

Chapter 491

Uneasy Allies

"So much for drawing away the defenders," Neil said as the heavy land skimmer threaded a swift and dangerous path through the trees. In the driver's seat next to him, Belinda was concentrating on controlling the skimmer. The heavy combat skimmer procured specifically for the mission had full-coverage armour and defensive weaponry. It was an advanced vehicle that only those with the right abilities could operate.

"In fairness," Gary said, "I haven't seen any Purity priests. Or anyone else alive, for that matter. Just these things."

Racing through the forest, harrying the skimmer, was a crowd of centaur-like construct creatures. Built from dark wood and mottled iron, they were fast, powerful and agile; perfectly suited to race through a forest. The bulk of the centaur constructs were bronze-rank, with about one on five being silver.

Some of the constructs had bows that conjured arrows when the string was drawn back and were using them to pepper the skimmer with arrows. Others had spears and lances they used to attack the vehicle whenever they got close enough.

The armour plating shielded the occupants, who were using open access panels to retaliate. Neil was using his shield powers as enemies tried to stab through the panels, his Burst Shield power blasting away attackers. Belinda was using the vehicle's weapon system; a triangular column on the roof. There was a sigil on each of its three sides, each one capable of a different attack. One was an electricity attack that arced from enemy to enemy, while another blasted streams of fire.

These first two attacks had not proved highly effective against the constructs, so Belinda didn't waste the energy. The third option conjured heavy bolts with strong armour penetration, which dug into an enemy before exploding. They were proving much more effective, although Belinda tried not to overuse the weapon and drain the skimmer's energy.

The main attackers were Gary and Kenneth, son of Brian; the fourth and final member of the group. Gary was throwing his hammer, which bounced from one construct to the next, chaining through the centaurs before flying back to his hand.

Each hit came with a resonating-force explosion, tailor-made for destroying constructs. Gary's weapon was specialised for fighting constructs, being the silver-rank variant of a weapon he made for himself following Farrah's death. It was enough to take

out the bronze-rank centaurs in one hit, but not the silvers. It did inflict significant damage and send them tumbling into other galloping constructs.

Kenneth likewise worked on thinning out the bronze-rankers, but most focused on slowing down the silvers. One of his special attacks involved a conjured harpoon that he threw into enemies, prioritising the silver-rank constructs. Once buried in a target, more harpoons were conjured around it, launching themselves at the centaurs around it. The secondary harpoons were connected to the initial target by magical ropes that dragged the subsequent targets. They all crashed into the first, binding them together in an awkward bundle. Bound up, the centaurs were stuck trying to fight their way free from one another, inflicting mutual damage even as they were left behind by the rolling combat.

Ken had the skirmish confluence, which made him very useful in this kind of running battle. Many of his powers could trip up the enemy, literally and figuratively, keeping the skimmer from being overwhelmed by the huge herd of constructs. Leaving the destruction of the bronze-rank constructs to Gary's powerful attacks, Ken concentrated on stalling the silver-rank centaurs with trip-lines and net traps.

"I thought Purity and the Builder were meant to be uneasy allies," Humphrey shouted from the roof of the skimmer as it raced through a gulch. "If this many construct creatures are protecting the dam, it would seem we were wrong."

"Making too many assumptions on not enough information is a poor pathway to knowledge," Clive yelled back. "I'm not sure we should have let Sophie go off alone?"

"Let her?" Humphrey asked. "Since when does she wait for anyone's permission for anything?"

"Is she going to be alright back there?"

"Of course," Humphrey said proudly.

The centaur herd bunched together as they followed the skimmer into the narrow gulch, which was exactly what Humphrey wanted. He was ignoring the arrows bouncing off his dragon armour since they all came from bronze-rank constructs. Sophie was nowhere to be seen, having left the skimmer long ago to stall the silver-rank ones.

As the lance-wielding centaurs thundered toward the rear of the skimmer, Humphrey stepped off, landing heavily in their path. The huge sword in his hands was in the shape of a dragon wing with rainbow scales. The blade was wreathed in fire.

Humphrey stood his ground as the centaurs bore down on him in tight formation, shoulder-to-shoulder, lances out. The centaurs might only have been bronze-rank but charging attacks were their specialty and their weapons had greater reach than even

Humphrey's huge sword. Dragon wings manifested on Humphrey's back and reached around him to form a wedge against the onrushing weapons, which were deflected away at an angle. The wings immediately swept back to reveal Humphrey already swinging his sword in a huge horizontal arc.

The sword smashed through the tightly-packed front row of centaurs without even slowing down, passing through wood and steel like a hot train through butter. The centaurs all but exploded from the force, flames from the burning blade spreading to many of the scattering chunks, raining down as burning debris.

That was not even the end of the attack as a wave of fire and another of force were sent hurtling along the gulch by the swing of Humphrey's sword. It wasn't as destructive as the original attack but still toppled the charging bronze-rank constructs like bowling pins.

Humphrey leapt high into the air with his silver-rank strength and, with a powerful sweep of his wings, propelled himself forward. He swooped over the gulch, opening his mouth to breath fire like a flamethrower, blanketing the centaurs still pursuing the skimmer.

Unlike the flames from the skimmer weapons, the fire from Humphrey's powers had an extreme effect on the constructs. The silver-rank effect of his aura, Dragon's Might, transformed any flames created by his abilities from ordinary fire into dragon fire. Dragon fire was far more effective against any kind of flame resistance, from protective magic to flame-retardant materials.

Wood quickly turned to ash and steel melted away as the silver-rank flames ravaged the bronze-rank constructs. Even the rocks were on fire, cracking and melting. In the wake of Humphrey's sweeping flight over the gulch, all that remained was burning wreckage, scorched earth and dark smoke, rising into the air.

More constructs were charging out of the forest and into the gulch. Humphrey turned to look for the skimmer, about to vanish into the woods again. Deciding that he'd bought it enough time, he teleported onto its roof before it moved out of sight.

Despite the construct centaurs moving through the trees in a tight herd, Sophie had no problems moving amongst them. If anything, it made her harder to hit with lances and bows, which were not designed for close-quarter fighting. So long as she avoided being trampled she was fine.

She wandered through the herd like a breeze, graceful and untouched. Even when it seemed like she was struck by a charging construct she wasn't, the very concept of distance bending to her will. She ignored the weaker centaurs, knowing that Humphrey would turn them to piles of molten scrap.

Sophie's biggest weakness was that she lacked the capacity to inflict decisive damage, whether up-front like Humphrey or building over time, like Jason. She did have powers that could land the occasional big, singular hit, but it required set-up, timing and usually team cooperation to make the most of those opportunities. She mostly tackled her low-damage problem by relying on her greatest strengths: speed and precision.

Sophie's damage was small but she inflicted both resonating-force and disruptive force with every hit. That meant that whatever armour or magical barriers were in place, what damage she did do wouldn't be shrugged off. By hammering away with every part of her body she could rain down attacks at a blinding pace. She was too fast to stop and too elusive to pin down.

The other key aspect of Sophie's approach was precision. Her attacks did not grow in power with ranks anywhere near as fast as the resilience of enemies did, so she needed to make every hit count. An ogre was incredibly tough. The side of its knee, not as much.

Centaurs, as a construct design, had clear strengths and weaknesses. Their speed and charging power gave their attacks incredible impact damage, allowing even the bronze-rank variants to pose at least some threat to silver-rankers. Their weaknesses stemmed from their horse-like bodies.

Against a small and agile enemy, fighting up close, their size and inability to quickly turn hurt them badly. Their designs gave them more flexibility than an actual horse, but it only ameliorated the problem, rather than solve it. Normally, this was not an issue while the constructs were moving at a gallop, as they were in pursuit of the skimmer.

To Sophie, however, the pace of the centaurs was inadequate to deserve the word speed. Moving backwards or sideways, even throwing out rapid attacks, she could easily outpace both their movement and their reflexes. She danced around the charging constructs as if they were standing still.

The other flaw in their horse-like bodies was that damage to their legs could be crippling. Sophie took full advantage of this by pounding on the legs with attack after attack. If the constructs had been actual centaurs instead of unfeeling automatons, they would have been frustrated at their inability to swat the fly buzzing around them.

Compared to the brutal, fiery cataclysm Humphrey unleashed in the gulch, Sophie could have easily gone unnoticed by someone watching the herd pass by. Her attacks were pinpoint and her attitude methodical, hobbling one construct after another with the diligence of a tradesperson making their way through the tasks of the day. One by one, the silver-rank constructs were crippled and left behind.

The constructs didn't have a key advantage that living silver-rank things did: the ability to rapidly heal. While some constructs had such abilities, they tended to be expensive, custom works. These centaurs were mass-produced models, their main advantage being numerical.

