

## Chapter 637

### A Man of Many Talents

After increasing delays, the convoy was finally preparing to head down the last stretch of road leading into the city of Yaresh. Part of the delay was making sure they had a place waiting to stow their large vehicles for the duration of their visit. They had settled on a fairly low-end camping ground as space was currently at a premium. Many travelling adventurers had already arrived in Yaresh, looking to join the conflict with the messengers. Humphrey and Korinne's teams were far from the only ones to travel in what amounted to ambulatory houses.

Before they left, Humphrey approached the vehicle used by the other team, stopping at the bottom of the ramp that led inside. He waited, knowing that the magic defences would have already alerted the occupants to his presence. He was left standing for several minutes before Korinne appeared at the top of the ramp.

"What can I do for you, Master Geller?"

"After the failed briefing, I thought it would be a good idea for us to discuss the friction between our teams. May I come in?"

Shortly thereafter, Korinne was sitting across from Humphrey in a booth. Unlike when she had been there with Zara, she did not make tea.

"I think it's clear that our teams are having some issues operating together," Humphrey said. "As the leaders, I thought you and I should figure out together if this is something we can remedy, or at least ameliorate, or if the differences are irreconcilable."

"Your team members seem to be blaming us for Asano running off to get his dogle wet instead of working with his team."

"That is not your fault and they know it. But your decision to take on Zara Rimaros has got them riled."

"Are you telling me to kick her out?"

"No. Jason decided that she stays. He's aware that you and your team are not in ideal circumstances and that your involvement with the princess will serve as some manner of compensation."

"He said that, did he?"

"Yes. I'm not putting words in his mouth to try and make you think he's less difficult than he actually is."

"Why is it his decision to make in the first place? Which one of you is the team leader?"

“On our team – our team, not my team - we each take the roles we need to take.”

“That’s a good way to get yourselves killed dithering when everyone tries to take control in the heat of battle. Command structures agree for a reason.”

“And we’ve found what works for us. I won’t claim it will work for your team any more than yours will work for mine.”

“Why are we even talking about this anyway? Didn’t Asano leave the decision about the princess to Lady Remore?”

“It’s Mrs Remore,” Humphrey corrected. “And you’ll find that Jason does things to achieve the outcome he wants, not to say what he means or speak the truth.”

“You’re saying he’s duplicitous.”

“We each have our roles. I already told you that.”

“Fine. But how are we supposed to trust someone who lies to us?”

“We don’t want your trust, Lady Pescos. We want your cooperation or, failing that, for you to stay out of our way. Zara Rimaros used Jason’s name dishonourably, and it dragged him into the exact trouble he wanted to avoid, at the time he most needed to avoid it. That is why having her on your team has put my team at odds with you. We are sensitive about losing Jason because we’ve done it before. He can be fragile in certain regards, and if something happens because of your princess, you’ll find that we are bad enemies to have.”

“Then why let her stay in the convoy at all?”

“Because Jason told us to, and he’s the one she makes trouble for. You wanted to know why Jason gets to choose? That’s why.”

Korinne sighed.

“My team are resentful of yours. It feels like we’re secondary. Tacked on.”

“You are,” Humphrey said. “Do with that what you will.”

Korinne started pacing in thought, a scowl plastered on her face.

“Genuine contention will only drag us both down,” Korinne said. “But a rivalry could be a push that moves us all forward.”

The smile that spread across Humphrey’s face made Korinne suspect he’d been waiting for the suggestion all along.

“I couldn’t agree more,” he said. “And Jason’s absence might just give us the breathing room to find a balance that is beneficial to us all.”

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The city walls of Yaresh were a line of massive trees with walls of glossy black stone filling the gaps between them. Tunnels passed right through the trunks, allowing passage

from one section of wall-top to the next. A black land skimmer arrived at the wall where vehicles were queued up at the gate, awaiting inspection. In the driver's seat was Jason, with Estella Warnock beside him.

Most of the vehicles were hauling cargo on magically powered wagons, some of which were almost the size of a semi-trailer truck. Bulk land freight was inefficient compared to the alternatives magic offered, but was cheap and seemed common locally, based on the vehicles lined up at the gates.

"That's a lot of land transport," Jason pointed out.

"I was thinking the same thing," Estella agreed. "Could be something about local magic conditions that makes other methods less viable. The magic is more than high enough to support airships, though, so I don't know. I'll look into it and see if there's anything going on we need to concern ourselves with."

"I have to say, Miss Warnock, I am increasingly satisfied with the choice to bring you aboard."

"Don't be too happy," Estella said. "I'm calling dibs on your princess."

"What?"

"You heard me."

"You're talking about Zara?"

"Yep. Come down in the world, low self-esteem. That's my zone."

"That's pretty despicable."

"You had your chances."

"I don't mean calling dibs. I mean preying on someone at their lowest."

"Oh, yeah, she's really hurting, with all her money and connections. Not all of us can just adopt ourselves into one of the most prestigious families in the kingdom because being a princess was harshing us out."

"It doesn't sound like you want to chase after her."

