

## Chapter 636

### Quiet Professionalism

The original design of Jason's cloud constructs allowed two modes. One was overtly made of cloud substance, while the other looked traditionally constructed by the vessel replicating ordinary materials. This could be a false façade or truly mimic the properties, so long as the materials had been fed into the flask.

Over time, the binary nature of the constructs had become more fluid as Jason made many alterations to the cloud flask that produced them. Between deepening his bond to it, filling it with myriad new materials and altering it using authority stolen from the Builder, the cloud flask had undergone extreme changes.

The culmination of this was a third form of cloud construct that used a hybrid of replicated materials and cloud substance in equal measure. The inclusion of House de Varco's modification designs had made it possible, allowing the vessels to use the best of both worlds. Not only could it enjoy the exceptional properties of any materials it reproduced but also the mutable and self-repairing properties of cloud substance.

Belinda ascended stairs that were rigid platforms that seemed like white marble, both to the eye and to the touch. They floated on cloud-stuff that offered just a tiny bit of give, balancing comfort and support. That support modulated itself automatically, whether the person walking it was as heavy as Gary or as light as Belinda. Light was a relative term, however, as high-rankers weighed more than normal people of identical builds. Belinda's small frame looked very light, while her actual weight was more than Taika's had been, pre-essence.

Belinda made her way up the stairs to the top deck, where a cabin door opened at her approach. Jason's master cabin looked different every time she went inside as he frequently shifted it around, and this time it was empty save for Jason himself. He was standing in front of the window, back to the cabin as he looked out at the city in the distance. Dark structures of glass and metal poked through the rainforest canopy in the distance to gleam in the harsh summer sun.

"I have them," Belinda said, moving into the cabin. "They'll stop working if you use your more overt magical abilities, but that shouldn't be an issue for you. Humphrey would have more to worry about in that regard."

"What about using my aura?" Jason asked without turning around. "It's a little more forceful than the norm."

“I’ve never tested this kind of device with an aura like yours. I’d keep it tamped down, just to be safe. That shouldn’t be a problem if you’re laying low, right?”

Jason turned around, flashing her a smile.

“Exactly right,” he agreed as she handed him a pair of blue coins. “I just put them in place?”

“I like to keep devices like this one simple. It’s important to be able to change appearances quickly and easily when you’re avoiding pursuit.”

“I’m not looking to steal anything,” Jason told her, a hint of good-natured scolding in his voice.

“I’m just saying that you should keep your options open.”

“Is this what the princess uses to change her appearance?”

“I’m fairly certain she uses some ritual magic designed especially for celestines. Not quite as convenient, and needs regular reapplication, but it will hold up under stress in a way that these won’t. But as long as you avoid your big finisher spells or any of your wide-area powers, these should be fine.”

“I’m not looking to get in any fights,” Jason said.

“You never are,” Belinda said.

“You didn’t see me back on Earth,” he said, then placed the blue coins over his eyes. The coins immediately vanished, revealing not Jason’s alien eyes but ordinary dark brown ones, much as they’d been when he was human. “I wasn’t mellow the way I am here.”

“Are you sure you don’t want your eyes to be a piercing, icy blue or something?” Belinda offered. “I can tweak them very easily.”

“No thank you,” Jason said, prodding around his eyes. The coins had truly disappeared, not just turned invisible.

“They’ll reappear if you use too much magic,” Belinda said. “Just channel mana into your eyes if you want to take them off.”

Using most magic items was a fairly instinctual process of feeding them with mana to form a magical link. Jason did just that with his eyes and they went back to normal as the coins reappeared.

“That will do nicely,” he said. “Thank you, Belinda.”

\*\*\*

The city of Yareh was relatively small in terms of population, having only a few tens of thousands. The design, deeply accommodating the natural environment, led to a small population density, however. Geographically, Yareh had the footprint of a much larger centre.

Humphrey, Clive and Neil had gone ahead to the Yareh Adventure Society branch to gather information. The information they brought back spoke to a situation more complex than originally anticipated, which they gathered everyone together to explain.

Almost every member of the convoy was present in the cloud vessel's briefing room, even the gold rankers, including the less-than-stable Callum Morse. Absent were the Order of Redeeming Light prisoners, all in magical stasis save for Melody, locked in her cabin in the cloud house. Carlos was present but his assistants were not, leaving the two last absentees.

Humphrey, Clive and Neil stood at the front of the briefing room, the others sitting in rows watching them.

"Where's Asano?" Korinne asked from the first row, the team leader sitting alongside the gold rankers.