With the silver-rank constructs either disabled or critically slowed, Sophie turned her attention to rejoining Clive and Humphrey. Before she left, though, she decided to thin out some of the weaker constructs while she was at it. She'd already followed the herd to a gulch where she could tell Humphrey had been to work from the smoke rising out of it. It seemed like the best place to cluster the herd together.

Sophie's Wind Blade power was something of an outlier amongst her other abilities. It was ranged, rather than melee, a direct magical attack and, when she drew on the higher-rank effects, quite mana hungry. One of Sophie's greatest strengths was that her abilities were mana efficient and her mana regeneration was strong. This played into the natural gift that celestines shared that made all their abilities more mana efficient.

Wind Blade, even pulling out all the high-rank stops, didn't have a massive impact on enemies her own level. For clearing out a bunch of bronze-ranks, though, it was up to the task. First, she needed to reposition, so she launched herself into the air with a blast of wind. She then shot forward, flying much faster than Jason or Humphrey could with their respective flight abilities, arriving at the far end of the gulch, centaurs bearing down.

Landing in their path, Sophie swept a long, horizontal kick that produced a blade of wind in the direction of the constructs. She could modulate the nature of the blades depending on how she produced them, with a long motion producing a wide, slow-moving blade. As of bronze-rank, the blades grew wider as they travelled, with the wider the initial blade, the faster it grew. By the time it reached the onrushing centaurs, the blade had become a wide but thin wave, like a huge scimitar stretching across the width of the gulch. Many monsters and any essence user could have easily avoided it, but the centaurs were charging in tight formation.

Sophie had launched second, third and fourth blades by the time the first struck. Every part of a wind blade that hit a centaur exploded into a secondary explosion; circles of cutting force like the rings of a planet. If Jason had been present, it would have looked familiar. The wind-blade runes of the Arcazitlan fortress had much the same effect.

Multiple blade waves devastated the charging constructs, although Sophie could not match the apocalyptic force with which Humphrey had left the gulch a smoking scrap yard. Only the low-rank of her enemies allowed her to partly mirror his success. Satisfied with her work, he launched into the air again and chased after the skimmer.

"Thank you for answering my questions on reproductive techniques," Jason said to the priestess as darkness emerged from his shadow to take the form of a land skimmer.

"I think you should be open to more practical instruction."

"Once again, I'm just looking for information. But thank you. For the repeated offers."

In the outer reaches of the Seas of Storms, three invisible people moved through the air, over the road network cutting through the jungle. They were matching pace with an open-top land skimmer full of strange figures.

"That man is very strange," one of the people said, his voice male. A privacy screen shrouded his words.

"He's just talking to his familiars," a female voice responded. "Everyone talks to their familiars."

"There is no way he understands what that thing is saying."

"I understand what my dog tries to tell me and that's just an ordinary dog."

"Your dog doesn't sound like it keeps tortured souls in a jar."

"That's enough," another female voice said, her tone making it clear that she was the leader. "Stay focused. He may be silver-rank but his aura is strong and his senses are sharp. If he detects us, this whole trip goes to waste."

Chapter 492

Supply Chain Problems

The next fortress town Jason visited wasn't under active attack, letting him get in and out quickly. Situated on the coast, it was connected to several storm accumulators. The offshore, windmill-like devices collected power from magical weather events for which the Sea of Storms was named. The prevalence of such storms in the local area was why an adventurer made the trip rather than an airship that could easily be caught up in the volatile weather.

This particular town used the power it collected to charge mana batteries that other towns could use to power their defences, reducing their reliance on the kind of long-distance deliveries that Jason was making. Jason was just adding to local adventurers already delivering to surrounding areas. Jason handed over a fresh batch of empty batteries and collected charged ones to take to his next stop. One of the most isolated forts in the region, it was outside the range the local adventurers normally travelled. It would also be the last stop on Jason's route before returning to Rimaros.

Far to the east of the forts being supplied by Jason was the fortress town of Carazela. One of the most outlying towns in the Storm Kingdom, its latest supply run was deeply overdue. The fort's defences had expired almost a week earlier and if not for a visiting essence user, either of the last two monster attacks could have overrun the town.

As it was, several monsters made it over the walls and the fort's commander had lost people driving them back. The commander, Merrick Harlowe, sat on the balustrade atop the wall, weariness engraved on his face like a sigil. He raised his head, offering a tired smile as someone walked up to join him.

Melody Jain was the essence user responsible for the fort lasting as long as it had without supplies. She had even made a run to the local Fertility food tower after the last attack, saving the civilians from starvation. She had fought hard and the stains and rents on her white leather armour told the story of the effort she'd expended in shielding the fort and its people.

Unlike her irrevocably stained armour, her white hair and dark skin were clean. Water was the one resource they had no shortage of and Melody liked to take showers. Merrick had no idea if she was a former adherent of Purity or a loyalist; he was afraid to ask and didn't really care. Either way, she had an affection for cleanliness that he guessed was a

long-ingrained habit. He was certain that she hated wearing her marred armour, yet she always did, ever at the ready.

Merrick looked at her white hair as she sat next to him, returning his tired smile with one of her own. She had cropped her hair short after a brutal head injury cut a good chunk of it away. The wound had been healed but she had trimmed her lopsided hair to a short pixie cut.

Melody gave Merrick a look that was filled with regret.

“Merrick, I have bad news.”

“You’re leaving,” he said, his voice devoid of surprise.

“I’m sorry.”

“I understand,” he said. “You’ve already done more than we had any right to ask.”

“I was hoping I could stay until new supplies arrived, but I have my own responsibilities. I’ve put them off as much as I could. More than I could, if I’m being honest.”

“Maybe those supplies will finally arrive before the next lot of monsters,” he said, forcing optimism into his voice that he didn’t feel.

“We both know they won’t,” Melody said softly. “I’ve heard things, and perhaps you have too. This isn’t an ordinary monster surge. Some things are falling through the cracks. You and your people are one of them.”

“There’s always hope.”

She looked at him crestfallen.

“I…”

She trailed off, shaking her head.

“What is it?” Merrick asked.

“I can’t say. I shouldn’t.”

He let out a laugh, heavy with resignation.

“Ms Jain. Melody. Everyone here is going to be dead in a week. You don’t have to fear your secrets spilling out.”

She hunched forward, looking at her feet as she shook her head again.

“You’re a good man, Merrick Harlowe. A decent and diligent man who looks out for his people. You wouldn’t damn them to save them.”

He sat up straight.

“Save them?”

Melody continued to shake her head.

"I only have one thing to give, Merrick, and you don't want it. Your people don't want it. I won't make them into pariahs."

"What are you talking about?"

Still hunched over, she turned to look at him.

"You know what I'm talking about," she said.

He looked away, running his hands over his face.

"Purity," he said.

"I know you haven't been asking because you were scared of the answer. Were you afraid that I'd leave or that you would have to make me?"

"Either. Both. So, you're still..."

"Yes," she said. "It's unwise to wear the symbols in these times, but the faith remains."

She stood up.

"I'll go."

"Wait," Merrick said, gently grabbing her forearm before snatching his hand away.

"Sorry," he said, stepping back. She turned around with a beaming smile, placing her hand on his forearm.

"You'll never have to apologise to me, Merrick. I've watched you give your all for the people here. You could take your strongest and make a break for safety but that never even crossed your mind. I have nothing but admiration for you."

He bowed his head.

"Do you have a way?" he asked, his voice barely audible. "A way to save them?"

"I can't recharge the fort's defences, Merrick. The power I have to offer becomes part of the people who claim it. Forever. It can't be given back, and it comes at a price."

"What kind of power? And what kind of price?"

"I don't think you should —"

"Tell me!"

His words, loud and sharp, rang out across the wall. Sentries watching for monster attacks turned in their direction.

Melody trailed her fingers down Merrick's arm and gripped his hand.

"I can't ask you to do this."

"I'm asking you."

She let go and turned away, bowing her head again. He reached out with a hesitant hand, pausing before touching it softly to her upper arm.

"Melody, please. If you have a way to save my people."

"I don't," she said without turning around. "Maybe – *maybe* – there is a way for them to save themselves, but I can't..."

"Please, Melody. I'm begging."

She slowly turned, bringing herself close to Merrick with a half-step.

"What do you know about the church of Purity?" she whispered. "Do you have any idea of what you're asking?"

"I'm asking for help."

"I belong to a group," she said. "An order. The Order of Redeeming Light. Have you heard of it?"

"No."

"We take the things that are unclean. Impure. We purify them. Turn them into clean weapons of righteousness against the very filth from which they came."

"Like monsters."

"They are the most pervasive impurity in this world."

"And you have some of these weapons of righteousness?"

"You've heard that my church is in league with the Builder?"

"I have, but I barely know what that means. We live simple lives out here, away from important people and their problems."

