina, was it? Lovely name, by the way. Just let Adelina do her job.”

He flashed Adelina an impish grin, his strange eyes flashing. She returned a nervous smile with a slight blush.

“Very well,” Shade conceded. “Don't blame me when they lock you in some magical trap room.”

“They're not going to lock me in a magical trap room,” Jason said. “Why would they even have a magical trap room?”

“It's for monsters that can move through the ground,” Adelina volunteered. “The walls are magically reinforced but we don't have good attacking options inside the ground, so we open a gap in the defences and lure them into a trap room.”

“Adelina,” Kerr said. “Why are you explaining the fort's defences to this stranger?”

Her eyes went wide and she gulped.

“Perhaps you should go back down and try the magical sensors again.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, scurrying back down the stairs.

“You really do have a magical trap room?” Jason asked. “Is there a trap door over it? Shade, does this world have rancors?”

“There is a bipedal lizard with an ogre bloodline that is quite similar.”

“How does a lizard get an ogre bloodline?” Jason asked. “On second thought, don't tell me. The answer will be weird and gross.”

Adelina returned from downstairs, reporting to Kerr once again.

“He's not human, sir, but whatever he is, it's what he appears to be.”

“Should I feel violated?” Jason asked.

“Make a gap in the wall to let Mr Asano through,” Kerr instructed Adelina.

“Yes, sir.”

She flashed Jason a glance as she headed back for the stairs.

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Luis led Jason to a storeroom where he unloaded all the supplies from Rimaros. It was all for the magical defences, plus crates filled with spirit coins. The powerful defences like the force barrier, the magically reinforced walls and the wind blade runes took concentrated, heavy-duty magic. Rather than spirit coins, this meant mana accumulators, much like the one Jason had used to maintain his cloud house's functions on Earth. They

were far cheaper than the cloud flask, of course, which was exotic even in Rimaros, so they burned out over time.

The spirit coins were to keep the essence users in the fort fed, as well as maintaining the less intensive magical amenities, like lamps, plumbing and air filters. Jason hadn't brought any regular food, only magical supplies, since the food came from the dedicated food farms scattered around. Jason was looking forward to seeing one in operation, which he would at his next delivery stop.

After checking the supplies against their respective lists and making sure everything had arrived, Luis took Jason to Kerr's office, the commander wanting to speak with the adventurer. He sent Jason in as Miranda, was just coming out.

"What do you think?" Luis asked Miranda in a half-whisper as the door closed behind her.

"About what?" Miranda asked.

"About Asano." Luis clarified as the pair started walking away. "What was that stuff about a diamond-ranker?"

"He was just talking nonsense. If he went mouthing-off at a diamond-ranker, he really would be dead."

"I think Adelina might like him."

"Nothing gets past you, does it?"

"But why? He's an evil weirdo and when he talks himself, something talks back."

"Now you're just looking for things. It's obviously a familiar; you're not that dense."

"I still think it's odd that she'd like him."

"Of course it's odd," Miranda said. "What woman was ever attracted to a powerful and mysterious stranger?"

"Wait, you don't like him too, right?"

"Of course not. He's an evil weirdo."

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Jason took a chair in the small office at Kerr's inviting gesture.

"That was a deft, if rather unusual approach to putting my people at ease, Mr Asano."

"Better strange than scary," Jason said.

"Unless scary is what you're looking for."

"I'm done looking for scary."

"Scary may not be done looking for you. Why did the Adventure Society send a guild member with our supplies?"

"I'm not in a guild," Jason said.

“You’re not?”

“Not yet. I’m going to join the same one as my team, but some unusual circumstances have left me here, on the far side of the world. I’m trying to get back to them or get them back to me; whichever works. It’s tricky during a monster surge, as I’m sure you can imagine.”

“The Adventure Society likes people to stay put and work hard.”

“As well they should,” Jason said.

“Even so, you’re definitely at a guild level of bringing boot and ass together. Why would they send someone like you out here on a delivery run?”