"Jason and Estella Warnock," Humphrey told her, "have headed for the city, where they will remain for what we estimate to be two weeks. The reason is that for the duration of that time, our teams will be working in close cooperation with other teams in the area. That means avoiding questions about why the cook is killing so many monsters, or why a mysterious figure keeps slaughtering monster packs before we arrive. Until we can operate more independently, Jason will be working in the city."

"Warnock I understand," Korinne said. "Scouting out urban areas is her job. Asano doesn't strike me as much of a spy."

"Jason will surprise you when it comes to blending in with regular folk," Gary said. "When he doesn't have to get involved with kings and gods and high-rank adventurers, he can blend in just fine. Especially for someone from another world. He doesn't run around doing outlandish things around normal people because he doesn't have to."

"Mostly doesn't," Rufus qualified. "Depending on your definition of outlandish."

"He's far more normal around regular people," Gary said. "Remember that village, right after we met him. He was just meeting people and being social. While gathering information, I'll remind you. Completely sensible."

"Are you talking about the village where he was blasted off the side of a mountain by a malfunctioning waterfall before saving the village from a bunch of shabs?" Rufus asked him.

"It's not his fault the waterfall wasn't working properly."

"Standing in front of it when it wasn't working was."

“Jason isn’t going into the city to spy,” Arabelle spoke up, cutting them short. “He presented a new idea for refining his aura control to Lord Pensinata, who approved of his exploration of the concept.”

“What concept?” Korinne asked.

“Integrating aura-echo interrelation with interpersonal magic,” Clive explained.

“What does that mean?” asked Kalif, a member of Korinne’s team. “Interpersonal magic?”

Clive took on an uncomfortable expression.

“Interpersonal magic is known by a wide variety of colloquial terms,” he said. “One of which is carnal magic.”

“Wait,” Kalif said. “We’re going to be working for the next two weeks while Asano is off knocking boots with the cute pink-haired woman?”

“Miss Warnock and Jason will be operating separately,” Humphrey said. “Miss Warnock will fulfil her role as a spy while Jason undertakes his own endeavour.”

“Plus, Stella likes girls,” Sophie added.

“So much for that then, Polix,” Kalif said to another member of his team who had a disappointed expression. “Hold on, if Asano isn’t taking someone with him, how is he going to use rumpy-pumpy magic?”

“Firstly,” Clive said, “please don’t call it that. And secondly, I imagine he’ll seek out volunteers.”

“Meaning he’ll have to pick up women himself?” Kalif asked. “Who’s going to go for that guy? If he had his Rimaros reputation to play off he might get a pity rub, but he’s playing a cook now, right? He’s going to spend the next two weeks going home alone.”

“I completely agree,” Belinda said. “What woman will go for a guy with laid-back charm, absolute confidence, a mysterious dark side and hidden secrets. Plus, he can cook and dance, which are traits that famously repel women.”

“I bet he doesn’t go for those stuffy society dances,” commented Rosa, the scout from Kalif’s team, earning her a glare from Kalif.

“I mean, who cares?” Rosa covered lamely.

“I think that’s quite enough about Jason,” Humphrey said. “We need to focus on our own activities in the coming weeks and potentially months. The conflict with the messengers in this region has proven significantly more complex than anticipated.”

“The Adventure Society more or less told us to shut up and do the contracts we’re told,” Neil said. “They’re on a war footing and are looking for soldiers who will obey, not adventurers causing trouble.”

"Fortunately," Humphrey said, "we were contacted by a priest of the Church of Knowledge. He gave us a much more thorough appraisal of the situation and background to how it reached this point. He also told us that if we can, not to make a fuss and follow the Adventure Society's orders for a couple of weeks, at which point the Church of Knowledge will requisition us for the main conflict. They already know about Jason, so they'll set us up on missions where he can work with us almost openly. They regularly requisition teams, so it won't look too out of place if we've proven ourselves reliable."

"Why would it look outlandish if they just call us up now?"

"Because there are plenty of teams that have already proven themselves and want a place in the big fight," Neil said. "If we come in out of nowhere and take a slot, people will start looking at us closer than we want to be looked at."

"The Church of Knowledge reached out because of Jason's relationship with the goddess," Clive said. "But Jason is also the reason we don't want too many eyes on us."

"Relationship with the goddess," Belinda repeated. "And this guy thinks he'll have trouble picking up women."

"It's not that kind of relationship, Belinda," Clive said. "Also, I'm fairly certain that implying it is counts as blasphemy."