"The Builder is very bad. Our entire church has had to do things to see it cleansed, things that others can't understand or forgive. But the Builder has something it gives to its soldiers. Something that makes them strong. My order has taken one of the things that produce this weapon and passed it through the purifying light of our redemption rituals. Now we can make people strong, without tainting them. Give this world a chance against the Builder. But the world hates us. Anyone who takes that power will be an outcast."

"Better outcasts than corpses," Merrick said. "What is this weapon?"

"It's called a redeemed core. If you give it to an essence user, they lose their powers but gain new ones. More importantly, they gain an entire rank. Immediately."

"An entire rank?"

"It won't work on gold-rankers."

"But on silvers?"

"It will take them to gold-rank."

Merrick took a step back running his hands through his hair with a shocked expression.

"This is not a simple fix, Merrick, or some easy path to power. There are consequences, beyond how society will look at you. You give up all your essence abilities."

You get new ones in return but not as many. You won't be the equal of an adventurer of your new rank."

"But strong enough to fight monsters."

"Yes. But there is another price as well."

"And what is that?"

"Faith. The taint of the Builder is gone but the new power has to come from somewhere."

"From your god."

"Yes. You must open your heart and your soul to Purity without reservation or his power cannot flow into you. You cannot toy with divine power. I've seen what happens to those who try to claim this power with a deceitful heart. They become powerful but also mindless. Simpletons who know only how to obey and not to think. I would rather someone be honest and turn from my god than go through that."

"I can worship your god. If he gives me the strength to save my people, he deserves my faith."

Melody looked around, wary of the sentries who might overhear. She moved closer to Merrick again, speaking in a whisper as she rested a hand on his chest.

"It's not that simple, Merrick. I've already told you more than I should. More than I'm allowed. I just... I see you. I see your courage and dedication to these people. You are the kind of man this world should be celebrating, not leaving to his death."

"Then give me this power."

"I can't. If my people are going to expose themselves to help you, they have to know that you'll truly be with us."

"What are you saying?"

"It can't just be you, Merrick. It has to be all your silver and bronze people. If you want Purity's help, you all have to make a show of faith. Together."

"I can't tell my people to do that."

"I know. This is why I didn't want to say anything at all."

Merrick walked away from Melody, back to the edge of the wall. He leaned on the balustrade, looking out over the sea. The breeze tousled his hair, the magical barrier over the fort long-depleted.

"It doesn't even have to be monsters at this point," he lamented. "Without the magical barrier, even a storm could deal with us."

"There might be something else," Melody said. "If your people were willing to show their faith, then perhaps I can convince my people can help you, in ways I cannot alone."

“What kind of ways.”

“If you and your people take the power, it will take a little time for you to adjust. Days, in which you won't be able to fend off monster attacks. But if my people knew they didn't have to fear you, we could stand for you, until you are ready. Perhaps even share some of what supplies we do have. I can't promise anything on my own, but—”

Merrick turned around to meet her gaze, eyes steely.

“I can't tell my people to do this,” he said. “But I can ask.”

Jason was riding along a wide jungle roadway when he sensed the approach of several essence users. He was passing by another fort town when four auras emerged and rushed towards him. They were essence users; three bronze and a silver. All had monster cores in their auras, so not adventurers.

Shade pulled the skimmer to a stop, the vehicle and Jason's familiars disappearing as he waited for the approaching people. He stood in the road, letting them come to him. It did not take long, all sprinting up the connection road leading from the nearby fort town.

“Adventurer,” the silver-ranker said as they arrived. They had gone hard enough that the bronze-rankers were exhausted from pushing themselves to match the silver's speed.

“I take it that you are residents of that fortress town,” Jason said.

“I'm the town commander. Are you a supply courier?”

“I am, but my supplies are not for your town.”

“Please,” the commander said. “Our courier is more than a week overdue. The food came from the Fertility farm tower but our remaining mana batteries won't hold out through another monster attack.”

“And if I give you the supplies for another, even more isolated town, what happens to them?”

“Please, I'm begging.”

Jason frowned.

“I can't give you these supplies,” he said. “They were provided by another fortress town that charges mana batteries, though.”

“They have access to storm accumulators?”

“Yes.”

“Then you can leave your supplies here and go back for more. All we need are charged mana batteries.”

“I can't make that decision,” Jason said. “But I've been there. I can portal you and I back there and you can plead your case to them for more supplies.”

The commander's face lit up.

"You have a portal power?"

"I do. We can go right now."

Standing in the open gates of the town, Merrick and Melody were facing one another, his hands clasped in hers.

"Come back quickly," he said.

"I will," she told him with a smile. "With good news, I promise."

He reluctantly released her hands and she left, moving quickly but stopping to look back more than once before she disappeared into the jungle. She picked up the pace until she was certain that she was beyond Merrick's aura senses. She slowed down and soon after, two women in white armour appeared. One wore tough but flexible leathers, like Melody, and handed her a fresh set from a dimensional bag. The other wore heavy armour made from the chitin of a monster, recoloured white.

"How did it go?" the leather-wearer asked as Melody stripped off her dirty armour.

"As planned," Melody said. "All the silvers and bronze-rankers."

The armoured woman chuckled.

"You're still the best, Mel. Should we let the next supply courier through? We kill too many and people might come looking."

"No," Melody said. "It's a monster surge and they send the expendable people for a reason. We'll shield the fort from the next attack, give them supplies and let them fend off the one after by themselves. Then we let a supply run through. We can't have them regretting their decision, after all."

Chapter 493

The Hitting It a Bunch Plan

The original plan had been to sneak into the dam quickly and quietly in two small groups while the defences had been pulled away by the attack on the valley. From the outset, it was clear that the defences had been massively increased since Clive, Humphrey and Sophie first scouted it out. Their intent had been to launch the operation immediately after their original surveillance. Travelling to reunite the team, meet Dawn and then the start of the monster surge had caused multiple delays.

The newly added presence of the constructs in such large numbers suggested either something had significantly changed or something important was happening. It was unlikely to be a reaction to leaking information about the attack on the valley because there hadn't been time to emplace herds of constructs all through the territory approaching the dam.

Guard squads of Purity loyalists were stationed outside the entrances at each end of the dam. Each squad was made up of one silver leading some bronze-rankers and were made short work of. Both teams needed to move fast because of the constructs they had left behind without eliminating.

At one end of the dam, Belinda deftly negated the magic on the heavy security door and picked the mechanical lock. On the other, Clive and Sophie split those tasks between them. Both teams went inside and ruined the magic of the doors, sealing them shut against anyone trying to go through, friend or foe.

The inside of the dam complex was cavernous, with huge open space and a ceiling that loomed high overhead. The dam spanned the entrance to a sprawling valley and the dam's interior followed that line in a huge, arcing curve. The roof, walls and floor were concrete, while huge devices of heavy industrial magic occupied the floor and stuck out from the walls. This was artifice on the largest scale; the kind used by cities to manage the infrastructure that supported their great populations. Here, it not only managed the water flow through the dam but the magic carried within that water; accumulated, refined and repurposed.

Plan A, stealth, had gone out the window before the two groups even reached the dam. Plan B, blitz past the diminished defences was rendered laughable by defences that had been increased, not decreased. Purity loyalists were already bearing down on them. Some were clearly guards, charging at them. Others looked to be artificers who served as

magical technicians. They were abandoning the infrastructure they were modifying and running in the other direction.

At one end of the dam, Sophie dashed forward while Humphrey poured out a circle of bone powder from a bag. Clive and Onslow stood protectively in front of him as he summoned his dragon warriors and Stash leapt from his pocket. The Shape-shifting little dragon turned from a mouse into a rune tortoise like Onslow. He couldn't match the full powers of the other familiar, especially when Onslow and Clive worked together, but he still made for a strong defensive bulwark.

Humphrey took out a pair of twelve-sided dice and rolled them in the circle of bone power. Light rose from the upturned faces of the dice, one projecting a glowing green line drawing of a crocodile's head. The other was more of an indistinct brown blob. The dice flew back to Humphrey's hand and he returned them to his dimensional space as a column of light shot up from the circle.

Sophie was already engaged with the approaching guards while Clive and the two Onslows were blasting magical attacks past her. Behind them, monsters were emerging from the light of Humphrey's summoning circle, one after another.

They were crocodiles made of mud, anywhere from five to seven metres long. Bone protruded all over their bodies, mostly taking the form of scales that looked less crocodilian and more draconic. The bone scales, as well as the long teeth, were all topped with panels and caps of enchanted metal. One of Humphrey's powers conjured basic magic items for each creature he summoned.

Despite having legs, the mud monsters slithered forward on a slimy path, like fat snakes or speedy slugs. They left a trail of mud behind them as they moved to attack.

The guards had the numbers initially but the tables quickly turned as twenty of Humphrey's dragon bone mud crocodiles filled even the huge floor space of the dam's voluminous interior.