“There are reports of pirates targeting the supply ships,” Jason said. “They’ve been loading the ships with some heavier hitters to try and catch them out.”

“I see. I assume you were told that you need to take our next supply request back to Rimaros.”

“I was.”

“Good. Luis will have that for you promptly. I was also hoping to presume upon you to deliver a package for me. To a friend in Rimaros. Mail is hardly reliable at the moment and even if the fort had a water link chamber, the service congestion in Rimaros is quite heavy.”

“The Adventure Society has taken control of all the water link services for the duration, or so I’m told. What do you want me to take? I don’t like putting mysterious packages into my storage space.”

“Just a letter and a recording crystal.”

“It wouldn’t be a recording of the fight I just had, would it?”

“It would. This favour will not disadvantage you, Mr Asano. My friend is not placed in the very highest reaches of society but he’s respected. More importantly, he has a lot of friends of his own, many of whom *are* in the highest reaches of society. He’s a good man to know and a better one to be known by. Especially for an out of town adventurer without a lot of local connections.”

“I’m not sure I like the kind of local connections I’ve been making thus far, but alright, Commander Kerr. I’m already playing delivery boy. Why not mailman?”

## Chapter 489

### Going Overland

Outside of the rocky gorge, the coastal landscape was filled with greenery, white sand and blue water. Jason stood on a hilltop, looking out at a gorgeous beach and the sea stretching out beyond it. Next to him stood his familiars. Shade had once preferred a shape akin to Jason in his cloak but now looked more like the silhouette of a butler. Colin was in a humanoid form, the leeches that made up his body having melded together into what looked like a blood clone of Jason himself. Gordon was the most alien, being a nebula draped in a cloak, surrounded by floating orbs.

“This is the life,” Jason said. “Setting out together to have some adventures. No worlds to save; no gold-rankers to fight and no vampire uprisings.”

“Mr Asano,” Shade said. “While I am loathe to dampen your enthusiasm, I feel obliged to remind you that you do still need to anchor the bridge that will stabilise the other world over time.”

“The magic's too messed up right now,” Jason said. “There's no way I get that right until the monster surge is over. That makes it a tomorrow problem. Today, our problem is where to stock up on local snacks for our tropical paradise road trip.”

Jason had dropped off the airship over the coast of what was, in his world, Honduras. He would need to make his way south through Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama to make his deliveries before portalling back to Rimaros. He wasn't sure how close the geography and climate would be, lacking familiarity with Central America in either universe. He was anticipating fewer resorts.

They were not far from the Arcazitlan fortress. Shade had taken the form of a land skimmer to carry Jason along the road out of the gorge on a smooth cushion of air. The road was part of a well-maintained network running through the jungles and hills, although he had stopped shortly into the journey to take in the panorama as the road crested a hill. He had called out his familiars to share the moment with him, although he had no idea if any of them appreciated sightseeing as a pastime.

Jason slapped Colin on the back.

“What do you say, blokes? Get moving?”

“Very good, Mr Asano.”

Shade was the only one able to speak but the others had their own means of communication. Gordon lit up one of his orbs with blue light, meaning yes. Blood clone

Colin opened his mouth and let out a noise that sounded like it rumbled up from the darkest pits of hell.

“I know you’re hungry,” Jason said. “You’re always hungry. It’s kind of your thing.”

Colin opened his mouth again, this time releasing the shriek of a soul being dragged to damnation.

“Yes, I know the bone feasters were skinny, but at least there were a lot of them. We’ll find someone for you to eat along the way. Would you like a sandwich?”

Colin’s response was a quiet, eerie sound, like wind whispering through a graveyard.

“Fine. A big sandwich.”

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Jason could have moved faster than his current travel speed by having Shade take the form of a flying vehicle. He was certainly interested in the local equivalents of planes, which he hadn’t seen any of yet. Magical constructs built in the shape of flying creatures, they were typically private vehicles for wealthy families and high-ranking adventurers. Compared to airships, flying constructs were smaller and far less efficient in terms of capacity to cost, both for passengers and cargo. Jason appreciated the two advantages they had, though, which were speed and being giant robot birds. He would be willing to give up the speed.

