

Chapter 466

Responsible Dad

Two skyships moved side by side through the air. One was a traditional vessel crafted from wood with floatation crystals set into the hull. The other was a monstrosity of rough iron and heavy bolts. Despite their differences, both were running damaged.

The wooden ship had been through rushed patchwork modifications to handle the unusual magic conditions it had passed through. It was too late to undo them now that the magic around them had normalised and the crew were doing their best to keep it running until they reached a port and could put it in dry dock for repairs.

The other ship functioned through wholly different design principles and had no trouble handling turbulent magic. It had suffered battle damage, although the basic functioning of the ship was minimally affected. Clive and Belinda had been careful in destroying as little as possible in shutting off the construct factory that took up the bulk of the vessel.

The wooden ship broke off from the other, diverting from its original destination due to the need for emergency repairs. The passengers and goods aboard would need to be transferred to another vessel before they could resume the journey to Vitesse. The iron ship was not equipped for living passengers, its internal space being taken up by industrial production infrastructure. The closest things to cabins were the storage racks for the constructs aboard.

The iron ship was a prize vessel currently captained by Clive. The other iron skyship sent after them by the vast flying city had been crashed into the ground by the other adventuring party. Rather than deal with all the constructs aboard and the factory producing more, they searched out the ship's flight systems and destroyed them.

Although they had then escaped back to the wooden ship, the other adventurers decided to descend to the ground and get left behind to hunt any constructs still functional after the drop. There was the threat of the floating city and the other airships it sent out, which fortunately had not yet been spotted again. The adventurers insisted on staying anyway, the silver-rankers were confident they would safely make their way out of the badlands.

Below decks in the iron ship, the cavernous, industrial space was lit up by Belinda's lantern familiar, Shimmer. Belinda herself was in the control room, steering the vessel while Clive was making sure none of the damage would send this ship plunging towards the ground as well.

With only the team, Jory and Gary on board, it was good that the design of the ship meant that it could be operated by very little crew. The skyship had originally been piloted by a single cultist using the unthinking constructs for manual tasks, a role Clive and Belinda had passed onto Gary and Humphrey. They also had one more assistant who was more enthusiastic than actually helpful.

“Goodbye, rubbish!” yelled a four-armed, two-headed ogre as he threw a large metal object through a hole in the side of the ship.

“No!” Clive yelled out. “Stash, that wasn’t rubbish. Stop throwing things off of the ship.”

“I am strong and big and strong!” Ogre Stash in a booming voice as he held out four massive hands. “Biscuits please.”

“You ripped a hole in the side of the ship,” Clive complained. “That wasn’t even battle damage.”

“I needed a place to throw the rubbish,” Stash complained.

“IT’S NOT RUBBISH! You’re stripping pieces off the ship and throwing them overboard! HUMPHREY, GET UP HERE.”

A shirtless Humphrey, smeared with dark grease crawled up through a hatch in the floor. He had a large wrench in his hand.

“What?” he asked unhappily. “I’ve almost managed to get that panel off without damaging the thing you said I really need to avoid damaging.”

“Which is pointless,” Clive said, “if your familiar keeps yanking random parts off the ship and tossing them out through the hole in the hull.”

“Gary was meant to be watching him,” Humphrey said. “Where is Gary?”

“Taking a nap,” Belinda’s voice called out from the control room. “I heard a rumbling and thought something had shaken loose, but it turned out he was just snoring really loud. I didn’t have the heart to wake him.”

Humphrey was looking at the hole in the hull.

“That wasn’t there before, was it?” he asked.

“No,” Clive said, his jaw clenched. “No, it was not.”

“What happened?” Humphrey asked.

“What do you think happened?” Clive asked, turning to stare at ogre Stash.

“I’m helping! Poo-head Clive won’t give me biscuits.”

Clive stepped up to the giant ogre, completely unintimidated.

“I’ll give you biscuits, you little—”

“Alright,” Humphrey said, stepping between them and holding up his hands. “Stash, why don’t you go up and see if Sophie has any biscuits.”

The ogre rapidly shrank into a small bird, flapping its wings as it hovered in their air.

“Clive sucks donkey balls,” bird Stash chirped as it flew out the hole.

“Stash!” Humphrey scolded as the bird made good his escape.

Humphrey leaned out of the breach to look down with trepidation where Stash had been throwing things. They had moved out of the sparsely inhabited badlands and were now passing over verdant lands as they grew closer to Vitesse. Now they had the ship to bring back they no longer intended to portal for the last leg of the journey. News of the city and the skyships it released had already been delivered to the Adventure Society by the passengers of the wooden skyship after it stopped in a major city.

“He was throwing things out of here?” Humphrey asked as he drew his head back from the hole.

“You need to get your familiar under control,” Clive said.

“Yes,” Belinda said, emerging from the control room. “Because dragons are famous for responding well to being told what to do. Especially when they have Jason Asano as a role model.”

“It does feel like he takes after Jason more than me,” Humphrey said. “That doesn’t seem fair.”

Belinda laughed, slapping Humphrey on the back.

“That’s because Jason’s the fun uncle and you’re stuck being the responsible dad. You need to impress the little guy.”

“Little?” Clive asked. “He was a massive ogre. If this deck didn’t have extra height to fit the constructs built in here, he wouldn’t fit.”

“I’m not going to run around trying to impress my own familiar,” Humphrey said.

“You should try impressing someone,” Belinda said. “Has Sophie seen this whole half-naked, dirty workman thing you’ve got going on? If not, you should rectify that immediately because it’s a good look for you. Seriously, I’d find an excuse to head up on deck right now. Maybe tell her that Clive had you down that hatch and you need the space up there to do some stretches. Now that I say it, I might come too.”

“You’re piloting the ship!” Clive told her.

“We’re in the sky,” Belinda said. “It’s not there’s anything to run into.”

“This is hardly the time,” Humphrey said and Belinda shook her head at him.

"I don't know if you've noticed how our week is going," she told him, "but I suspect things will be going this way for a while. If you want time, Humpy, you're going to have to make it."

"Please don't call me Humpy."

"Why not? I think it could catch on."

"That's why I don't want you to call me that. Look, I get it. Believe me, I do. But right now we're on a stolen boat and I'm worried my familiar threw something overboard that killed a farmer."

"Oh, you remember that do you?" the increasingly cranky Clive asked. "Lucky for you and your troublemaking lizard, I've got it covered. Just watch."

Humphrey saw the large metal object Stash had thrown float up from the outside of the ship and he shuffled out of the way as it moved in through the hole. Outside of the hull, Onslow the flying tortoise was matching pace with the skyship, several more of Stash's projectiles floating around him.