The crocodiles didn't just clamp onto the dam guards but dragged them to the ground and into a death roll, sucking them into the mud of their elemental bodies. In doing so, the bony scales passed through the bodies of the guards, who disappeared into the creatures and didn't come back out. Each monster had to pause and digest before moving onto the next victim.

Only the bronze-rank Purity loyalists suffered this fate, although that was most of the guards. The silver-rankers amongst them were strong enough to fend off or avoid the sluggish monsters, despite there being so many. Humphrey, Sophie and Clive were much harder to avoid.

At the other end of the dam, Belinda was taking frontline duties while Gary summoned an ally of his own. Using her ability to grow larger and stronger, she called up the heavy weapons and armour Gary had forged for her. Her echo spirit familiar, named Gemini at Jason's suggestion, mimicked her form and gear as it stood beside her. No longer bound by its iron-rank limitations, Gemini now had physical substance and could even emulate some of Belinda's abilities.

Behind the pair, Gary was calling out his own summoned entity. A singular entity, compared to Humphrey's small army, Gary's forge golem was a towering edifice of crude iron. A white-yellow glow shone from between the heavy panels that made up its lumbering body. It was neither quick nor agile, but it was massive, at almost twice Gary's height. While it was every bit as strong and resilient as it looked, more impressive was its most powerful attack. The panels on its chest opened up to reveal a cavity full of molten metal it could spray over enemies.

"This is wrong," Clive said as he looked over a large device.

They had partially fought their way along the dam and Clive had stopped to sabotage a large piece of equipment that looked like an industrial pump into which someone had stabbed a bunch of huge crystals.

"You can't sabotage it?" Humphrey called back from amidst the ongoing combat. His summons were still fighting more of the Purity loyalist guards, alongside Sophie and Humphrey himself.

"I can sabotage it, sure," Clive said. "But this isn't doing what we thought it was. Not just that, anyway."

Humphrey drew back from the fight to speak with Clive, leaving Sophie and his monsters to hold the line.

"What do you mean?" Humphrey asked.

"Oh, yeah, boys," Sophie yelled from the front, even as she continued acrobatically beating on the enemy. "This is a great time to stop for a chat!"

"Have you noticed that these guards are fighting tooth and nail, even though they're clearly outmatched?" Clive asked.

A guard flew through the air, landing on the ground next to Clive. Immediately after, Sophie landed on the guard in a mount position and started beating him in the face.

"No," she said. "I didn't notice that at all."

She backflipped off the guard, then kicked him derisively in the head before disappearing back into the melee.

"I think that whatever they're doing here," Clive said, "these guards are trying to buy time for them to at least partially finish it. I think the artificers are trying to accelerate the process taking place here."

"And what process is that?" Humphrey asked.

"I'm not sure," Clive said. "This whole dam should be collecting magic and using it to hide the valley and the Purity loyalists in it. That's only consuming part of the collected magic, however; the rest is being collected and funnelled somewhere else."

"For what?"

"I don't know," Clive said. "Somehow, though, even more power has started coming in from the valley, on top of what's being drawn from the river. I'm not sure of the source but there's something off about it."

"Off?"

"How many times can I say I don't know," Clive said. "I'd have to examine this setup for longer to figure out what's happening here."

"Oh sure," Sophie said as she sprang off the wall and kicked three people in the head before landing. "Take your time; it's fine."

"Actually, it's not," Clive said. "Give me a moment to sabotage this and then we should get to the main infrastructure hub at the centre of the dam as quickly as possible. We can't just stand around."

"ARE YOU KIDDING ME?"

After fighting their way through to the middle of the dam, Humphrey, Sophie and Clive found the others, already waiting. Dead guards were strewn about and they finally found the technicians who had fled earlier. Some were dead while others had been strung up with rope and were being interrogated by Kenneth. Neil was making sure they survived the questions.

Gary and his golem were clearing away bodies while Belinda examined a large magical device. It was large enough that it had clearly been constructed on-site but showed signs of recent and hasty modification. Parts had been crudely removed or added and there were magical diagrams scrawled all over it in chalk.

"Took you long enough," Belinda said, not turning away from the device. "Were you just standing around talking the whole time?"

Sophie flashed a glare at Clive and Humphrey.

"No idea what you're talking about," Clive said as he joined Belinda. "Any idea what they're up to?"

"I'm working on it," Belinda said. "This is weird, right?"

"Yeah," Clive agreed. "You saw the power being drawn in from the valley?"

"Yeah. I figured out that whatever's going on, we don't want it to, so I went ahead with the sabotage."

"Same."

"What's the source of power in the valley?"

"As far as we know, there shouldn't be anything in the valley that could produce the amount of power this place is drawing in. It has to have been brought in since we scouted the area out."

Belinda walked Clive through what she'd already learned examining the setup, the others quickly losing track of what they were talking about. The pair of magic experts pulled out various devices from their storage spaces as they tried to decipher the purpose of the huge device and its modifications.

Sophie moved over to Ken and Neil as they brutally questioned a dangling artificer.

"Get anything out of them?" she asked.

"The path of the zealot is a rigid one," Ken said. "It affirms their resolve in times of trial. An admirable trait, but an impediment to our current endeavour."

"He means no," Neil said. "They're not weak, I'll give them that."

"That is what I just said," Ken told Neil.

"And I translated it into the way normal people talk. Why does this group always need one guy who talks like he's from another world?"

"My manner of speech is rich with meaning and precise in that which it conveys," Ken said. "Perhaps you should take the time to listen instead of assuming that the people around you are simpletons."

"That's not what..."

Neil groaned and stomped off.

"He misses Jason," Gary said, approaching Sophie and Ken. "Such a tsundere."

"You know I don't like that term," Sophie said.

"That's because you are one," Neil called back.

"You can participate in the conversation or go off and sulk," Sophie told him. "You can't do both."

"Watch me!"

Gary poked the artificer dangling unconscious from an overhead beam.

"Are you done with this one?"

"We are," Ken said. "We'll continue through the remaining survivors but I doubt that any will talk here. We'll take them back to the Adventure Society to be questioned properly. They'll break eventually."

"Is this really necessary?" Humphrey asked. He had been looking at the carnage with a grave expression. "Killing enemies is one thing, but torturing them is another."

"What do you think is happening to people when you set them on fire with your abilities?" Sophie asked him.

"I know that," Humphrey said. "But this doesn't feel right. Fighting the enemy is one thing. Stringing up helpless people and making them suffer is another."

"You're sweet," Sophie said, placing a hand on his arm. "We're definitely torturing the evil zealots, though."

"It won't be torture," Ken assured Humphrey, stepping out a puddle of blood left by the man he'd just tortured into unconsciousness. "Torture is, as a means, unreliable and inconsistent. I've only taken this step here in the hope of extracting critical and timely information from people who do not want to give that information up. The Adventure Society has more humane and effective methods."

"It's always easy to find an excuse," Humphrey said, stepping up into Ken's face. "Your questions are over."

Belinda slid up to Sophie, speaking to her softly.

"Is it just me or does Humphrey get kind of sexy when he goes all ideological?"

"Oh yeah. Jason used to do it too, but he just came off as kind of a prick."

"You know we're all silver-rank, right?" Neil asked. "Just because you're whispering doesn't mean we can't hear you."

A blushing Humphrey desperately looked at Clive to change the subject.

"What have you found?" Humphrey asked him.

Clive glanced at Belinda, who shrugged back.

"This place is collecting magic," Belinda said. "We knew that going in. We thought it was all being used to hide the valley from magic detection but that's only expending part of the power, the rest of which was being collected."

"Like water behind a dam," Clive added.

"This new power source, coming from the valley, is very new," Belinda continued. "It's not an ongoing source, either. It came in one big lump and the dam's magical processing is being used to refine it. This lump only came in a matter of hours ago. When we leaked the attack on the valley to potential Purity and Builder spies, it seems they immediately moved into the final phase of whatever their plan here was. They've been rushing to some

final stage where all the power from the dam and the valley is being sent out and used for... something.”

“Something?”

“The power collected here,” Clive said, “both from the dam itself and the valley, is being refined and then sent back to the valley for whatever is going on there.”

“The place where we sent a bunch of teams on a feint attack,” Neil said.

“Yes,” Clive said. “We have no idea what we’ve sent them into.”

“What about the original plan?” Humphrey asked. “Can we still use the power flowing through here to blow the dam up and flood the valley? The team leaders all have magical devices to shield their teams from the floodwaters. Won’t that stop whatever the Purity church is up to?”

“Even if we don’t know what they’re doing,” Neil said, “I’m fairly certain that stopping it is good for us.”

“There’s not enough power left to destroy the dam,” Belinda said. “They’ve been sending it all into the valley for whatever it is they’re doing. We can’t repurpose that power from here anymore.”