The airship that had carried Jason away from Rimaros had not been travelling at its maximum speed. One of the things Jason had learned while talking with the airship crew was that any magical vehicle became exponentially easier to detect the faster it was moving. During a monster surge, full speed ahead was a recipe for disaster. It was probably why he had yet to see one of the small, swift flying constructs.

Since he wasn’t going to have Shade rocket him across the sky, Jason took the approach that had been recommended by the Adventure Society, which was to stick to the roads and follow the route he’d been given. He was allowed to take whatever pathway he wanted so long as he met his delivery deadlines but, for once, Jason decided on the path more travelled.

He followed the roads using the land skimmer, which was more or less a hovercraft. Jason was familiar with the vehicle type from his time in Greenstone. He’d ridden skimmers specialised for navigating wetlands and sandy desert, both of which were quite like airboats in their construction and operation.

Shade took a more heavy-duty form that resembled a large, open-top car. It reminded Jason of a land speeder from Star Wars if the props guy only had black paint. Rather than pushing air out the back for propulsion, like the vehicles he was familiar with, this one

moved through silent magic. Shade's ability to take on the form of transportation was much stronger at silver rank, meaning he could replicate more magically sophisticated vehicles. This was especially true when not working with Greenstone's limited ambient magic.

The forms Shade took were unable to mimic the weapons and defensive properties of similar forms of transport, with limited exceptions such as creatures with bladed arms or the impact bars of a vehicle. Even then, there was a fragility to such features that made them useful for little more than clearing rough terrain.

The only means Shade had to improve the defensive power of these forms was for Jason to share his cloak power with each of the bodies Shade used to construct the form. This could be relatively mana intensive, such as when Jason shared enough cloaks for Shade to create several passenger buses. That was in the Battle of Broken Hill, where many civilians required evacuating and there were more than enough monsters to drain.

"Going overland is better anyway," Jason explained, sitting in the back seat. One of Shade's bodies was pointlessly in the driver's position, with Gordon floating over the seat next to him. Colin was in the back, Jason's first familiar getting to sit next to him.

"Every time some open-world game puts in flying mounts," Jason continued, "it's more convenient but also more boring. Plus, you miss out on all the awesome stuff you just fly over without ever getting to see."

"Mr Asano, I don't believe any of us have played a video game."

"Gordon gave it a go, bless him," Jason said. "I had to buy Emi a new controller. Having beams of destructive force instead of hands isn't super convenient."

The empty hood of Gordon's cloak dipped sadly.

"Don't worry about it, mate. How about we let you pick the music?"

Jason pulled out his recording crystal stand, which was a series of rotating trays on a central shaft, with a handle at the top. Each time he tapped a finger to a compartment, it projected a listing of what the crystal inside had recorded on it.

"I need to get an artificer to make some kind of music player," he mused. "Something I can slot all these into and make some playlists. So, what are you thinking Gordon? The Doors?"

An orb glowed orange, a negative response.

"Beach Boys? Could be just right for a road trip along sandy shores."

Orange glow.

"The Hollies? A bit of *Long Cool Woman in a Black Dress*?"

Orange orb.

Jason tapped a finger to his lips thoughtfully.

“Okay, I think I’ve got it. Marlana Shaw.”

All of Gordon’s orbs lit up blue and Jason laughed. He took out a small crystal projector and leaned over the front seats to rest it on the dashboard. Jason missed the amenities of a car, like a music system, but not enough to get Shade to take a car form. Shade had never so much as suggested it, knowing Jason wanted to put Earth and its problems behind him.

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Jason could have stealthed his way south. Even using Shade as transport, the familiar retained his ability to mask Jason from various forms of detection. Instead, he and his familiars were riding in the open-top vehicle along an empty road, *California Soul* blasting out of the crystal projector. He wasn’t going to reach gold-rank hiding from monsters and the surge would be his last chance to see them en masse for a while.