"He can control metal with one of his shell runes now," Clive explained. "I had a bad feeling when your familiar tore open the side of the ship, so I sent Onslow out as a precaution."

More of the things Stash had thrown out of the ship were floating around Onslow and started moving back into the ship through the hole.

"Could he use that on armoured enemies?" Humphrey asked.

"It's like telekinesis powers," Clive said. "People can block it with their aura. I normally have him use it to throw things at people or use tools. Now that Stash has stopped lobbing things off the ship I can get my non-useless familiar back to actual work."

"Stash isn't useless," Humphrey said. "He's just been a bit excitable since he found out Jason is still alive."

Clive's expression showed his dissatisfaction but he nodded a weary acknowledgement.

"Haven't we all," he said. "Just don't let the little... don't let him back down here."

"I can probably manage that," Humphrey said.

"When do you think we'll see him?" Clive asked. "Jason, I mean."

"I'm not sure. If the monster surge has really started, Jason's out there somewhere but we'll need to report in at the Vitesse Adventure Society branch. It'll be hard to move around until it's over."

"Can't we just not report in?" Belinda asked.

“No,” Humphrey said, his tone brooking no discussion. “No one shirks, not during a monster surge. Especially this monster surge, given what we've learned and what we've now seen for ourselves.”

“Besides,” Clive said. “We'll need the Adventure Society to find him since he could show up anywhere. Communications will be at a premium for a while but Adventure Society records are magically updated across all branches. Jason's a registered member of our team so we can put in a request to be notified of any change in status. Going from dead to alive is a big change in status, so as soon as Jason turns up at a branch, we get notified.”

“Jason's an adventurer,” Humphrey said. “It's not just what he does, but who he is. My mother once said that Jason was the most natural-born adventurer she's ever seen. She told me that because she said it would get him killed and, being Mother, she was right. We saw him die an adventurers death with our own eyes. Wherever he's been, whatever he's been through, I refuse to believe that's changed.”

“Humphrey,” Belinda said. “I warned you to snatch up Sophie before we find Jason and she gets turned around. I'm starting to think that I should have warned her.”

“That's not really a public conversation, Lindy,” Humphrey said. “Wait, what are you talking about?”

“Are you in love with Jason?” she asked.

“What? That's absurd.”

“You didn't just hear yourself,” Clive said. “If I hadn't spent the last year watching you and Sophie dance around each other like awkward teenagers, I'd completely believe it.”

Humphrey went pale.

“You know about... I mean, there isn't anything to...”

His shoulders slumped.

“Does everyone know?”

“Of course they do,” Clive said. “It's completely obvious. But only I had to watch it every damn day. I spend one more night around a campfire with you two swapping winsome glances, I'm going to start throwing rocks.”

“What about Dawn?” Belinda said.

“You think her and Jason?” Clive asked.

“Not that,” Belinda said. “Although, maybe, now you say it. But can't she have the Adventure Society find Jason? She has more pull than any of us. She could find where he is, we go there and register with the local Adventure Society branch there and everything works out.”

“Maybe,” Humphrey said. “If Dawn is willing, it depends on how far into the monster surge he arrives. We aren't going to wait around not participating. When the monster surge starts, you show up and do your bit. That's just how it works.”

“We should be doing our bit with Jason,” Clive said and Belinda nodded her agreement.

“The Adventure Society isn't entirely inflexible,” Humphrey said. “If he's somewhere Mother has been, they might let her go fetch him back. It's a question of whether the branch he's at permits him to go and if Mother gets enough time free. The demand on gold-rankers is especially heavy during monster surges.”

Stash flew up to where Sophie, Neil and Jory were leaning on the rail of the open deck watching the land pass by underneath them. He turned into a puppy and landed in Sophie's arms to get a scratch behind the ears.

“Biscuit, please.”

“Did Humphrey say you could have a biscuit?” Sophie asked. Neil and Jory shared a look over how much she sounded like a woman who suspected her child had asked his dad for something first and was told to ask his mother.

“Yes!” Stash said. “I'm a good boy who helps out.”

Sophie matched the innocent puppy eyes with a suspicious glare.

“Alright,” she said finally and took a biscuit from the dimensional pouch on her belt. She smiled as Stash happily ate it from her hand.

“Look,” Jory pointed, Sophie and Neil looking up. A large orb was flying towards the skyship faster than the ship itself could move. The orb looked like a snow globe without any snow, containing a full-scale quaint little cottage.

“Well, she did say she would contact us again before we reached the city,” Neil said. “It still seems weird that she flies around in a cottage, though. She's like the villain in a fable for kids.”

Chapter 467

Surge Protocols

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

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

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

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

Jason narrowed his eyes as he looked into the distance.

“What is it?” Farrah asked.

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

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

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

“Of course,” Jason said.

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

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

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

She turned to look at him.

"What?" he asked.

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

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

"I'd avoid changing anything too much."

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

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

"What's a marbula?" Jason asked.

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

"That's harsh."

"Just don't overdo the aura disguise."

"It's good like this, though?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Don’t forget your spirit domain.”

“Oh, thanks.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We both intend to register."

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

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

"And are you two a formally registered team?"

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

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

"Because we died," Farrah said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vidal turned his gaze on Asano.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vidal stood up.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Livaros will have crystal wash.”

“SHADE! We’re changing course!”

Chapter 468

Disappointed or Relieved

Dawn's cottage bubble flying vessel floated over the deck of the skyship. Dawn emerged from the cottage, walked down the short garden path to the bubble surrounding it and stepped through, like passing through a waterfall. She dropped lightly to the deck and the bubble shrank before dropping into her hand. She then placed the vessel into a pouch on her belt.

Sophie, Neil and Jory watched this happen, with a grimy and half-naked Humphrey coming up on deck just as Dawn was putting her astral ship away. Dawn looked over at Humphrey, then at Sophie.

"Did you ...?" Dawn asked her.

"This wasn't me," Sophie said. "Neil, Humphrey's pretty dirty. You should go help soap him up."

"You're a degenerate," Neil muttered as he marched towards the stairs leading below. "I'll go get the others."

"Thank you for loaning me this, by the way," Dawn said, handing Sophie a recording crystal.

"What's that?" Jory asked.

"You don't need to worry about that," Sophie told him. She deftly avoided puppy Stash, cradled in one arm, from snatching the crystal from her fingers and slipped it into a pocket.

Soon the rest of the group was coming up on deck. Gary was yawning while Belinda argued with Clive.

"It'll be fine," Belinda said. "I put a metal bar there to hold the thing in place and tied a rag around it so it wouldn't slip."

"That is not any way to fly a skyship," Clive argued.