“What can we do?” Humphrey asked.

“Well,” Clive said, “we think they couldn’t avoid needing this central device here to regulate the magic being fed to whatever is happening in the valley. We can’t redirect it, but we could potentially disrupt it.”

“So, we could just hit this big magic thing a bunch,” Sophie said.

“We don’t know what that would do,” Clive said.

“We know that it would make whatever’s going on down there not go the way they want,” Belinda said. “I like the hitting it a bunch plan.”

“Again,” Clive said, “we don’t know what that will do. It’s reckless.”

“As is failing to act at all,” Ken said.

“It’s happening right now, right?” Gary asked. “If we’re picking between what the evil zealots want and something else, without knowing what either choice is, then I choose the something else.”

Humphrey turned to Ken.

“The Adventure Society put you in charge of this team,” he said. “The choice is yours.”

“Stuff that,” Sophie said. “I say vote. Hands up who wants to smash the crap out of this thing?”

Her hand was joined in the air by Neil, Gary and Belinda.

“That’s a majority,” Belinda said.

“Whatever the Adventure Society might say, your team is not mine to command,” Ken said. “Whatever you choose, I shall abide, and it seems that your members have spoken, Mr Geller.”

“Great,” Gary said, hefting his hammer. “I’ve been wanting to hit these big magic machines since we got here but Belinda wouldn’t let me. I’m going to start with one of them big crystals.”

In the mist-shrouded valley below the dam, a picturesque rural village was being splashed with blood and death. Purity loyalists were desperately defending against teams of adventurers.

“Keep them away from the ritual site! It’s almost complete!”

As the battle raged, huge waves of magic surged from the woodland reaches of the valley. Transcendent lights of blue, silver and gold rose out of the forest canopy at points up and down the valley. Each of the large magic conglomerations twisted into a ring shape that floated high in the sky.

Streams of magic continued to rise up, feeding the rings’ power as huge portals opened within them. Winged, angelic beings started to emerge from each of the portals, filling the sky like a plague of sexy, feathery locusts.

The fighting below stalled as the battling forces watched the angelic creatures emerge. The adventurers were filled with confusion and the Purity loyalists with triumph until the streams of energy feeding the portals started to flicker and pulse. The portals became unstable and the angelic creatures started flying swiftly away from them, even as more came through.

Finally, the portals exploded. Violent eruptions of magic shot in every direction, turning angels into red mist and blasting craters in the ground. Adventurers and Purity faithful alike fled from wild blasts of magic shrieking through the air and thundering into the ground. Everything turned to chaos and destruction as the ground was thrown up in clouds of dirt, shattered houses and trees. Ear-tearing explosions smashed into the people on the ground and the angelic creatures in the air, their broken bodies raining from the sky.

Eventually, the magic faded. The survivors had escaped; adventurers and Purity loyalists on the ground and the angelic creatures through the sky. Dust clouds still lingered, most of the village and the surrounding woods now a devastated moonscape of craters and desolation.

Inside some of the craters, people started regaining consciousness, naked and hairless. These were not survivors of the battle, instead somehow left behind by the wild explosions triggered by the breaking of the portal rings.

One of these people was a man with chocolate skin and a pro-wrestler physique. He came to, the dirt scattered over him falling away as he stumbled groggily onto his feet. Looking himself over, he saw his nakedness and ran his hands over his bald head. He talked to himself, disoriented, his high-pitched voice not matching his imposing physique.

“What the hell, bro? I’m in the nicki-noo.”

Chapter 494

I Liked the Fighting Better

Jason was once more riding a land skimmer along the road network that wove through the local equivalent of Central America. Each side of the broad thoroughfare was lined with dense jungle. According to his map, Jason was less than an hour from the final destination on his journey before he could portal back to Rimaros.

Something twinged at his aura senses, so light that he wasn't sure he hadn't imagined it. It was certainly closer than he wanted anything to get undetected. It could easily be an especially stealthy monster. If it was a gold-ranked one he was in trouble, although sneaky monsters were typically less effective in an open fight.

Jason blasted the area where he'd glimpsed the aura with a heavy fist of suppressive aura force and his magic senses felt something break. Three figures in white outfits became visible by the side of the road. One of them swept a sword from which a blade of light shot out and split Jason's land skimmer in half. Jason landed lightly on the ground as the vehicle dissolved into his shadow.

He conjured his blood robes and cloak around him as he looked at the three people. They all wore white leather armour, a man and a woman flanking a second woman in the middle who was clearly the leader. She was scabbarding the sword she had used to destroy Shade's vehicle form.

All three had stark white hair and their auras read as human, despite the man amongst them having the slender frame and tapered ears of an elf. It wasn't just their armour that was white but everything they were wearing, from the metal of their belt buckles to the blade of the woman's sword. Jason had only known one person to dress like that.

"You're as perceptive as promised, Asano," the woman in the lead said.

Jason's mind quickly processed. The white clothes; knowing who he was and where he'd be. Along with making him realise something he should have already anticipated, it told him who they were and what they were doing.

"Purity church," he said. "The Builder sent you."

"Laughably, the impure being is under restrictions as to who he can send after you."

"That's laughable? A bunch of Purity adherents playing flunky to an 'impure being' and he's the one deserving of mockery?"

"None of his people could take you down under the restrictions he is under because his filthy minions are weak. He made a concession to our principles because we know

exactly how to handle filthy little plague-bringers that hide in the dark. And as you can see, we're all silver rank. There's only the three of us; no overwhelming numbers. No excuses for your interdimensional friends to interfere in affairs that aren't theirs."

"That's funny, coming from someone shackled up with the Builder. If I didn't—"

Mid-sentence, Jason suddenly opened a portal. The Purity trio wasn't caught unaware, the subordinate woman throwing an object as the portal arch rose from the ground. Jason dove for the portal but the thrown object moved in a flash, a conjured chain wrapping around his body before vanishing.

-
- You have been affected by item [Inescapable Chains].
 - [Inescapable Chains] has been consumed to inflict [Inescapable]. This effect ignores resistances.
-

Jason knew the affliction, as his own Inexorable Doom power could inflict the same one.

-
- [Inescapable] (affliction, magic): Cannot be affected by teleport or non-damaging dimension effects.
-

It rendered the portal in front of him useless and prevented him from shadow jumping. They had come prepared, having an item that could negate one of Jason's most critical techniques. It passed straight through his powerful resistances to sealed off any chance of easy escape while also crippling his normal combat style. The trio looked at him smugly, still not moving to attack.

"You should just come quietly, Asano. You can't win. That agreement made on your behalf might stop us from using gold-rankers but there was nothing about very expensive and specialised items. They hid us from your senses and now have cut off your ability to run or hop around in the dark. Combined with our abilities, which already counter yours, you have no chance."

Jason winced under his hood, the enemies not seeing it. Trying to take him alive made what would come next a much trickier proposition.

"The Builder wants me dead," Jason said. "Going along quietly doesn't seem like a good choice for my long-term health."

"We have a use for you, first. Come along and maybe you'll find a chance to escape. Better than fighting and dying."

"I've been taken prisoner and I've fought and died," Jason said as he conjured a dagger into his hand. "I liked the fighting better."

The three Purity loyalists all drew swords. No one moved as they continued to eye each other off.

“What does Purity need with me?” Jason asked.

“You aren’t worthy of our god’s attention, Asano. One of our members needs you to be her worm on a hook.”

“There’s a lot of that going around,” Jason said and dashed forward.

The three Purity loyalists reacted swiftly, one of them throwing up a hand that flashed with blinding light.

➤ **You have been afflicted with [Flash Blindness].**

Being reliant on sight in the midst of combat was something Jason had been trained well beyond. His other senses painted a perceptual picture he had long used when his eyes were insufficient or deceived. The sound of the blade; the resonance of the magic passing through its enchanted metal. The feel of the air being displaced around him and the intent in the auras too weak to hide from him. If anything, the impediment helped Jason slip into his combat trance state.

Despite being one man with a knife against three people with swords, Jason held his own. Being surrounded by enemies was nothing new and his powers and skills combined to make him supernaturally elusive. Shade's ability to suppress various giveaways prevented them from using the same senses Jason did to read the battle. His cloak masked his movement and feints made with his aura misled their magical senses.

In many ways, Jason had blinded them more than they had him. Even attacks that should have landed missed as his cloak bent space around him. The bright swords of the Purity loyalists flashed with rapid and precise movement but it was as if they were stabbing at an empty cloud of darkness. On top of everything else, two of Gordon’s orbs were intercepting attacks in shield form, buying Jason precious breathing room.

Jason didn't pull out his familiars for different reasons. With Colin, he needed to maximise his regeneration until he had built up the effectiveness of his drain attacks with afflictions. Also, Colin himself was very reliant on afflictions and Jason wanted to diminish the resistances of the enemy before deploying him to full effect. There was also the risk that the enemy would have some countermeasure to the leech swarm. They knew his abilities and came prepared; they would be fools to ignore arguably his strongest trump card.

