

Chapter 741

An Impossible Act of Forgiveness

The messenger envoy group was set up not too far from where the adventurers were camped outside the city. There were no messengers amongst them, being comprised entirely of what they called the servant races. They had travelled along the network of roads winding through the rainforest, stopping at a clearing not far from the city. A heavy freight land skimmer had been used to move the large metal orb containing the study of the diamond-rank messenger, Mah Go Schaat. It was close enough to be visible from the towers of Emir's palace.

While the study was being delivered to Jason, his team was only part of a full convoy of vehicles being sent to collect it. The Duke of Yaresh, the Adventure Society and the Magic Society were all represented, a string of land skimmers flowing out of the city. Jason and his team joined them outside the city gate in two black skimmers, courtesy of Shade. Allayeth had joined Jason in his skimmer, along with Clive, Humphrey and Neil.

"Why so many people?" Neil asked. "This is something Jason is just picking up and taking away, right?"

"There are concerns that messengers are using this handoff as some kind of ploy," Allayeth said. "That is the stated reason."

"Stated?" Neil asked.

"Politics," Humphrey said. "The interactions with the messengers are important to the city. This means that the city's power factions need to involve themselves or they look irrelevant."

"In this case, they are irrelevant," Neil said.

"I'll bet that's not what the Magic Society wants," Clive muttered darkly. "They're going to try and snake the orb from Jason. Claim it's for the greater good of the city or some other transparent lie. Seriously, I'll bet money. Any takers?"

"No thanks," Jason said.

Amongst the convoy coming from Yaresh, there was no shortage of gold-rankers, all from the city factions. Jason's team were the only outsider adventurers involved. Allayeth was the representative diamond-ranker while Charist remained in the city in case the messengers were attempting something shady.

The highway was a little worse for wear after more than half a year of neglect, starting back with the monster surge. In a rainforest, the plant life encroached fast, even on a magically sealed road. Weeds grew up through cracks and crawled across the surface

from the edge. Trees started to overhang the sides, although the road was still wide enough to allow the passage of the skimmers. The surface was even less of a problem, the skimmers floating around a metre over it as they hovered along the ground.

Jason looked around at the intimidating force riding in the vehicles around them. He picked up dissatisfaction aimed in his direction, mostly from the auras of the silver-rankers, but he didn't begrudge them for it. It was their city, their home, and it had been levelled to the ground. Now, they were heading to meet with agents of the force behind that destruction and they were self-invited hangers-on. It was Jason, an outsider, who was central to the interaction.

The convoy approached the spot at which the messenger servants were waiting, a grassy clearing beside the road. There was a long, straight section of road leading up to them, allowing the convoy to see them from a good way off. They could sense them from even further, letting them determine the strength of the group.

The convoy slowed to a crawl, making a slow and careful approach. This was in spite of their senses revealing that the group from Yaresh was massively overpowered compared to the messenger envoys. Most of the messenger servants were bronze-rank, with only a few silvers. They were also outnumbered.

The heavy freight skimmer amounted to a barge that floated just off the ground. On the back was a metal orb the size of a small cottage, braced in a wooden scaffold. There were also a couple of skimmers that had brought most of the dozen or so messenger servants, mostly elves. Clearly, this was not a force able to face what Yaresh had sent, but it was enough to handle most monsters that attacked the group in transit.

The elves were standing around, their auras pulsing nervous energy. They had known they would be outmatched in terms of power and there was every chance this mission would be their last. Traitors to Yaresh, which had suffered terribly under the messengers, they had to know they were likely to be killed outright. If any of the gold-rankers decided they wanted these people dead, they were more likely to be cheered on than admonished.

The one person with the absolute power to stop that was Allayeth. Having heard her opinion on the issue, however, Jason half-expected her to do the killing herself. As one of the few people present Jason couldn't read even a little, he was unable to predict what she would do.

"They're scared of us," Jason said, feeling Allayeth out.

"They should be," she muttered darkly. "They're traitors."

"Please don't execute them."

“Why shouldn’t we?”

“Because we don’t need to. It doesn’t hurt us if they live. We’re well past the point they could sneak into the city as spies.”

“And what does mercy get us?”

“Mercy isn’t a means, Allayeth. It’s an end. Do you think killing these people would be some kind of justice?”

“They betrayed the city. Betrayed the world.”

“And they will forever be outcasts for that. Once we kick the messengers off this planet, these people will be pariahs wherever they go. Can you honestly tell me that killing them is about justice? Or even punishment? That it wouldn’t be about satisfying your own anger?”

“And what’s wrong with that?”

“When I went back to my world, I was a naked edge. My father told me something that I took far too long to internalise. He told me that when I have all the power, and I’m choosing between life and death, it’s not the person that I’m killing or sparing that matters. I’m what matters. Do I be ruthless or merciful?”

“It’s not your city, Jason. It’s easy for you to be self-righteous.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “It is. It doesn’t make me wrong, though. These people were weak, Allayeth, not evil. They faced a power beyond their ability to confront and it broke them. They couldn’t see a world where the messengers didn’t conquer it, and they did the only thing that made sense to them in that moment: they gave in. If everyone had the strength to stand up against impossible odds, then everyone would be an adventurer. But they’re not. Some people need protection, and those traitors? They are people that you and I failed to protect. Now, we are the great power before them, just as the messengers once were. And like the messengers, we have to choose their fate. Will we be ruthless, like the messengers, or merciful? Maybe even show a little glimpse of hope to people who served the messengers because their hope was dead.”