"I told you before: we're in the sky. There's nothing to run into."

"We don't even have a full handle on how this thing works," Clive said. "Not to mention someone's troublemaking lizard was tearing random parts off the ship."

"There's a lizard?" Stash exclaimed, leaping out of Sophie's arms. "I'm gonna catch it!"

Puppy Stash scrambled across the deck, dodging between legs and disappearing down the stairs.

“I need a break,” Clive said. “I hope we find Jason on a beach somewhere, grilling meat.”

“It does sound pretty likely,” Gary said. “Remember when we were rushing to rescue him when he was kidnapped and found him adjusting his cufflinks with the bad guy tied up?”

“Yeah, and then he passed out for three days,” Neil said. “What kind of idiot uses the last of his energy after getting tortured to put on a sharp suit?”

The group gathered together on the deck, respectfully greeting Dawn.

“The reason I have come to you here,” Dawn said, “is that it would not do you any favours if we were to maintain contact once all the eyes in Vitesse are upon me.”

“Why not?” Neil asked. “Isn’t knowing someone influential a good thing?”

“We’re silver-rankers,” Humphrey said. “We’re better off without gold and diamond-rankers paying us attention.”

“More importantly,” Dawn said, “so is Jason. He has a task to complete and until he does, it would be best if some of the secrets he brought back remain secret. Specifically, he took something the Builder left in Jason's world. This item was supposed to give the Builder influence over whoever was forced to use it but Jason absorbed the item entirely, purging the Builder’s influence and gaining an amount of power over the Builder’s minions.”

“Well that certainly sounds useful,” Clive said. “If that information gets around, the Adventure Society will tie Jason to a stick and start waving him at the Builder.”

“Shouldn’t they?” Jory asked. “It sounds like Jason could be a powerful weapon. That shouldn’t go to waste.”

“You think Jason is going to hide?” Humphrey said. “You weren’t there, Jory. Six of us went to battle against the Builder and his army of constructs, cultists and whatever it was he turned those priests into. Jason fought the Builder himself, and he died making sure that the rest of us succeeded.”

“And all this was after he was chained up while the Builder tortured his soul,” Neil added. “Say what you will about Jason – which I personally intend to do at length – but the Builder threw everything you can throw at Jason and Jason came back for more. The Builder killed him. With his own hands, kind of. And that still hasn't stopped the smug prick who probably came back from the dead just to keep annoying the crap out of everyone. Jason roaming around of his own volition will do more to hurt the Builder than anything the Adventure Society can dream up, I can promise you that.”

"I think that's the nicest thing you've ever said about Jason," Clive said to Neil. "While somehow still including the phrase 'smug prick.'"

"It's a low bar," Neil acknowledged.

Sophie stayed out of the conversation and was still watching Dawn.

"You want us to look for Jason instead of you," Sophie said.

"Yes," Dawn said. "It will be odd for you to have the Adventure Society track the status of your dead team member but not attention-grabbing. In any case, I am still in the process of travelling around and disseminating what information I can about the Builder's invasion."

"What about that floating city?" Humphrey asked. "What's being done?"

"The invasion platforms are appearing all over the world," Dawn said. "They are the concern of the Adventure Society. Your concern is Jason."

"There are more of those things?" Gary asked

"That's how the Builder is invading?" Clive asked. "Flying cities?"

"Not all of them fly and not all are cities. The scale is roughly the same with each, but the power level is not. The strongest invasion platforms can only appear where the dimensional skin of your world is most permeable."

"So, Greenstone doesn't have some diamond-rank sky city invading it," Humphrey said with relief. Regardless of their feelings about it, every team member but Jason had been raised in Greenstone. The desperate battle where Jason died had been fought to protect it.

"What happens when Jason turns up somewhere?" Jory asked. "They aren't going to let us just run off in the middle of a monster surge."

"We can request a travel dispensation," Humphrey said. "If we bring in this ship for the Magic Society to study, plus do some good work during the surge, the fact that our team member came back from the dead should be enough that either we can get him to us or go to him."

"Young Master Geller is correct," Dawn said. "Using my influence might be faster, but faster is not always better. I shall provide Mr Standish with a discreet means to contact me should you find Jason's location or find yourselves in desperate need of assistance."

"I thought you could only take action once," Belinda said. "You're willing to waste it on us?"

"Jason would not see it as a waste if it keeps you all alive," Dawn said. "In his time away, he came to understand how much he needs you all."

"Maybe not Neil," Belinda muttered.

“Jason has earned my help,” Dawn said. “Both with the sacrifices he has made and the sacrifices to come.”

“What does that mean?” Neil asked. “Does that mean us? I don’t want to get sacrificed.”

Approaching the island of Livaros, Jason and Farrah immediately spotted the differences from Arnote, which they had left behind without making landfall. The shoreline was mostly cluttered with ports, docks and marinas, as far as they could see in either direction. There were a few places, though, where large houses sat behind pristine beaches or atop rocky cliffs. Some of the cliffs had skyships docked against them, presumably connected to the houses through tunnels inside the rock face.

Moving their gaze inland, the island appeared to be a single sprawling city, albeit an affluent one based on the quality materials, craftsmanship and architecture of the buildings. White stone abounded, with wide, tree-lined streets. More skyships could be seen inside the city, docked to towers that loomed over the surrounding buildings.

“Is that a port for flying ships?” Jason asked.

“Yes,” Farrah said. “You’ll see at least one in any city that isn’t magically barren.”

“Okay, this is pretty great,” Jason admitted, mollified after not stopping at Arnote. “Maybe I should get this thing flying.”

Since passing by Arnote, the level of water traffic they saw had steadily increased. Once they were approaching the more populous Livaros, it had been joined by air traffic with skyships flying overhead and smaller flying vehicles moving between Livaros on the ground and the sky islands scattered around.

The vehicles they were seeing ranged from magical boats to flying carriages to trained magical beasts. There was a preponderance of people riding different forms of a creature similar to a manta ray, in a plethora of sizes and colours.

Smaller ones had a single rider and skipped over the water like a stone. Others carried multiple people surrounded by a bubble of air as in plunged under the water. Some were even flying through the sky, one of which was huge and carried more than a dozen people.

“I think you need to tone down the disguise a bit, before we arrive,” Farrah told him. “I think keeping a low profile is the right move but you got caught up in the idea of disguising your aura. It’s impressive, don’t get me wrong, but it’s not like people are out looking for you.”

“Builder cult.”

“Yeah, but you’re not hiding your name, are you? They won’t be going around asking people if they’ve spotted an outworlder with good aura control.”

“Fair point,” Jason acknowledged.