Ever since leaving Greenstone to spend months in an astral space, Jason had no shortage of readily accessible monsters. The astral space itself, then the proto-spaces of Earth, the monster waves and the transformation zones. For all the misery and tribulations he had been through, raising his rank at an impressive pace had never been an issue.

Jason had checked on his team’s status at the Adventure Society and they had all ranked up fairly recently. Even with the boost to advancement speed that humans enjoyed, Jason had beat out Humphrey and Clive by a good margin. After going through iron-rank at a sedate pace, Jason had raced through bronze.

Now Jason was in a more normalised space and had hit the grind-wall on the long path to gold. Once the monster surge was over, it would take years to make real progress. Even so, he wasn’t sad about that fact. After what he’d been through, he was ready to slow down, if only events would let him. That wouldn’t stop him from making the most of the monster surge while it lasted, though.

The most disappointing part of the trip turned out to be the lack of people. The coast was dotted with abandoned towns and villages, the citizens having evacuated to fortress towns or one of the local cities. None of the cities could match the size of Rimaros and lacked the resources to supply the forts with all their needs. This was where Jason and adventurers like him came into play.

Without people around, Jason was able to extend his senses to their full reach, the way he couldn’t in a city. Mostly he just sensed herd animals that hadn’t be taken away. They’d been set loose outside the towns in hope of drawing monsters from the empty infrastructure. People were hoping to come home without some wandering monster having trashed it.



The roads were excellent but the lack of other traffic was a little unnerving. Like the empty towns and villages, it reminded Jason unpleasantly of Earth when all the rural areas had been abandoned for the safe zones.

He stopped regularly to go off and hunt packs of silver rank monsters. Once he detected a gold-rank one at the periphery of his perceptual range and withdrew his senses sharply. He turned down the music and slowed the skimmer to a crawl. Fortunately, the monster either didn't sense him or was one of the blessedly non-aggressive types. He marked the location on his map ability to share with the Adventure Society anyway.

Gold-rank monsters could live for decades or even centuries before their bodies started breaking down, sending them berserk. As such, the Adventure Society often left the non-aggressive varieties alone, while keeping track of their location and age.

Arriving in one of the small cities, Castistis, Jason was happy to see people again. He was far more thoroughly examined at the gate than he was at Arcazitlan fort, from magical scans to checking and rechecking his contract documentation.

"You all seem a bit jumpy," Jason mentioned to a guard as she scanned his body with a fourth different device. "Something happen?"

"A vampire got in with a big batch of refugees," she told him. "Turned about a dozen people before we caught on. Those evacuation accommodations aren't set up for pitched battle and things got bloody. We lost a lot of people, refugees and city guard both. Now we check everyone. Adventurers, nobility, it doesn't matter."

"That's fair," Jason said. "And I'm sorry. I can see why you'd be careful."

She let out an unhappy snort.

"If you could maybe share that attitude with your adventurer friends, that would be nice."

"I'll do my best. I'm not a local, though, so no promises."

Jason didn't want to linger in the city. It was massively overcrowded from all the people taking shelter, which he had no intention of adding to. He would report the gold-rank monster he sensed and then get back on the road.

The guards told him the personal flight was allowed, but vehicular flight required a permit. So advised, Jason set out across the city using his cloak wings, although their mana cost was greater when used in the sunlight. He wouldn't be able to take any detours unless he wanted to drop down to ground level and rest, but the city held nothing that seized his interest.

The city was pleasant enough, especially seen from above, but was rather unremarkable. Compared to Rimaros and its sky islands, Castistis was small and lacked

attention-grabbing features. It was just inland enough to be sheltered by hills, which was valuable in the Sea of Storms. The Buildings were low and widely spaced, with plenty of greenery. If not for the swarms of people it would have been open and inviting.

Jason reined in his aura once more in the populated area. Relying on the directions the guards had given him, he swiftly made his way to the Adventure Society office, picking up the auras of the local adventurers as he drew close. He felt perceptions passing over him as well and he modulated his aura to seem capable but not elite. This matched most of the auras he sensed around him.