"I'll admit I'm not great at pursuing relationships."

"Have you considered maybe trying charm? Getting to know them honestly? Basic decency?"

"None of those are my strong areas."

"Then maybe figure out what your strong areas are and find someone who finds them appealing."

"As it turns out, I'm not really into the people who are into my strengths. My standards are too high to include anyone who'd settle for me."

“You weren’t kidding about low self-esteem being your zone, were you? Watch out for the landing.”

The skimmer turned into a cloud of swirling darkness that was drawn into Jason’s shadow. Jason moved from sitting to standing with practised ease while Estella fell on her rear before getting up and brushing road dirt off her pants.

“I said watch out for the landing.”

“I didn’t know that meant the vehicle would disappear out from under me.”

There were two queues for people looking to enter the city. Rather than joining the vehicle queue, they moved to the shorter queue for those with other means of transport, usually mid-to-high-rank adventurers. These were people that flew under their own power, rode familiars like Jason or portalled into a nearby open area designated for that purpose.

Jason and Estella produced their Adventure Society badges and identity papers. Like Jason's current identity, Estella was registered as an auxiliary that was not required to mobilise, despite the city's adventurers being on a war footing. They were told that the team they were attached to would need to report to the Adventure Society by the end of the day after their arrival. After that notification, the pair were allowed through a tunnel that brought him into the city proper.

“Oh yeah,” Jason said as he emerged and looked around. “Travis won’t be happy about missing a proper elf city.”

They were in a warehouse district centred around the city gate. A four-lane boulevard ran from the gate into the city, but didn't follow the plumb-straight line typical of urban areas. It was instead split into a pair of double lane streets, each following one side of a mostly straight creek. The sides of the street were lined with trees and the space around the buildings was filled with grass.

The buildings were all made from brick in various shades of black, yellow, grey, red and brown, suggesting a wide variety of local stone. Vines were crawling up the walls of every building and the roofs were gently sloped and covered in live grass, bushes and other small-to-medium plants. The air was thick with rainforest smells, damp and earthy. Looking down the boulevard and further into the city, they saw much taller buildings in the distance where stone gave way to glass and metal.

Panning his gaze around, Jason saw very little lumbered wood. What wood he did see looked either natural, with the city accommodating its growth, or having been shaped into often highly specific forms as it grew. The buildings were spaced out, with rainforest growth burgeoning up in between them.

The street was busy with vehicles entering through the city gate next to the tunnel they had just emerged from. Taking more of a look, Jason noticed that many of the vehicles were made from more of the specifically grown wood. Metal-wheeled carriages had wooden frames that not only looked to have been grown that way but also had the faint aura of living plants. The frames looked to be filled out with metal and draped cloth. Other vehicles had similar designs, from three-wheeled single-seaters to bus-like contraptions that had a dozen massive wooden legs instead of wheels.

Other vehicles that Jason was more familiar with were also in evidence. Land skimmers, more conventional carriages and personal floatation discs were all on display. They were minimally present, however, and never driven by the elves that made up the bulk of the population. The local elven ethnicity had skin tones ranging from almond to milk chocolate, while their hair ranged from honey to rich brown. Straight hair was either out of fashion or not natural, with styles ranging from cascading waves to ringlets to explosions of frizzy waves.

Jason and Estella moved out of the way of others emerging from the tunnel and Jason closed his eyes. He took a deep breath, letting it out slowly with a huge grin.

“Do you still have lungs?” Estella asked him.

“No.”

“Then how are you breathing like that?”

“I just do. Doesn’t your body just do the things you want it to?”

“No. My grandfather showed me some techniques for body manipulation, but if I wanted to breathe I’d have to concentrate to make it work.”

“You should practise those techniques some more. It’s nice to be able to sigh sometimes. Studies have shown that sighing is an important component of personal wellbeing, helping to alleviate stress and recalibrate your mood.”

“I’m going to go now. See you in two weeks.”

“Don’t forget that Shade is there if you need to signal for help.”

“You thought I’d forget the person you left hiding in my shadow?”

“You might have.”

“He watches me sleep.”

“Yeah, he mentioned that you snore.”

“What?”

“Mr Asano,” Shade said from Jason’s shadow. “I will thank you for not impugning my character. Miss Warnock, I can assure you that I told Mr Asano nothing about your snoring.”

“I don’t snore.”

“I acknowledge that you assert that, Miss Warnock.”

“You two are as bad as each other,” Estella said. She stormed off, leaving Jason standing at the side of the street.

“Does she really snore?” Jason asked.

“Mr Asano, you were the one who told me not to divulge personal details unless relevant to security. Even if those details sound like someone sawing lumber in a tunnel.”

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Jason spent the day walking through the city, taking things in. Beyond the unconventional architecture, the warehouse district had little to offer and he didn’t tarry. The neighbouring entertainment district proved much more interesting, even early in the day, with bars, cafes and places offering delights ranging from the chaste to the downright saucy. Jason was looking for the place he would begin sampling the local cuisine when he spotted an elf rubbing out the menu board from the outside wall of a small pub.