“What you can do with your aura is great,” Farrah said. “Just because you can do something doesn’t make it a good idea. How about instead of transforming yourself, you just act like a sensible person.”

“That’s not my strong suit,” Jason warned. “I’m more familiar with plans that seem great in my head and more-or-less work but have unintended consequences because I really don’t know what I’m doing or just couldn’t keep my mouth shut.”

Farrah turned to give him a flat look.

“What?” Jason asked with an innocent expression. “I can be self-aware. Eventually.”

“I’m just saying,” Farrah said, “that acting like a sensible person makes for a better disguise than turning yourself into a creepy sleaze. Which I would have had time to explain if you’d shown me what you were going to do more than half a minute before the guy reached us.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” Jason said. “I pretty much completely hid my sin essence.”

“Jason, I think you’re underestimating what it takes to stand out in a proper adventuring city. How about you just try being yourself and take the time to get to know this place, its people and the culture before loudly explaining to the most powerful person you can find why they’re immoral.”

“I do like to try new things,” Jason said. “I can give it a go.”

“And don’t try to sleep with their princess.”

“I’m not going to sleep with their princess.”

“I know you’re not going to sleep with their princess. I’m saying don’t try.”

“I won’t.”

“Good.”

“But what if they have a lot of princesses?”

“Jason...”

“That Vidal guy suggested the royal family is pretty big. They might be hard to avoid.”

Farrah shook her head.

“This is not going to go well.”

As they drew closer to the island, someone was approaching the yacht on a small vehicle that looked to Jason like a bamboo jet ski.

“Oh, nice,” Jason said.

The rider approached the yacht, turning and matching speed as it came alongside. A friendly voice called up from the water.

“Hello, onboard! I’m from the Port Esten Docking Office. Can I come aboard?”

“Certainly,” Farrah called back. “You can dock at the rear platform.”

Jason and Farrah moved to the rear of the yacht where a low docking platform for small watercraft emerged from the side of the yacht as a door opened in the hull. The rider approached on his personal watercraft and stepped onto the yacht, lifting the small craft out of the water and resting it on the platform. The vehicle was rather light, making it easy for his bronze-rank strength.

The man was a celestine, with sea-green hair, matching eyes and an easy smile. He was dressed quite like Jason with tan shorts, a bright floral shirt and no shoes. His aura was non-threatening, with the unmistakable feel of heavy core use. This man was no adventurer.

The man looked to be in his early thirty to Jason’s eyes. For a bronze-ranker, that meant he was probably fifty or more. He looked around, taking in what appeared to be a painted metal hull, white in classic yacht style.

“Cloud ship, yeah?” he asked.

“How can you tell?” Jason asked.

“I’ve worked the Livaros ports since I was a wee tacker,” he said. “I’ve seen just about every conveyance ever put to water or sky. You see enough cloud ships and you learn to spot them, even when they’re disguised. We’ve got a few of them docked right now and there’ll be more with the surge supposedly about to jump off. Of course, we’ve been told that before.”

“This time, you can believe it,” Farrah said.

“Yeah? Adventurers are you? Anyway, is this just a cloud ship or one of them fancy ones you keep in a bottle? Don’t see a lot of those, even here.”

“Bottle,” Farrah said.

“Nice. Oh, I’m Albert, by the way, but everybody calls me—”

“Bert?” Jason asked.

“No, Al,” Albert said. “You can call me Al.”

“And you can call me Betty,” Jason said, earning him a slap on the arm from Farrah.

“I’m Farrah and this is Jason,” she said, giving Jason a scolding glare.

“Sorry,” Jason said. “I can’t tell if I’m disappointed or relieved you’re not a Bert.”

“You're a bit of an odd duck, aren't you?” Albert said, looking Jason up and down. “Still, can't fault your taste in clothes. Are you fine folks looking to dock the boat and live on it, or will you put it back in the bottle and seek other accommodation?”

“I think we'll put it away,” Farrah said, nodding her head at Jason. “This one has ideas about buying a little plot of land on Arnote and living the quiet life.”

“Can't fault you there,” Albert said. “I'd like to do that myself, someday. Got some family there. It's not a bad choice, either. Most of you adventurer types like to stay in the action, so there'll be competition for places on Livaros, be it in the marinas or the inns. There's been a lot of activity lately, with the latest round of rumours about the surge. Arnote might not be as convenient to the Adventure Society but you shouldn't have trouble finding a place. Just make sure you don't go causing trouble.”

“That's what we've heard,” Jason said. “So, what do we do now?”

“If you're going to bottle up your boat, then that simplifies things for all of us. I'll guide you into port, you get rid of your boat and we're all done. I can point you straight at the Adventure Society port office if you'd like.”

“That would be great,” Jason said. “We appreciate the...”

Albert and Farrah looked at Jason, whose eyes had gone wide as he trailed off. He was frozen for a moment and then snapped into action. He pulled out his cloud flask and set it down and the still-moving yacht started the slow process of returning to the flask. It would take around ten minutes for the yacht to completely dissolve around them.

“I think you're jumping ahead there, friend,” Albert said.

“Shade,” Jason barked. “Give us two of those bamboo watercraft. Once the cloud flask is done collecting the yacht, collect the flask.”

Two patches of darkness moved from Jason's shadow to the water behind the yacht and turned into black replicas of Albert's small vehicle.

“Sorry Al,” Jason said. “We'll be making our own arrangements, but thank you. Farrah, we need to go.”

Without waiting, Jason jumped onto one of the vehicles and it launched off towards the island, spraying water behind it. Farrah gave Albert an apologetic smile.

“Sorry,” she said. “He can be a bit dramatic.”

“What's going on?” Albert asked.

“No idea,” she said and then jumped on the other black watercraft and immediately shot away.

Albert shook his head and then pushed his watercraft back into the water.

“Adventurers,” he muttered to himself.

Chapter 469

More Paperwork

Unlike most of the temples in Rimaros, the city's main temple of Knowledge was not to be found in the temple district on the island of Livaros. Instead, it could be found on the second-largest of the city's sky islands, one of the few which could be accessed by the public. The island was primarily known for being the location of the Rimaros Magic Society campus, which held ownership and control of the island.

In a major city like Rimaros, the temple of Knowledge was an important resource for the many magical researchers and had a symbiotic relationship with the Magic Society branch. Within the temple was a chamber specifically for incoming portals. A portal appeared and two people emerged before it closed behind them.

"This had best be as important as you claim," Rufus Remore said darkly. "I have my own concerns."

Rufus was tall and lean, with dark skin and a bald head. He was wearing loose clothes, having come from the humid Mistrun Delta in Greenstone.