Jason's experience of adventurers came from two extreme ends of the spectrum. Greenstone and Earth represented the bottom of the adventurer barrel. The mediocre aura control of most of the essence users Jason had met all but screamed sloppy skills and little, if any, proper training. On the other side were individuals like Danielle Geller and Rufus Remore, as well as the adventurers of Rimaros. Even the adventurers assigned delivery duty in Rimaros would have been absolute elites in Greenstone.

In Castistis, the adventurers fell somewhere in the middle. Based on their auras, their skills were respectable, but not enough to make it in the big city. Jason knew that many adventurers had gone to Rimaros for the monster surge, hoping to be recruited into a guild. The adventurers here apparently understood their level.

There were a few auras that stood out, their aura control a definite cut above the rest. He felt a cluster of them close together, presumably a team. There was one gold-rank aura present, which felt much akin to the mid-rage auras that were the norm there, but polished by experience.

The Adventure Society building was a three-storey office without any attached buildings. Castistis was too small for a trade hall or even a dedicated building for the jobs hall. Jason landed out front and opened the doors just in time for a voice to come whining out of it.

"Do you know who my father is? You're courting death!"

"Oh, great," he muttered under his breath. "There's a Thadwick."

## Chapter 490

### Small

The lobby of the Adventure Society office was not large, even though it served double duty as the public face of the society and the jobs hall. About a dozen adventurers were standing around inside, with even this small branch made busy by the monster surge. The team of silver-rankers whose auras marked them as a cut above the others were present, looking with weary expressions at two other adventurers, facing off.

Jason had seen that expression before, on the face of Neil when Thadwick was about to do something stupid. Given that the team was superior to both of them, they were likely babysitting one or the other through the surge. Jason guessed it was the loud one.

"I am Argrave Mericulato, son of Ramon Mericulato. You think you can talk to me like that."

He was a celestine with onyx hair and eyes and pale skin. His almost petulant expression made Jason peg him as genuinely young, not just preserved by his silver rank. As for the smugly derisive look on the other adventurer, it was embarrassingly familiar as well.

"Wait!" Jason called out as he entered the lobby. He started marching across the room. "You're the son Ramon Mericulato?"

The adventurer who had been loudly proclaiming his family connections turned to look at Jason.

"Who are you? Why are you interrupting me?"

"I apologise," Jason said obsequiously. "I was just startled to learn that you're the son of Ramon Mericulato. He's an inspiration to me –to everyone, really – and even to meet his son is such an honour. I apologise if I've disturbed you at all."

"See?" Argrave said, turning back to the other adventurer. "This is how you show respect."

"Don't bother with this man," Jason said. "Dealing with people who are small only serves to make you smaller. You need to be the bigger man, if only because you so very clearly are. People like him and me are beneath you. You have no need to bother with us."

The idiot nodded at the praise, noticing neither the other adventurer opening his mouth to retort nor the pinpoint blast of aura suppression that silenced him before he spoke.

"What's your name," Argrave asked Jason.

“Neil Davone,” Jason said. “It’s an honour to be known to someone with such a prestigious background.”

“It is,” Argrave agreed, then turned to the elite silver team. “We’re leaving. This nonsense is beneath me.”

Argrave marched out of the room, pushing both double doors open as he passed through. One of the elite team members flashed Jason a grateful look as they followed, closing the doors behind them. Jason released the aura suppression on the other adventurer, who looked like he could breathe again after being caught underwater.

“What was that?” he asked angrily. There were a handful of other adventurers standing around, watching the whole debacle. Jason’s slightly hunched stance and obsequious expression had vanished the moment the lobby doors closed. He gave the other adventurer a friendly smile.

“Sorry about that,” Jason told him.

“Why would someone who can do that suck up to that little toad?”