Similar factors led to him retaining Gordon. Having Gordon not manifest meant that Jason could use a pair of much-needed shields and Gordon added to Jason's already formidable aura strength. Jason was simultaneously suppressing three auras of his own rank, preventing three auras worth of benefits to the enemy and detriments to himself. These were not weak or inexpert auras, either. Their solid control lacked weak points that made them easy to collapse. Only consistent pressure and raw strength got the job done.

There was also the likelihood that the enemy had attacks that could hurt Jason's incorporeal familiars, Shade and Gordon both. Jason was saving Shade in case the fight went poorly and he needed to make an escape.

Even with a combat trance pushing him to the limits of his capability, Jason was heavily pressured. Unable to shadow jump away, he stood his ground, every moment on a knife's edge. The trio of loyalists showed off exceptional training that marked them as elite adventurers on top of being religious zealots. For all that Jason's training had been diligent and exceptional, that of the Purity adherents was no lesser.

The difference between Jason and his opponents was the reason Rufus had founded a training annex in Greenstone. Elite adventurers from high magic zones trained in safety, too valuable to risk losing before they came into their true power. They were raised through the use of mirage chambers and carefully cultivated monster battles under the watchful eye of instructors.

Jason, by comparison, had been fighting life and death battles from the beginning. Before he was an adventurer – before he was even iron rank – he had faced battles where he was unprepared, underpowered, outnumbered and outmatched. Fighting on the knife's edge was a place where he knew how to stay balanced.

Jason's cloak and senses were doing some heavy lifting as the four silver-rank combatants flittered around one another like leaves in a wild gust. Jason's other abilities did not fare so well.

-
- Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin], [Price of Absolution] and [Wages of Sin].
 - [Sin] had been resisted and does not take effect.
 - [Price of Absolution] had been resisted and does not take effect.
 - [Wages of Sin] had been resisted and does not take effect.
-

Unsurprisingly, worshippers of Purity had potent resistances. The only effects that managed to stick in the early stages of the fight were those that, like the affliction preventing Jason's shadow jumping, ignored those resistances. Each attack levied against Jason incurred the sin affliction from his aura. Unlike the same one from his special

attacks, those afflictions went straight through their resistances. Further, each instance of sin on his enemies let Jason's aura diminished their resistances.

One of the biggest problems that affected Jason when his afflictions were slow to build was that it hurt the effectiveness of his Amulet of the Dark Guardian. One of his most precious useful items, he had earned it alongside the first scar on his soul and its power grew with him over time.

For every affliction Jason delivered, the amulet gave him a shield that could absorb damage and, after it had, became a short-lived healing effect. Each shield and heal was weak but Jason normally output a vast number of afflictions. The rapid acquisition and expenditure of the shields was a critical buffer to Jason's ability to endure hits. Without it, Jason was working with a much smaller margin of error.

The loyalists would not stand around and wait for Jason to build up power, however, and they had abilities of their own. Using their numbers to pressure Jason, they positioned him to suffer attacks that couldn't be avoided through small, evasive motions. Waves of searing light and short-lived, conjured sword-squalls burned and cut. Even with all his evasiveness, the swords of the enemy still managed to land some magic-infused attacks. The enemy was too skilled to dance in Jason's hand.

Jason couldn't avoid everything and was struck by savage special attacks that burned his flesh and even dispelled his cloak. He suffered extra hits even in the brief moment it took to conjure it again.

Although his regeneration was potent, Jason was not building up fast enough. Without afflictions properly landing on his enemies, his drain attacks were too weak. Without the ability to jump out of the combat, he couldn't buy a moment to cast a more powerful drain spell. Even if he could have, its effectiveness would likewise suffer from the same absence of afflictions.

Although it was looking bad, hope was far from snuffed out. Not every affliction fell short, especially as the resistance of his enemies slowly dropped.

-
- Special attack [Leech Bite] has inflicted [Bleeding], [Leech Toxin] and [Tainted Meridians].
 - [Bleeding] is already in effect. [Bleeding] has been refreshed.
 - [Price of Absolution] had been resisted and does not take effect.
-

Tainted Meridians was one of Jason's silver-rank afflictions that had seen little use as it had minimal impact on monsters that used mana in a different way than essence users. Landing the affliction on his current enemies was much more useful.

-
- [Tainted meridians] (affliction, poison): Subject's stamina and mana costs for magical abilities are increased. The effect of drain abilities used on them is increased. Bleed effects on them cause mana loss commensurate with blood loss.
-

Jason's only realistic chance at winning the fight was to out endure his enemies, but silver-rankers had no shortage of endurance. The tainted meridians afflictions would accelerate the clock Jason needed to run out.

Tainted meridians taking hold marked the turning point in the fight as Jason's afflictions finally started to bite. As he continued to clash with the loyalists, dark blood and jagged rents marred their once-pristine white armour. Jason was bloodied himself, but it was soaked by his robes or hidden by his cloak, while he was healing.

The enemy had been healing as well, at the start, having their own passive regeneration. Now that afflictions were taking hold, bleed effects were soaking the healing and leech toxin was refreshing the bleeds as the healing consumed them. As the fight dragged on, his enemies grew weaker as he grew stronger.

He was about to move the fight into a new phase and start draining afflictions when his enemies beat him to it. One member of the trio created a magical dome around the three of them.

"Gordon," Jason said, his familiar appearing and immediately blasting the barrier with six beams of energy specialised in breaching magic. Even so, the barrier was resilient, being a channelled ability. Channelling powers required the user to give up any other active abilities, but the power was worth the inconvenience when used well.

The barrier was used very well, showing off the trio's teamwork. The moment it went up, the leader started chanting a spell incantation that chilled Jason to the bone. The last time he had heard it was the very first time he fought a silver-ranker, also from the church of Purity. He remembered its effects, which were a bane to almost every combat power Jason had.

Jason realised that when they claimed their powers countered his, it had been no empty boast. A cleansing light washed out of the barrier, through his enemies and then through him.

-
- All of your afflictions on [Purity Priest] have been cleansed by an effect that ignores all cleanse prevention.
 - All of your afflictions on [Purity Adherent] have been cleansed by an effect that ignores all cleanse prevention.
 - All of your afflictions on [Purity Adherent] have been cleansed by an effect that ignores all cleanse prevention.

- All of your boons and the boons on your items have been negated by an effect that ignores dispel prevention.
-

At the same time, the third loyalist cast a slow but powerful healing spell to follow up. With Jason's afflictions gone, it took full effect, erasing all the damage Jason had done. In moments, everything Jason had accomplished in the fight was washed away. He didn't hesitate, recalling Gordon and having Shade bodies flood out between himself and the barrier.

This was the contingency for which Jason had been holding Shade. Jason burned a large chunk of his mana to manifest starlight cloaks over all the Shade bodies, then disappeared amongst them. His aura vanished, the enemies still inside the barrier losing all track of him.

The one advantage Jason gained from his enemies bottling themselves up was that it finally gave him a chance to break away. The Shade bodies, Jason amongst them, dove into the jungle and scattered. The incorporeal creatures were unimpeded by the thick Panamanian jungle and Jason was not much worse off. His cloak bent space, not to ward off attacks but to allow him to slip easily through the dense jungle growth.

The Shades and Jason alike melted into the shadows cast by the thick canopy overhead. If he could play hide and seek long enough in the jungle, Jason could wait out the duration of the affliction blocking his ability to portal away to safety.

The auras of Jason's enemies were moving closer as he sensed them flying over the jungle. He knew that his own flight power was mediocre and unlikely to match their speed. As for staying in the jungle, even slipping through the growth like a ghost couldn't outpace their flying over it. He slowed down enough that the remaining Shades he hadn't sent out could muffle the sound of his passage through the harsh terrain.

Tiny bird-shaped lights came darting through the canopy like phosphorescent hummingbirds, banishing the shadows around them. They spread out in a sweeping arc, quickly revealing which of the shadowy figures moving through the jungle were decoys. Jason kept moving but the glowing birds were both very fast and very numerous, tracking Jason down in far less time than he was happy with.

He called out two of Gordon's orbs, using them to shoot down the birds they lit up his hiding places but more quickly came. It was immediately evident from the auras converging on him that the birds were giving away his position the moment their light fell on him.

Running out of options, he blasted the light birds closest to him to restore the shadows and then dove into a thick mud pit. Unfortunately, the three Purity loyalists were not the Predator and Jason was not Arnold Schwarzenegger. While the conjured birds were deceived, the loyalists were not fools. They realised Jason had to be hiding to escape the reach of the birds and started sweeping his last confirmed area.