"I am a priestess of the goddess of Knowledge," Gabrielle Pellin told him. "I am fully aware of your concerns. You used to be more polite, Mr Remore."

Gabrielle was no longer the teenage iron-ranker that had been Humphrey's girlfriend. With age and rank, her already impressive looks had blossomed into dangerous beauty, with olive skin, chocolate hair and graceful poise.

She led Rufus forward, out of the chamber and into the larger temple. It was mostly comprised of a vast library covering multiple wings, each with multiple storeys.

"How long have you known they were alive?" Rufus asked.

"When Jason Asano both died and came back to life, Mr Remore, he was beyond the vision of this world's gods."

"But you knew."

"I serve the goddess of Knowledge, Mr Remore, not the goddess of assumptions. If I told you that Jason Asano was alive and I was wrong, how would you feel about that? And as for Miss Hurin, that came as a surprise to even the goddess."

"Are you saying they are already here?"

"As we speak, a local Adventure Society official is directing them to the island of Livaros."

"We're in Rimaros?"

"We are. I imagine you will wish to greet them on their arrival at port."

Rufus frowned.

“I apologise, Priestess Pellin. You have done me a service, only to receive discourtesy in return.”

“The last member of my church you spoke with, you slapped in the face,” she said, her voice tinged with amusement. “I consider discourtesy a welcome step in the right direction.”

-
- [Contact \[Rufus Remore\] has entered communication range.](#)
 - [Contact \[Gabrielle Pellin\] has entered communication range.](#)
-

The personal watercraft Shade had taken the form of all but flew over the water. Only magic kept the ultralight vehicle from flipping over. Jason was an experienced jet ski rider and this strange bamboo variant wasn't that different. He was in a half-crouch as it skimmed over the water, moving between larger boats as he made his way into port.

Jason homed in on the familiar aura like a beacon until he spotted a bald, black head on the busy dockside. He conjured his cloak and launched himself into the air, then glided down to land in front of his friend. As the cloak dissolved around him, he flashed the stunned-looking Rufus a huge grin.

“G'day, bloke.”

Rufus looked Jason over. The strange eyes, the aura that had yet again gone through massive changes. Now they were equal rank, Rufus had a new appreciation for its oppressiveness. As Jason's aura withdrew to a discrete state, Rufus realised Jason had unveiled it so that Rufus would sense the personal crest marked upon it.

“Farrah thought I was a shape-shifter or something,” Jason said.

Rufus clasped Jason in a fierce hug.

“Crikey,” Jason croaked. “It's good to see you mate, but it feels like you're trying to juice me.”

“Farrah,” Rufus said, not letting Jason go.

“Look behind me, mate.”

Rufus released Jason and looked out at the water. Farrah was just rising from her own watercraft on wings of fire, swiftly joining them on the dock. She and Rufus joined in a wordless hug.

As they did, Jason turned to the priestess.

“Gabrielle,” he greeted.

“You were quite correct, Mr Asano. She is not the goddess of Solid Deductions Made on the Basis of Reasonable Evidence.”

Jason chuckled.

“Still don’t like me much, do you?” he asked.

“I am glad that you are no longer dead.”

“That’s still goodwill, so I’ll take it. I assume that your boss is responsible for getting Rufus here?”

“There was a brief window before the Adventure Society starts claiming the time of every portal user, including those belonging to the church. Even my trip here will last until the monster surge is done. My Lady sent Rufus Remore here as a gesture, having not let your companions know of your likely resurrection. Your other companions are currently indisposed and by the time they reach Vitesse, it will be too late to bring them here immediately. They will need to make their own way to you.”

“They’re all alright, then?”

“They are well and together.”

Jason gave Gabrielle a bow of gratitude, startling her.

“Even though she already knows my gratitude, please convey my thanks to your goddess, Priestess Pellin.”

“I will do so, Mr Asano.”

“Why did she send you too?” Jason asked. “To keep an eye on me?”

“You have an important task to complete, Mr Asano.”

“And what do you know of that?”

“My goddess only told me that it is your secret to share or – and she wished to voice her strong preference on this – not to share.”

Rufus and Farrah came up behind him, Rufus’ arm slung over Farrah’s shoulder. If the smile on his face was any wider, the top half of his head would have fallen off. He clasped a hand on Jason’s shoulder.

“You have to tell me everything,” he said. “Everything.”

The trio got some directions from the Adventure Society port office and started making their way through the city. There was a lot of personal transportation magic on display in boulevards and avenues thick with essence users. Some rode mounts, others magical carriages. Personal float disks were the most common, although there were some interesting variations. Jason was particularly taken with the ones that produced a mist that made it seem like the rider was drifting about on a cloud.

“Can you do a cloud thing?” Jason asked Shade.

“I can do a black cloud,” Shade said.

“Never mind.”

“Jason,” Farrah said, “this is not the time to be playing Monkey Magic.”

“What’s monkey magic?” Rufus asked.

“She’s talking about Sun Wukong,” Jason said. “It’s a legend from my world.”

“No,” Farrah said, “I’m talking about the old Monkey TV show, as you well know.”

“That’s not what I was thinking,” Jason said.

“Are you going to stand there and tell me the theme song isn’t playing through your head right now?”

“Fine,” Jason admitted. Rufus was looking at them in horror.

“Jason... what did you do to Farrah?” he asked.

“It’s fine,” Jason said. “Shade, some horses, please.”

“Horses,” Farrah said as three dark horses with glowing white manes and hooves were formed out of Jason’s shadow.

“What’s wrong with horses?” Jason asked.

“I thought the reason you couldn’t have Shade turn into a heidel in the other world was that your world didn’t have heidels,” Farrah said.

“Sounds about right,” Jason said.

“Our world doesn’t have horses.”

“You probably just haven’t seen them,” Jason said.

“Shade?” Farrah asked.

“I am merely the vessel, Miss Farrah. The actual power belongs to Mr Asano, and any limitations he has, or chooses to impose, are his own.”

“Come on,” Jason said hastily as he mounted one of the horses. “Can’t hang about all day.”

On the upstairs balcony of a café, just outside the Livaros temple district, a table was covered in plates.

“This is fantastic,” Jason mumbled happily around a forkful of food. “I’ve been living almost entirely on spirit coins for the last couple of years.”

“Because of the food shortages you mentioned,” Rufus said and Jason nodded.

“His world was never equipped for monsters,” Farrah said. “Once the concentrated, localised monster surges started happening, much of the trade and transport infrastructure collapsed.”

“It sounds like your world saw some dark days,” Rufus said solemnly.

“We’ll explain more once we’re a little more secluded,” Farrah said.

Jason mumbled his agreement.

“Let’s just focus on the happy stuff for now,” he said. “Are there any more of those dumplings?”