“It’s like I told him,” Jason said. “If you get involved with someone small, it only makes you small as well. Take it from someone who’s been caught up in pettiness and been made petty himself for doing so. I’ve walked that road to the end and it doesn’t lead anywhere good.”

“He’s a smarmy little prick who doesn’t know how to do anything other than trot out his family name.”

“Yep,” Jason agreed. “People like that are essentially high-maintenance pets. If you feed them a biscuit and leave them to their handlers, they’re simple creatures and will wander off on their own. If you try to discipline them yourself, they won’t stop barking and, sooner or later, you’ll have to deal with the owner.”

“You think I’m just going to accept you crushing my aura like that?”

“Yes,” Jason said softly, the smile dropping from his face. “I do.”

Suddenly a sense of stillness came over the room that went beyond mere silence. The adventurers around them had a feeling that it was somehow related to an aura but couldn’t sense the aura doing it, leaving them unnerved.

“I think you’re smart enough to take some advice from someone who has been where you are and made mistakes,” Jason said, then held out his hand for the man to shake. “I’m Jason Asano.”

“Liston Kitt,” the adventurer said, shaking Jason’s hand. “Which one of us did you give the fake name?”

Jason flashed a grin.

“The name is real. I’m the fake part.”

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Jason reported the gold-rank monster and got out of the city before he wound up in any trouble with entitled young adventurers and their more than capable entourages. Back in the land skimmer with his familiars, they started seeing more and more conjoining roads as they drew closer to an important transport hub. They passed several empty port towns, plus a large one that had the defences of a fortress town. It wasn’t on Jason’s delivery list, so he passed it by. Nearing the heart of the transport hub sector, Jason caught sight of an unusual building in the distance.

A huge tower loomed over the jungle, allowing Jason to spot it long before the roadways brought him to it. It rivalled the skyscrapers of Earth for scale and was set out in the shape of an octagon. The walls were large panels of dark green glass, set into stone walls whose lighter shade of green was very familiar.

“Shade, do those bricks look like the ones they export from Greenstone?”

“There is a striking resemblance, Mr Asano.”

“That’s a long way to ship stone.”

“The tower should be the magical farm of the Fertility church,” Shade said. “As the stone in question is valuable for the life and water affinities it inherited from the astral space apertures around which the stone is quarried, it would make sense to be used for this purpose.”

“I guess you don’t spare the expense when you need to keep giant monsters away from the food supply,” Jason said. “I was starting to think that I was rich but it turns out that I’m silver-rank rich.”

“Given that you are quite early on the path to gold, Mr Asano, your fiscal gains have been respectable.”

“Oh, I’m not complaining. I’m just seeing things like sky islands and skyscrapers made of magic stone shipped from the other side of the planet. It’s becoming increasingly evident that this fish has found itself in a very large pond.”

As the skimmer followed it towards the tower, Jason started sensing magical infrastructure. The road itself seemed to be some kind of magical conduit, part of a wide-scale mana accumulator feeding magic to the tower. Jason had seen something similar in the past when Farrah had used a similar setup to fuel the defences of Asano village.

They started passing over large defensive formations embedded into the ground. Jason felt them sweep through the vehicle, his familiars and himself with potent magic; a protective array stronger than anything he’d encountered before. Perhaps Emir’s gold-rank

cloud palace could match it, but Jason's senses had not been advanced enough back then to compare.

The magic wasn't hidden but instead projected, to the point where even normal people might sense it.

Any monster with even minor supernatural senses would easily detect the threat in time to flee, let alone Jason's powerful senses. Jason recognised that the purpose was to deter monsters and save on the cost of activating the formidable protections.

Jason pushed on, being very open with his aura as the magical arrays probed it. He could tell the defences were designed for far greater dangers than he presented and he didn't want any accidental misfires because he was playing games.

Drawing close to the tower, the skimmer slowed to a stop in front of a bronze-rank elven woman in green robes, waiting for Jason's arrival. The robes were marked with a baby holding a grain stalk in each hand, the symbol of Fertility. Gordon vanished into Jason's aura and Colin soaked into Jason's skin. Shade and the skimmer both disappeared into Jason's shadow. Jason stood up as the skimmer dissolved around him.