“That all sounds very nice, Jason,” Allayeth told him. “But the practical reality isn’t like that.”

“And it never will be if we aren’t willing to try and make it that way.”

“What would you do?” Allayeth asked him. “What would you try? You’re famous for ridiculous choices. What would yours be here?”

“You’re not going to like it.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“I’d forgive them.”

“And what would that look like, from a practical perspective?” she asked. “Tell them that we’re sorry that they got turned into traitors and open up the gates of the city to welcome them home?”

“Of course not. Trust but verify. Watch them, carefully. Those people would need massive amounts of counselling, so give it to them. Some you’d be able to help and some would be beyond help. You’d probably have to put those ones down, but not before getting some information out of them. You might even put them to use, let them think they’ve deceived their way into the city. It would make what Estella Warnock is doing a lot easier. Maybe, some of them come out the other side as people who can still live a life, even after all they’ve done. I hope that we all deserve redemption, so long as we’re willing to work for it.”

“What you just described is never going to happen.”

“I know,” Jason said.

“There are so many ways that would go wrong.”

“Yes,” Jason agreed.

“Then why?”

“Because why not try to make things better, even if it seems impossible? Killing is necessary sometimes, but it doesn’t make anything better. At best, it stops something from getting worse. And if we’re being honest with ourselves, sometimes justice is a word we use to mask indulging in our anger. That doesn’t make anything better; it just makes us worse for having done it.”

Allayeth shook her head.

“I did ask for ridiculous,” she said. “I didn’t know what to expect, but you want to help the people who turned to the enemies threatening the entire world. That’s who they betrayed, Jason: the entire world. Wanting to help them is madness.”

“So is getting in a knife fight with the Builder, or patching a hole in the side of reality by building a temple to yourself. Is forgiving all those people and having it work out well in any way possible? Probably not. But you’ll never accomplish the impossible if you aren’t willing to try, Allayeth, and I like the idea of an impossible act of forgiveness. I know that it’s hypocritical of me to be saying all this, after the things I’ve done. And I know that you have much more life experience than me.”

Allayeth’s stern gaze cracked a little, showing a brief glimpse of amusement.

“Are you calling me old?”

“No!” he exclaimed quickly. “Well, yes, but in a good way. But the thing about youth is that it can be passionate. Idealistic. It can chase impossible dreams, and in doing so, be

the change that pushes civilisation forward. I don't know about this world, but in mine, every generation makes society a little bit better. Showing compassion where their parents showed blame. Accepting outsiders where they were once excluded. And every generation before it looks back, calling them frivolous or selfish or caught up in foolish ideas that will never work. They claim that what they want is impossible. The reality is, that positive change is closer to inexorable. And yes, there are some rough steps backward as well. But compared to even a century ago, society is transformed."

"I think that may be the first time I heard you say something good about your world," Neil said. "Normally you just say it's terrible and there are flying wolves everywhere."

Jason groaned.

"No, that's not... look, *Airwolf* is—"

"Nobody cares," Neil cut him off.

Jason lacked the time to get the conversation back on track as the convoy's sluggish pace finally drew it close to the messenger's servants. The Magic Society contingent was the first to move, leaping from their skimmers before they fully came to a stop. There was one gold-ranker amongst them, a monster-core-using administrator, the rest being silver. They were a mix of core-users in society-branded robes and non-core users dressed more practically. They were most likely members of both the Magic and Adventure Societies, as Clive had once been. Jason could sense their emotions, the eager avarice towards the orb and the knowledge it contained.

"I told you they'd try and take it from you," Clive muttered bitterly. "Just like they took the elemental messengers we captured."

"I wonder what happened with that hole the elemental messengers dug up to the surface?" Neil mused. "The Adventure Society was building some kind of defence outpost on top of it, right?"

"Alongside the Magic Society," Clive muttered. "They're keeping very quiet about what's happening with it. It's harder to exploit something when people watch you do it."

"The outpost is being guarded and any messengers that come out of it are being captured," Allayeth said. "They're little more than mindless beasts. More monsters and elementals are coming out than messengers, though. In all of our discussions, the messengers refused to reveal how many of their kind were down there in the first place. And yes, all the messengers are being handed off to the Magic Society."

"They should be giving them to Carlos Quilido," Clive said. "He's the world's foremost expert on involuntary transformation and he's right here in Yaresh. But the Magic Society

won't use him because then it wouldn't be the society taking the most credit for whatever they get out of the messengers."

"I recommend you bring that up with the Continental Council representatives," Allayeth told Clive. "I suspect they will be receptive to that line of argumentation."

"I don't suppose you can get them to back off here?" Jason asked Allayeth.

"I can, but I won't. I will go as far as I need to deal with the messengers, but that orb is a spoil that you asked for, Jason. If you want to keep it, you'll have to prove that you can, and that's politics. As a diamond ranker, I stay out of such things."

"Your friend Charist doesn't," Jason pointed out.

"I am not responsible for Charist's integrity," she told him. "Only my own."

"Yeah," Jason said, his voice resigned but accepting. "That's fair enough."

Humphrey let out an unhappy sigh.

"You know," he said, "for all that I said the gold-rankers were here to support us, I didn't want to go pushing people around. But you negotiated that orb for yourself, and I know why. Having them try to take it from you will not stand."

He hopped out of the skimmer.

"Let's go annoy the Magic Society."

Clive practically bounced out of the skimmer with a maniacal laugh that had everyone giving him wary side glances. He ignored them and marched off after the Magic Society contingent.