“What we should focus on is getting ourselves organised,” Farrah said. “As it stands, we don’t have any place to stay and we remain, so far as I’m aware, dead. As far as any records are concerned, anyway.”

“We need to update your status with the Adventure Society,” Rufus said. “The others will be looking for that.”

“So, you met Dawn,” Jason said to Rufus. “How’s she doing?”

“She seemed normal,” Rufus said. “Whatever that means for a diamond-ranker. They appear how they want to appear.”

“Dawn took a little while to loosen up, but she got there,” Jason said. “Mostly. I think it was her boss’ idea. Wanted her to reconnect with her mortality.”

“You’re about as mortal as it gets,” Farrah told Jason. “Which is odd for a man who keeps coming back from the dead.”

“I was expecting something more ominous,” Jason said. “Skull motif, lots of black.”

“No,” Farrah said, “That’s more you and the god of Undeath.”

Rufus, Farrah and Jason were standing outside of what looked like a rather nice memorial centre with lots of tasteful white stone and neatly manicured gardens. It was a long way from what Jason expected from the temple of Death. The trio stepped onto the grounds to start making their way through the pleasant garden pathways to the main building. As soon as he set foot on the path, Jason froze.

-
- You have entered a spirit domain.
 - You may not claim this territory as a spirit domain unless it is surrendered to you.
-

Jason cautiously probed with his aura but got no negative reactions.

“What’s wrong?” Rufus asked.

“I’ll tell you later,” Jason said. “It’s fine.”

“Are these gardens laid out as an array?” Jason asked.

“Good eye,” Farrah said. “The dead are stored in temples of Death, so they all have arrays of ritual formations to protect against any necromantic power, be it inadvertent or deliberate.”

"You can get accidental zombies?" Jason asked.

"It's magic," Rufus said. "You can get anything."

"So, does the god of Undeath get a temple?" Jason asked. "It'd be more of a secret thing that people try and wipe out as soon as they find it, right?"

"Yes," Rufus said. "It's the same for most of the purely harmful gods, although Undeath is one of the worst. They have to hide them because the Adventure Society, the churches and any local authorities will raze them to the ground. Unless the local authorities are in league with them, which is a complete mess."

"That was actually how Rufus, Gary and I met," Farrah said. "We've told you about the zombie plague we all ended up fighting together. There was a temple of Undeath at the heart of it all. The local mayor was the high priest; it was a huge mess."

"I've never seen that many undead," Rufus said.

"I wish I could say the same," Farrah said, Jason nodding his agreement. Rufus gave them both a worried look.

The main building of Death's temple proved oddly pleasant, with clergy wandering around in white robes, open space and plenty of light.

"This is not a place for the dead," an acolyte explained as he led Jason and Farrah through the halls while Rufus waited in the lobby. "The dead have already passed on and their sacred remains are respectfully prepared for their ultimate disposition in the deep places of the temple. This place is truly for those who remain. A place to come together and celebrate their lost love ones and the life that remains."

"Death care is really exploitative where I come from," Jason said. "Your goddess probably stops that kind of thing from happening here, right?"

"My goddess stops it from happening everywhere," the acolyte said.

"Our definition of everywhere," Farrah said, "is more expansive than what you're thinking of."

They were shown into an office where a bronze-rank priest got up from his chair to meet them. His hair and eyes were a matching sea-green colour and he had an easy smile. He appeared to be in his thirties, which meant closer to fifty for a bronze-ranker. Jason and Farrah shared a look.

"I think I'm going insane," Jason said. "People keep wondering and now it's finally happened."

"I'm sorry?" the priest asked.

"Your name isn't Al by any chance, is it?" Farrah asked.

"Ah," the priest said. "You must have met one of my brothers."

"It's happening again," Jason muttered.

"I'm Aldrich Albericci," the priest introduced himself. "But everyone calls me Al."

"You don't happen to have seven brothers do you, Al?" Farrah asked.

"I do," Aldrich said. "Alvin, Alexander, Alan, Albert, Alistair, Alfred and..."

Aldrich rolled his eyes.

"...Alejandro. He's the sexy one."

"You aren't all identical?" Farrah asked.

"No, we are," Aldrich said. "Mr Asano, Miss Hurin, please do sit."

Jason was shaking his head as he sat down across the desk from the priest.

"Is he alright?" Aldrich asked. "He didn't come back from the dead a bit funny did he?"

We get that sometimes."

"You know who we are," Farrah said. "You know why we're here, then."

"I do," Aldrich said. He took an envelope from his desk drawer and placed it on the table. "Identity certifications for you both. It's quite unusual for people to both die and come back from the dead outside of our goddess' gaze. She is, however, still the goddess of Death. She knows of each time you have fallen and each time you have returned. She gave me specific instruction to ask you to be more careful, Mr Asano. She may not know the details, but she is aware that death is becoming an unfortunate habit for you."

"Yeah," Jason said wanly. "Coming back from the dead is kind of my thing."

"She would rather it wasn't, so please do her a favour and stop dying in the first place."

"Thank you for this," Farrah said, taking the envelope.

"Helping the living with the affairs of the dead is why we are here," Aldrich said. "It's just that when the living and the dead are the same person, there's more paperwork."

As they were about to leave, something occurred to Jason and he turned around in the door.

"Al," he said. "I don't suppose one of your brothers is a tailor?"

Chapter 470

Multi-Talented

Rimaros was a city of well-trained and powerful essence users, meaning many strong auras and powerful senses. With the number of essence users present in the city, and more pouring in for the monster surge, it was a disorienting cacophony for those able to sense it. This was one of the main reasons that aura retraction was a key point of etiquette.

While any essence user could sense auras, detecting the senses of others being projected out was something that required training. In Rimaros, the appropriate training was commonplace, which is why it was similarly impolitic for people to project their senses to the full extent. Jason appreciated the courtesy others showed in not blasting out their auras and their senses and returned the courtesy in kind.

Standing in a crowd of adventurers, this was especially important. Jason, Farrah and Rufus were outside the administration building of the Adventure Society's main campus, which was the beating heart of the island of Livaros. Adventurers were streaming in from all over the city and beyond to register for the monster surge and even the exterior of the administration building was crowded almost shoulder to shoulder. Jason, Farrah and Rufus were stuck outside, waiting amongst the throng.

Adventurers were being prioritised by rank by the Adventure Society officials managing the crowd, but there was no shortage of silver-rankers. It was a big change for Jason, after Greenstone and then Earth. In both places, silver-rankers were high ranking elites at the top of their respective societies.