They slowed down their flight and brought out what looked like miner's lanterns, if miners were extravagantly wealthy and made their tools from silver and gold. They started slowly panning over the jungle with beams from the lanterns. Jason had no doubt this was another item procured to overcome one of his advantages, likely Shade's ability to mask his presence from various means of detection. This aspect of the familiar's power was more versatile than strong, so Jason was sure a specialised tool would penetrate it.

Jason was running out of options and it was coming down to luck as he waited for a chance to sneak away in a moment he was overlooked or the sweeping beams passed him by. The moment didn't come as one beam, then a second and third settled on him. Moments later, his three pursuers descended through the jungle canopy on wings of light.

Laying filthy in the mud, Jason glared up at the three loyalists.

"Look at you," the leader said. "It was always going to come to this."

Jason got to his feet and conjured his blade into his hand.

"It always does," he said, flashing a savage, bloody grin before it disappeared into his hood as he conjured up another cloak.

The leader sighed.

"Very well," she said. "Melody will have to be disappointed. Kill him."

Chapter 495

That Usually is My Day

The gold-rankers secretly trailing Jason watched with surprise as three people appeared out of nowhere.

“This is it,” Liara Rimaros said. She was with two members of her old team, from when she had been a restricted essence enforcer for the Adventure Society. Like many gold-rankers, the current disposition of their team wasn't about everyday monster-hunting because there weren't enough gold-rank monsters to hunt with the power to push them closer to diamond.

Most gold rankers didn't even chase after diamond rank. Those that did, like Emir's teammate Callum, spent much of their time in extremely high magic zones. These were places where the average power of monster manifestations excluded all but a few specialised population centres. These were wild frontier towns, where even silver-rankers were asking for death by roaming without protection.

Gold-rankers in civilised society pursued more civilised agendas. It might be mastering a craft, founding a township, garnering political influence or duty to a nation or guild. Their teams came together at need, whether for the occasional monster hunt or to assist a member with their individual goals. With lifespans extending into centuries, monster surges often served as reunions.

Liara had needed to make sure that neither Jason nor anyone waiting to ambush him would detect his observers. With her team in the city for the surge, she had access to people whose abilities she knew and trusted. Jana and Ledev were a brother and sister pair that, along with Liara herself, had made the hunter component of their specialised hunter-killer team. Together, they had been following Jason from the moment he left the airship.

“Do we move in?” Jana asked.

“Let's wait and see what happens,” Liara said. “Surprisingly, they're only silver-rank, so we can afford to let it play out.”

They listened to the conversation between Jason and what turned out to be Purity loyalists, instead of the expected Builder cultists.

“Who could possibly put restrictions on the Builder that it would adhere to?” Ledev asked. “And why would they do it for this guy?”

“They intend to take him alive,” Liara said. “That's better than we hoped for. It means we don't have to intervene to save him and we can track them back to their nest.”

The three Purity adherents hovered in the air above Jason. They had little room to move under the jungle canopy, even if the wings of light holding them aloft were intangible and unaffected by the trees. Jason knew that even though it was tactically unsound, his enemies couldn't resist the chance to look down on him. Being one himself, he could easily spot a showboat.

Unleashing his aura, Jason didn't suppress all three but focused on the leader. His power gripped her like a fist crushing an egg and he unleashed a soul attack that left her face twisted in a silent scream.

The attack on their leader gave the others pause for only a fleeting moment, but it was a moment Jason ruthlessly took advantage of. A shadowy arm shot out, grabbing the stricken leader and dragged her down out of the sky. Jason tossed her into the mud pit that he had just climbed out of and the mud immediately started to roil madly, like a bubbling cauldron. The wasn't boiling but filled with leeches that immediately inundated the leader, her already dirty armour now painted in dark, clingy mud.

The leeches dug into her flesh. They wriggled through the rents left in her armour by Jason's dagger and squirmed into her boots and sleeves, clamping onto any exposed skin. Lamprey teeth dug into her hands, face, even her eyelids as she thrashed to get out and free of the tiny carnivores.

The other two zealots were only startled for the most brief of intervals and weren't shocked into anything as stupid as freezing in place and calling out their leader's name in anguish. Trusting their leader to handle her own problems, they turned their focus on Jason and moved to the attack.

The less than ideal tactical positioning of the zealots bought Jason time as he ducked into the jungle, his cloak allowing him to slip through the dense growth. It was not much of an impediment to his enemies and their silver-rank power but it bought Jason the time to pull a potion vial from his belt and swig the contents.

It was a general power-enhancing potion that boosted his basic attributes. This gave the same comprehensive enhancement as a spirit coin, but instead of a quick spike, the power was smoothly distributed. It didn't give Jason the same level of power jump as a gold spirit coin would, keeping him inside the silver range. The effects would last much longer, however, with far less debilitating after-effects.

It was a highly expensive potion, the silver-rank variant costing more than the gold-rank coin it was roughly comparable to. Jason was not short on money, however, and his

current situation was the kind of desperate situation where it seemed very much worth the price.

Jason had a brief window while the strongest member of the enemy trio was caught up extracting herself from a pit of Colin. Silver-rankers moved fast and her companions were crashing through the jungle as Jason barely had time to get the potion down. They came charging through the undergrowth like rhinos but, rather than flee, Jason moved to meet one and they crashed together. Using her own charge to get inside her sword reach, he rammed home his dagger.

In the terrain, Jason's short dagger was far better than the zealots' swords and he jammed it right into the throat of the woman that slammed into him. Impaling the throat of a silver-ranker was far from enough to kill them, or even impede them that much, but Jason knew from experience that there was more to it than that.

Outside of protection specialists, very few people, even at silver rank, had suffered the kind of countless attacks that came with Jason's self-healing combat style. For all his evasion techniques, every time he slipped up, misread an attack or was simply outplayed, his body had paid the price. His experience had allowed him to move past instinctive reactions to wound that to even a bronze-ranker, were critical. His opponent lacked this experience and couldn't help but clutch at her savagely pierced neck,

Jason's experience was his strongest advantage against enemies that were well trained but hadn't spent their entire careers going from one life and death battle to the next. One of the lessons that came from walking that line over and over was that the difference between victory and defeat often came down to just a few critical moments.

This was why Jason worked so hard to buy even fragments of time and strove to make the most of each. He had bought one moment with his aura attack, another with his dive into the jungle and the zealots handed over a third with their poor positioning. With each one he'd bought a key advantage; boxing up the leader, boosting his power and seizing the initiative. Now was his moment to own the fight.

Jason positioned himself between the two zealots and a nest of shadow arms snaked out of his cloak to entangle the loyalist that didn't have a gaping wound in his neck. At the same time, Jason landed more attacks on the one he'd already stabbed; sewing machine pricks, quick and shallow, as he tried to load her up with afflictions. Even with his boosted power, though, the results were patchy at best. His resistance suppression powers were weaker at a baseline level than the Purity zealot's resistances.

Despite snatching the battle's momentum, Jason was in a bad way. He had been about to replenish his reserves in the first stage of the fight when the shield delayed him.

The powerful heal and purge powers used within than shield turned delay into denial. Jason was left ragged and spent while his enemies were fully healed and free of the afflictions on which Jason's powers relied. The only measure by which they remained depleted was their mana supply.

Shade emerged from the jungle, reconverging after scattering in Jason's failed attempt at escape. He couldn't physically hurt them, but his ability to drain mana attacked their biggest current weakness.

Jason had a brief window in which he had the edge, between the absent leader, his potion boosted-power and his control of the fight's momentum. He had while it lasted to redo all the gains the purge spell had wiped away. He gave it his all, snatching every moment and seizing every advantage in a desperate attempt to turn his current momentum into victory.

Every trick and every tool was used. He threw out darts that created shadows, explosions and decoy auras. One type entangled the enemies in vines, which was especially effective in their present terrain. He even pulled out an electricity gun, half-melted from overuse. It wasn't powerful enough to inflict real damage but the surprise factor of an attack so removed from his abilities was one more advantage he could make use of. He wasn't willing to give any of them up as he scraped the barrel for everything he had.

It wasn't enough.

Resetting Jason's buffs and afflictions at the moment he was at his lowest and about to replenish himself had reset a battle already stacked against Jason to an even more lopsided starting point. All his skills, tools, tactics and powers could accomplish no more than forestalling the inevitable. Jason's enemies couldn't match his experience or skill, but the difference was a matter of degrees, not orders of magnitude.

The zealots were highly capable, with an abundance of resolve. They didn't let Jason's cockroach survivability diminish their patience and push them into sloppy mistakes. While they might not have Jason's experience of life and death battles, they did understand oppression. They knew well that patience would inevitability give them victory.

The leader escaped Colin, her powerful resistances shrugging off almost all the poison the toothy leeches inflicted. The game familiar continued to hold her up for a while, taking his blood clone form and binding her up in strips of bloody cloth. Eventually, though, she burned most of his body mass away with searing light and rejoined her companions.