"Are you the adventurer bearing our supplies?"

"I am. Jason Asano."

"It is good to meet you. My name is Flor. I'm unfamiliar with the house of Asano. Should I address you as mister, young master or lord?"

"Lovely to meet you, Flor. My preference would be Jason, if that's not unduly informal."

"Of course not, Jason. Would you please follow me?"

The exterior of the tower had uniform windows of dark green glass, except for the bottom level and the two or three at the top. The ground floor had two doors set into each side of the building that Jason had seen, all heavy-duty metal engraved with protective sigils. Of the two doors per side, one was a large freight door and the other a normal-sized one. The priestess led Jason in through the closest of those.

Inside, they followed one hall and then another until they arrived at an octagonal elevating platform shaft. She touched a crystal next to the shaft and they waited for the platform to descend.

"You're a few days ahead of schedule. That is much appreciated."

Although Jason felt like he was meandering, he had forgone the recommended method of stealthing carefully south while avoiding fights. Instead, he had lured in monsters with the skimmer moving at a fast, but not too-fast pace. As a result and even with stopping to fight, he was well under the delivery deadlines he'd been assigned.

“It’s a beautiful part of the world,” Jason said. “The wildlife is a little stropy but the scenery is amazing. I’ve been told that this isn’t a highly-coveted job but I’ve been more than satisfied with the experience.”

“That is a good attitude to have, although perhaps not one that will serve the ambitious.”

“I’m almost aggressively unambitious,” Jason said, before adding with a sullen mutter, “for all the good it’s done me.”

The priestess gave him an assessing look but made no further comment.

The elevating platform arrived from above and they stepped onto it. It carried them upward and the glass walls of the shaft gave Jason a good view of each storey. Above the ground floor, every level they passed was a single giant room, each containing what looked like a vast and densely packed hydroponic garden.

"This method of alchemical cultivation is a little resource-intensive, thus the nutrient bath supplies we need on a regular basis," Flor explained. "Outside of monster surges, it is not a cost-effective method of cultivation and the alchemically-focused orders of the church use these facilities for research purposes. During a surge, however, this methodology allows us to grow enough food for a very large amount of people in a small and secure space. With the Storm Kingdom’s civic authorities offsetting the costs, we, of course, do our best for those isolated in the fortresses and cities.”

“I’ve seen similar techniques where I come from, although I’ve never seen it on a scale like this,” Jason said. “Those methods were non-magical, however, so the results here are no doubt more impressive. I imagine that accelerated growth rates are only the beginning of your achievements. There have been food shortage problems over the last few years where we could have used these techniques.”

“Are you speaking of another world?”

“You’re familiar with outworlders?”

“Familiar might be too strong a term,” she said. “I have encountered just one in the past. I believe there is another residing in Rimaros right now.”

“At least one,” Jason said.

They passed the third-highest floor of the building, which was very different and looked like some kind of industrial plant. The platform stopped at the penultimate floor and Flor led him out. This was a storage level that looked a lot like the supply depots in Rimaros.

“The top three floors are service levels,” Flor explained. “The level below us contains the systems that deliver the resources stored on this level to the growing floors. We have a

sorting area where you can deliver your supplies. The floor above contains the shrine, the living areas and the coupling rooms.”

“Coupling rooms?”

“Would you like to see them? You’ll need to go through some testing first but you’ll be absolved of all parental responsibilities, of course.”

“No, I’m good.”

“Are you sure?” she asked, looking him up and down. “I wouldn’t mind—”

“Very sure. Thank you, though.”

She shook her head sadly.

“They say men only think about one thing,” she muttered, “but show them one assertive woman and they shrivel up.”

“Hey, I love assertive women. Also, there’s no shrivelling going on here.”

“Of course not,” she said sympathetically.

“There isn’t!”

“It’s easy enough to prove...”

“You’ll just have to take my word for it.”