"Notice how there aren't any iron-rankers around," Rufus said. "In a true adventuring city like Rimaros, they're considered not much different from normals. If you aren't careful in their training, iron-rankers can very easily die from the monsters that manifest in this region. It's why the training annex I've been building in Greenstone will be so valuable. Part of what has made the Gellers so successful is that they realised long ago that the prestigious high-magic regions aren't better for everything."

"Do you know if there is a branch of the Geller family here?" Farrah asked. "Perhaps they could get word to Danielle Geller."

"I'm not sure," Rufus said. "It's certainly worth exploring, once we're done with this mess."

Farrah looked over at the bronze-rankers, boxed out by the silver's being given priority.

“Bronze-rankers here,” she said, “are much like iron-rankers in Greenstone. They’re inexperienced and untested.”

“Here, and in places like Vitesse, iron and bronze-rankers are coddled. They have to be. When bronze and iron monsters do spawn here, it’s in massive herds. They get thinned out and the low-rank adventurers are set loose on them. No autonomy, no spontaneity. It’s why we jumped at the chance to get out from under supervision and come to Greenstone, and what makes the training annex valuable,”

Farrah put a hand on Rufus’ shoulder.

“We know, sweetie. Your family runs a school.”

Jason snorted a laugh as Farrah turned back to him.

“Silver-rankers like us are the true backbone of adventuring culture in a city like this,” she explained. “That’s the rank where they can reasonably roam about without needing protection beyond their own team.”

“There are far more gold-rankers than you’ll be familiar with seeing, here,” Rufus said. “But that doesn’t make them common. They’re called on at need, but for ordinary gold-rank monsters, one or more teams of silvers are sent out, maybe with a gold-ranker leading a joint force. Actual gold-rank teams are reserved for the largest threats because calling on them usually involves an exchange of favours.”

“Those rules shift during a monster surge, though, right?” Jason asked.

“Very much so,” Rufus said. “During a surge, the golds put aside their interests and agendas and step up. They also aren’t the last line against the larger threats, since diamond-rank monsters usually only turn up during surges. That’s when the hidden diamond-rankers show themselves. You’ll probably see a diamond-rank monster yourself before the surge is done. Hopefully from a very long way away.”

“It’s not the monsters that worried about,” Jason said. “We’ve seen worse than what a monster surge can throw at us.”

“You’re underestimating the surge,” Rufus said.

“No,” Farrah told him. “He’s not.”

“It’s the other thing the surge is bringing,” Jason said, looking at the crowd around them. “They haven’t announced the surge’s bonus feature yet, have they?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” Rufus said. “I can hardly believe it myself, some of the things Dawn told us.”

“This certainly isn’t going to be like the surges we remember growing up,” Farrah said. Both she and Rufus had lived to see two previous monster surges, neither while as adventurers. One had been while they were still toddlers.

Rufus frowned at the crowd. Aside from dividing the crowd by rank, the society officials were organising into three queues. Local adventurers from guilds were getting priority in the fast-moving line, with local adventurers in the slower-moving second line. Outside adventurers were standing in the third line, occasionally spicing it up with a shuffle forward.

"I don't like your coming back during a monster surge," Rufus said. "All I want to do is go off with you both and talk for a week."

"This was always going to be the timing," Farrah said, "regardless of when we came back. We shouldn't get into it out in the open, though. We'll tell you about it later."

"We need to get this registration done," Jason said. "Unless the Gellers can help, it's how the others will find us since Knowledge won't tell them."

"I still don't understand what Gabrielle said when we asked," Rufus said. "Something about Knowledge not being a... something. I don't think she knew either."

"An SMS service," Farrah said. "She was talking about communication networks from Jason's world," Farrah said. "I miss my phone."

"You mostly just called me," Jason said.

"It had my games. *Shrubberies vs. Skeletons* might have been a knockoff but I maintain it was better than the original."

"How much of my money did you spend on microtransactions again?" Jason asked.

"You say that as if you paid attention to money," Farrah told him. "You didn't even pay attention to spirit coins after what you got from killing Dawn."

"After he WHAT?" Rufus yelled out.

"Don't make a spectacle of yourself," Jason told him. "We'll tell you about it later."

"We really need to get to later," Rufus said. "You said communication network? Are you talking about the magic item you mentioned that's like a water link chamber you carry it around in your pocket?"

"It's not magic," Farrah said. "We did use a bit of magic on ours, but most people don't."

"How is that even possible?"

"Jason once told us that we would find his world as wondrous as he found ours," Farrah said. "He wasn't wrong. The things they accomplish without magic are incredible."

"They're starting to incorporate magic into them now, too," Jason pointed out. "My world has less magic, but the combination of magic and technology will do a lot to close that gap."

“It empowers normal and low-rank people much more than we see in our world,” Farrah said. “The societies in Jason’s world weren’t built by immortals with vast personal power. They have to accrue power through money and influence, but even the most powerful rarely live to see a century. There is an inherent difference in how people look at things.”

“Is everyone there like Jason?” Rufus asked. He was growing concerned that Jason’s world had somehow infected Farrah’s mind.

“No, he’s strange everywhere,” Farrah said. “That’s not a bad thing, though. The people from Jason’s society weren’t ready for the realities we face here, so the arrival of magic was handled poorly in a lot of ways.”

Farrah put a comforting hand on Jason’s shoulder.

“Jason had to step up and face challenges that people of our rank shouldn’t have to. His family supported him but they weren’t ready to accept the steps he had to take to keep his world safe. What he had to become to take them, and the sacrifices along the way.”

“You did plenty for my world,” Jason told her. “You faced the monster waves. The army of the dead at Makassar. Without you, they may have never figured out how to repair the grid and bring the monster waves to an end. You did more than anyone actually from that world.”

“Jason,” Farrah said, “you’re from that world.”

“No,” he said softly. “Not anymore.”

By the time Jason, Farrah and Rufus finally got into the administration building, it was well past dark. There was an array of officials directing adventurers, who took Farrah and Jason's identity certifications before Jason was directed separately from the others. Rufus and Farrah were a registered team and part of a prominent guild, even if they were a long way from the guild's seat in Vitesse. They separated but the trio would keep in contact through Jason’s party interface.

Jason was led to a small office. He was met with by an adventure society official who waved him to the chair across the desk from her own without looking up from the papers she was reading. Her silver-rank aura was marked by monster cores, marking her as a pure, albeit senior bureaucrat.

Jason waited patiently as she continued to read from the sheaf of papers in her hand, moving through one page, then another. Occasionally she would shift her eyes briefly to give Jason a brief, assessing glance. The office was magically sealed and Jason’s senses

were blocked by the walls. He didn't try pushing them to see if he could get through the block, but he suspected not, given that it also cut off chat through the party interface.