Shade had likewise taken hits for the team. As Jason had feared, his opponents had attacks that could cut down Shade's incorporeal forms. When only a few remained, Jason

recalled them. Like the portion of Colin's biomass Jason always retained, it was enough to reconstitute them both without the need to resummon them. Gordon was already stashed away because he didn't have extra bodies to lose. Jason also needed the shields from the borrowed orbs.

Jason had made impressive headway in afflicting the two enemies he confronted himself. It was a struggle between his ability to impart his various maladies and their ability to resist and purge them. Being Purity worshippers wasn't for nothing and they both had cleansing powers, although Jason was able to impede them. The silver-rank effect of his Inexorable Doom spell was an additional affliction that helped lock the other maledictions in place.

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- **[Persecution] (affliction, curse, stacking): Subject gains resistance to incoming boon, recovery, cleanse and heal-over-time effects. These resistances cannot be voluntarily lowered. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.**
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Even with his advantages, Jason felt the momentum turn against him like a vast ocean vessel, slowly but unstoppably changing course. Purity's most zealous worshippers had too many purgation tools at their disposal, both abilities and items. Their teamwork let one cover the other to drink a quick potion. As a result, Jason hadn't done enough by the time the clock ran out.

The leader rejoined her companions just as the effect of Jason's potion was coming to an end. His temporary strength turned to weakness; nowhere near the after-effects of a spirit coin, but still damning in his current circumstance. He was too weak to fight all three and he couldn't have outrun them at his best. He'd failed to turn the fight around or drag it out long enough that he could once again use his portal.

The portal he opened was still in place, back on the road. The other end was in his cloud house and Jason had been hoping that Rufus and Farrah would come through from the other side. It was a slender hope, though, as they had missions of their own. Neither would slack off during a monster surge.

In the end, Jason was tired and hurt, weak and ragged. Even so, he kept fighting, futile as it was. He'd reached his desperate bottom line, but they wouldn't be able to catch him without killing him.

"What is he doing?" Ledev asked as he watched from high in the air with Liara and Jana. "He knows they want him alive, so why would he fight to the death?"

"Because he knows we're here," Liara said.

“There’s no way he sensed us,” Ledev said.

“He didn’t,” Liara said. “The Purity loyalists showed him we were here.”

“They don’t know either,” Jana said.

“They didn’t have to,” Liara explained. “Asano is aware that we know how the Builder’s people react to him. He knows we have access to his assigned route. He also knows that if anyone can find people suspected of working with the Builder to leak information to, it’s the anti-Builder taskforce. As soon as these people were waiting for him, he realised that we were fishing for cultists with him as bait. He even said as much.”

“He thinks we’ll step in and save him,” Jana realised.

“Forget it,” Ledev said. “He thinks he can force our hand, but if he wants to die, let him. It’s more valuable to follow them back to their people than tip our hand.”

“We can’t just let him die,” Jana said. “I’m going to help him, Led. And so are you.”

“Fine,” Ledev groaned.

“There is more to Asano than I’ve been allowed to tell you,” Liara said. “I think the lengths the Builder is going to over one silver-ranker makes that plain enough. Even if he weren’t, though, we placed Asano in this situation. We’re taking him back out of it.”

Jason could barely stay on his feet, but his strange eyes were alive as they glared at the zealots from the darkness of his hood. Even run ragged, Jason was making the Purity adherents pay a higher price than they wanted to take him down. They thought it was the last, prideful gasp of a dying man, unaware he was waiting for someone else to make themselves known. While he remained defiant, he was starting to worry that they either weren’t there after all or would just let him die. Then three gold-rank auras locked into the Purity loyalists.

The Purity people didn’t go easy but the gold-rankers and their surprise attacks took them prisoner, hurt but alive. After making sure the trio were thoroughly locked up in suppression gear, Liara, Ledev and Jana dragged them back to the road. Jason was leaning heavily against a black land skimmer, covered head to toe in mud, blood and exhaustion. With Colin’s biomass severely depleted, Jason was reduced to drinking a healing potion, and it wasn’t his first. He’d taken three of healing and two of mana in as quick a succession as he could without poisoning himself.

“I’m an idiot,” he said. “I should have seen this coming from the moment you saw those Builder cultists react.”

Ledev and Jana threw curious glances at Liara.

“They don’t know,” Jason realised, watching Liara’s teammates. “They’re not in the anti-Builder unit? Are they your own team?”

The stealth specialists revealed nothing from their auras but lacked Liara's political training to mask body language.

“They are your team,” Jason said. “This is a private thing. Oh, crap. The old man really is deciding whether to—”

“Yes,” Liara said, cutting him off. That told Jason more about how much Jana and Ledev knew.

“You really think I’d go along with that?” Jason asked. “Especially after today?”

Ledev's face was filled with growing disapproval as he listened to Jason and Liara talk.

“You’re speaking with a princess of the Storm Kingdom,” he told Jason. “You need to address her with respect.”

“Respect is earned,” Jason said wearily. “And lost.”

Ledev opened his mouth to retort but stopped at a gesture from Liara.

“You knew we were here,” Jana said. “If you’d gone quietly, we could have tracked them back to their base and then rescued you.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “Because that’s what selling me out to the Builder cult engenders: trust.”

“I know we haven’t treated you well, here, Mr Asano,” Liara said.

“I spotted that too,” Jason said. “But I won’t claim to be innocent of using others without thinking of the consequences.”

He frowned, then narrowed his eyes at Liara.

“Except you did think about it, didn’t you. By now, you must know pretty much everything I’ve ever done in this world. You’ll know that I have a history of reacting badly when powerful people try to use me. You want to see if I’ve learned better. Except it’s not you. The old man is having me tested, and not just by you. Do say hello to Trenchant when you debrief him.”

“You think you warrant that kind of attention and effort?”

“You’re here, aren’t you?”

“You think very highly of yourself,” Ledev said.

“That’s not news to anyone,” Jason said. “And I never asked for all that effort. I was looking for a nice, quiet stay in your very lovely kingdom.”

“There are no quiet stays in a monster surge,” Jana said.

“It depends on your standards. By mine, a monster surge is plenty relaxing. The Builder invasion will be rough, though. I’ll give you that.”

“You think a monster surge is relaxing?” Jana asked.

“Sure,” Jason said. “You’ve got the Adventure Society and all these gold and diamond-rankers to save the world so you don’t have to do it yourself. They have a great spice market on Arnote; I’m going to put together a mix for cheese enchiladas when I get back.”

“You were right that I’ve learned a lot about you,” Liara said. “And today, I learned more. People the Builder wants to kill personally don’t get nice and quiet, Mr Asano.”

“Then you should check my files again. He’s already killed me personally and it didn’t take. Now he’s sending henchmen. He has no idea how to dark lord properly; he’s doing it all backwards.”

“You and I need to have a long talk, Mr Asano.”

“No, we don’t, Princess of the Storm Kingdom. You just want to.”

He let out a long sigh.

“Look, I’m tired and I still have a job to do, so I’m going to make my last delivery and go home. Come find me in Rimaros and maybe I’ll muster up the energy to get angry and say something stupid. I have a lot of practise.”

“That’s it?” Jana asked and Jason gave her a quizzical look.

“That’s what?” Jason asked.

“An organisation key to orchestrating an interdimensional invasion is targeting you specifically for death. You barely survived their ambush and you’re just going to what? Go about your day?”

Jason gave her a tired but friendly smile.

“Lady, that usually is my day. If I stopped working every time some evil church or the local Magic Society director had me kidnapped, I’d never get anything done. This was meant to be a nice break for me, where people like you deal with the global conspiracies and forces from beyond reality. But your princess, here, went and hung a pork chop around my neck. Now I’m going to be hip deep in zealots, cultists and evil magic robots from space. Again.”

Jason opened the door of the skimmer and slumped into the back seat.

“You can’t just leave,” Ledev said. “We’re not done with you.”

“You’re bloody right you’re not,” Jason said, without turning around to look. “You people are following me until I’m done in case someone else tries to kidnap me. You’re the

ones who told these pricks where to find me, after all. We're only an hour out of the next fort town anyway."

Ledev looked incredulously at the top of Jason's head, laid back on the plush seat of the skimmer. He opened his mouth to talk but again Liara silenced him, putting a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"That's fine," she said. "We owe you that much."

Jason sat up, turned and gave Liara a long, assessing look. Unlike the others, he could not read her sincerity or lack of same at all. He gave her a small nod, turned back and waved his hand forward. The land skimmer started moving, soon zipping away down the road. Ledev's face still showed his anger at Jason's insolence, while Jana looked sceptical and confused.

"Did he say he was kidnapped by a Magic Society director? And what's a robot?"