“Food’s off?” he asked.

“Most of the kitchen crew got in a brawl playing tri-ball,” she said without turning around. “The city militia threw both teams in the cells until tomorrow. Chef’s still in, but unless you know of four at least halfway-decent cooks who’ll work for cheap on short notice, there won’t be enough hands to do food service.”

Still with her back to him, she didn’t see the huge grin overtake Jason’s face.

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Bellory had been sceptical of the strange human, but she stood transfixed as she watched the bustle of activity in the kitchen. As the chef issued directions, a forest of shadow arms poked out from under shelves, out of cupboards or anywhere else a shadow could be found. They also reached out from her new temporary employee, chopping up ingredients, working the grill and frying with pans or plating meals.

“Are you sure it’s okay for those things to touch the food?” she asked the chef, Kellance. He was her cousin.

“The conjured arms are very sanitary,” Jason said.

“Also, I have an active sanitation ritual,” Kellance said. “More sariantes please, Mr Miller.”

“Call me John,” Jason told him. “Which ones are the sariantes? Oh, the shallot-looking things, no worries. They taste good.”

“Have you been sampling ingredients, Mr Miller?”

“Er... no.”

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The rainforest-riddled city offered little in the way of light pollution, making it easy to see the stars shine once the sky grew dark. After the evening rush died down, Jason and Kellance retired to the roof of the pub, in lounge chairs with naturally-grown frames slung with light, comfortable fabric. Between them was a side table with a bottle and two glasses. Once the pub closed for the night, Kellance went home and his spot was taken by Bellory. The bottle was emptied, followed by two more.

“I didn’t realise that elves could put away so much liquor,” Jason said. “I’ve got poison resistance and this stuff still has a kick.”

“Do you know a lot of elves?”

“I haven’t done a lot of drinking with them, it’s true,” Jason said. “Although I’m just realising that I might have and don’t remember it because they drank me under the table. I did make some elven friends, though, when I was living in a port city a few years back.”

“And now you’re following adventurers around?”

“Strictly speaking, they’re following me. They haven’t even arrived yet. Or maybe they have; I’ve been here all day. And I think I just drank all my wages.”

Bellory laughed, a tinkling water sound.

“You don’t mind just being an auxiliary?” she asked. “Waiting back at camp while the others go off and do the fighting?”

“Well, for one,” Jason slurred, holding up a slightly wobbly finger, “have you ever seen adventurers fight monsters? You’re best off staying away from that, believe me. And for a third thing, I serve an important function.”

“You do seem like an important man,” Bellory lied.

“Do you know what a bulvrath is?” he asked.

“I don’t.”

“It’s a bog monster. Likes to ambush travellers on roads that go through swamps and mangroves. Very good at hiding, very cautious. Good at telling the difference between a wagon full of juicy victims and a wagon full of adventurers coming to kill it. Takes days to pin them down, and that’s when you know what you’re doing.”

“And what’s that got to do with cooking? Are they delicious?”

“I haven’t checked. They make nests out of their own poo.”

“I don’t think I’d check either.”

“The point I’m making is that after hunting down a bulvrath, an adventuring team has spent days roaming around a filthy bog, living on spirit coins, for the chance to kill a monster while wading through waste-deep filth. When they come back from that, do you

think they'd rather wash themselves off with soap potion, eat a spirit coin and go to bed, or have a nice, crystal-wash-infused shower followed by a delicious hot meal?"

"You provide showers as well as cook?"

"I'm a man of many talents. I cook, I dance, I provide amenities and I..."

He frowned.

"...I'm a man of three talents."

Bellory laughed again as she emptied the last bottle, splitting the dregs between their glasses.

"So, will you be going back to your amenities?" she asked.

"I don't, strictly speaking, know where they are right now," he said, not exactly lying. Knowing the precise direction and distance wasn't the same as knowing what the location in question was. "I'm sure they've arrived somewhere. My friend Hump said something about a camping ground."

"You have a friend named Hump?"

"You wouldn't like him. He's definitely not super-handsome. I'm sure I can find my way back to them."

"You know," she said, her voice growing husky. "It's awfully late to go looking for your friends, especially in your condition."

"I'm fine," Jason said, his sing-song voice not assisting his plausibility. "I'm fine to go roaming the streets at night, as surely as I'm standing here."

"You're sitting."

"You might have a point then. Are inviting me to stay?"

"Maybe."

"I'd best take this off then," he said reaching under his shirt collar to unclip a small suppression collar.

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- Multiple resistances have increased. All relevant afflictions will have their duration reduced according to new resistance levels.
  - Poison [alcohol (silver rank)] has ended.
  - Poison [alcohol (silver rank)] has ended.
  - Poison [alcohol (silver rank)] has ended.
  - Poison [alcohol (silver rank)] has ended.
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Jason shook his head to clear it, then turned to Bellory, who was giving the suppression collar a flat look.

"I told you I had poison resistance," he said. "Does this mean I'm uninvited?"



“No,” she said, climbing out of her chair and on top of him in his, making the frame squeak. “It means you better remember what that fourth talent is.”