"Mr Asano," the official said, finally looking at him directly. "There are quite a number of irregularities in your record. Let's start with the fact that you're dead."

"I provided a certification of identity from the church of Death. I also have a personal crest you can check against Magic Society records."

"I'm familiar with the documents I'm holding in my hand, Mr Asano. Is this going to be an exercise in you telling me things of which I am already aware?"

Jason forced down his instinctive response. She was clearly testing his equanimity.

"I apologise," he said with a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "This is a new process for me and I've never operated in a city like this before. I'm unfamiliar with the scope and scale of operations here and would welcome any guidance you were kind enough to offer."

"You're an outworlder," she said.

"Yes."

"You trained in Greenstone and came into contact with several families prominent outside of that little provincial town. The Gellers, the Remores. You were also present for an event in which many prestigious young people from around the world were competing for a prize. Which you, won, despite the considerable talent in competition with you."

"I had a Geller on my team and no shortage of luck. Your records are very thorough."

"You were implanted with a star seed and made into a minion of the Builder before having the seed extracted."

"Not that thorough, then. What you just said isn't accurate. I was implanted with a seed under unusual circumstances but it didn't take. I got lucky."

"You sound like a very lucky man, Mr Asano."

"I've encountered some good fortune," Jason acknowledged.

"Did you meet anyone from Rimaros around the time of the contest?"

"Yeah, actually. All the teams were split up and we worked with who we could find. There was this bloke. Defence specialist, what was his name... Keane, that was it. He was from some city here in the Seas of Storms. Not sure if it was Rimaros or not, but your city is spread out. It covers a lot of territory, so maybe. I should look him up."

"You, along with your team, made a second incursion into this astral space when it was unsealed a second time," she said.

"That is correct," Jason said. "The first time was for the contest and the second time was just my team."

"The contest executed by Emir Bahadir."

Jason didn't comment on her choice of verb, simply noting it away.

"Correct."

"And how would you characterise your relationship with Mr Bahadir?"

"Friendly."

"Would you consider yourselves accomplices?"

"I cannot speak to what Mr Bahadir would consider," Jason said. "As for myself, I would call Mr Bahadir a benefactor. Gold-rankers don't need iron-rank accomplices."

"I can think of many circumstances in which they would. That would be a failure of imagination on your part, Mr Asano."

"This doesn't strike me as a conversation where imagination will serve me well," he lied.

She leafed through the papers in her hand, skimming the contents.

"During this second instance in which you entered the sealed astral space, your team encountered the Builder cult."

"Yes."

"You fought the Builder cult."

"Yes."

"And out of your team, you were the only one to die."

"Someone has to be the worst," Jason said.

"And your death was confirmed. Your team watched your body dissolve into smoke, like a monster."

Jason's face fell.

"They saw that?" he asked softly, voice slightly breaking. "They saw me... they had to watch?"

"Yes," she said coldly. "What if I put it to you, Mr Asano, that you were still an agent of the Builder at that time and that you turned on your team and was killed by them. That they only told others that you sacrificed yourself to protect their reputations. What would you say to that?"

Jason felt rage rise up inside him like a wild tide but let none of it appear in his aura as he gave her another lifeless smile.

"I would say that unevidenced conjecture that impugns the reputation of a group of people who are objectively heroic for the very thing that makes them heroes is unbecoming of someone representing an organisation like the Adventure Society. Further, I would say that on a personal level you were a petty, bitter and envious little person who does not deserve the seat you are sitting in. If you were to put it to me."

"Where have you been for the last two and a half years, Mr Asano?"

"Home. See the family. You know how it is."

"Would you care to elaborate?"

"No."

"I see. How did you come back from the dead?"

"It's kind of my thing."

"That is not an answer."

"I spotted that too."

"The more forthcoming you are, Mr Asano, the more we can help you."

"Where I grew up, we call that kind of sentence a red flag."

"Your initial contact with one of our officials raised several questions. You were noted as being suspicious."

"I am suspicious. We've just gone through my enigmatic past so you know that better than most. I'm a man of mystery."

"A past on which you refuse to elucidate."

"A girl's got to have her secrets."

"You aren't painting yourself in a good light, Mr Asano."

"That's kind of my thing too. I'm coming to realise it's something I'll just have to accept about myself."

"You deceived our contact agent. He listed your race as human, not outworlder."

"I was testing out some aura self-manipulation with Vidal. He was very professional. Observant, which is why it didn't go so well for me. My friend told me that I should just be myself, which is probably a good lesson for all of us."

She shuffled to another page of the documents in her hand, looking it over.

"Yes, Miss Hurin. She also died, quite some time before you. In another astral space, in another fight against the Builder cult. How did she come back from the dead?"

"Well, I was coming back from the dead myself, so not bringing her with me would have been rude."

"Your familiar is a shadow of the Reaper, yes? And not just any shadow but the very one that had, for centuries, previously managed the astral space in which you died."

"Yes."

"Is it responsible for the resurrections of yourself and Miss Hurin?"

"You caught me," Jason said. "My bronze-rank familiar brought both me and my friend who had been killed an entire year previously back from the dead."

"If not that, then how?"

"I told you. Coming back from the dead is kind of my thing."

"You seem to have a lot of things, Mr Asano."

"I'm multi-talented."

"So I've read," she said, once more looking to the papers in her hands. "Stealth, utility, mobility, self-healing, cleansing, drain attacks. That's a lot of things that aren't afflictions for a so-called affliction specialist. It seems that you're quite the dilettante."

"Cleansing is affliction-related. Affliction-adjacent at the very least. Besides, I like to think of myself as versatile."

"No one cares what you think, Mr Asano. I am referring you to our Builder response team for assessment as a potential threat. If you are cleared, you will be assigned an action quota. You will need to report regularly to the jobs hall where you will be assigned contracts in order to meet this action quota. Is this understood?"

"Yes."

"Given the breadth of your abilities, you will be a liability for most tasks due to your inability to dedicate your disparate powers. You have mobility, navigational and storage abilities, so I am marking you down for solitary missions delivering supplies to isolated, non-critical areas."

"I heard that team-based operations were the standard here."

"You are not from here, Mr Asano. Do you have a problem with the tasks to which I am assigning you?"

"Not at all," Jason said. "It sounds like those people could use some help and maybe aren't getting the attention they need, given how busy things are. I'm happy to pitch in."

The official stared at him silently for a moment.

"An admirable attitude," she said finally. "If it's genuine. Outside this office, you will find a small security team who will escort you to our Builder response team for immediate assessment. If they fail to clear you, then what contracts you may or may not want will no longer be an issue. Good day, Mr Asano."