"So?" she shot back. "Gods and their churches never did a damn thing for me."

"You do know that I'm a priest of the Healer, don't you?" Neil asked.

"You've got an imaginary friend; we're all very proud," Belinda told him. "Get on with it."

"The Healer is not imaginary! And you're the one who interrupted in the first place."

"Belinda," Humphrey admonished, his tone making it plain that he was not willing to brook further nonsense. "If silence is as much professionalism as you can muster, then do so. Clive, please explain what is going on."

Clive nodded as Belinda gave Neil a smirk but held her tongue.

"Some of what we're about to tell you is information we had already gathered from various sources," Clive said. "Some of it comes from the priest of Knowledge we just met. As you should all be aware, the Church of Knowledge has been mustering forces in certain areas around the world."

"What most of you won't know," Humphrey followed on, "is the scale and scope of the Church's activities, and how long they've been going on."

"The groundwork for the church's activities," Clive picked up, "turns out to have been going on for decades. Large troupes are being established piecemeal, so as not to attract attention. Monster cores have been used to create expansive forces of essence users,

under the command of more conventionally-trained adventurers. Each and every one, faithful to the Church of Knowledge. Only the god War was aware of the magnitude of Knowledge's plans, and remained silent for reasons unknown, at least to us."

"A number of years ago," Humphrey said, "they started to mobilise and gather at locations around the world, chosen by no means anyone could determine. It took a while to realise what was happening and on what scale, but if you track the activity back to when the forces that Knowledge had built up started moving, it was all on a single day. A day after which the Church of Knowledge apparently no longer cared about being noticed."

"Given that you've made such a point of it," Korinne said, "I assume there is something significant about that day."

"It was the same day Jason Asano first arrived in this world," Clive said. "Knowledge knows more than even the other gods. She knew the messengers were coming, and she knew that Jason would be the one that opened the window through which they would come."

"Are you saying that Asano is responsible for the messenger invasion?"

"No," Humphrey said. "Jason and Farrah were the ones who triggered the monster surge."

"The monster surge that had been artificially delayed for years," Clive added. "The longer it was stalled, the worse the surge that came with it would be when finally unleashed. And the longer the Builder would have to plunder our world. Jason and Farrah put an end to that delay and prevented it from getting worse, but some amount of damage was inevitable. It was a plan that came into effect years before Jason ever encountered magic."

"And the same window used by the Builder," Humphrey said, "allowed what we thought was the Church of Purity to help the messengers in coming to our world. And that is where everyone learned what Knowledge had been preparing for,"

"Where Knowledge had gathered, other forces gathered in reaction," Neil explained. "And in every region where that happened, messengers were summoned. Knowledge has been preparing to defend this world for decades, building the force we would need but have no time to establish once the threat was revealed."

"This brings us to what the priest in Yaresh told us," Humphrey said. "A few hours from the city, Knowledge's military force set up a camp. The god of War did the same, and then the messengers came. The government in Yaresh, as well as the Adventure Society, were both concerned about each of these developments, and then things got worse."

“There is an extremely rare natural magic event that can happen,” Clive said. “It’s called a natural array. To excessively simplify, it means that, over time, essences, awakening stones and quintessence manifested, undisturbed, in a very specific pattern. The convergent magical energies within that pattern combine to create unconventional effects. The nature of those effects is defined by the size and nature of the pattern, as well as the elements that make it up.”

“Can someone simplify that some more?” Kalif asked.

“It means that sometimes magic stuff happens,” Clive said, exasperated. “If you can’t follow more than that, then I recommend staying quiet and asking your team leader after the briefing.”

“I’m not an idiot,” Kalif said sullenly.

“Then do the smart thing and be quiet,” Clive said, “or we’ll be here all day.”

“I don’t like how you’re speaking to my team member,” Korinne said warningly.

“And I stopped caring what you liked the moment your new team member arrived,”

Clive shot back. “Shut up and listen or get out.”

Humphrey put a hand on Clive’s shoulder.

“Clive—”

“No,” Clive said, shrugging off his hand, and turned on Amos Pensinata. “You were brought on to help Jason, not make things worse. But your baggage...”

He waved a hand at Korinne’s team.

“...has only made things worse. So, fix it or get off this boat and take them with you.”

With that, Clive stormed out, Humphrey wincing as he watched him go.

“What about the briefing?” Neil asked. “Clive was meant to cover the magic stuff.”

“We’ll postpone,” Humphrey said. “We’ve covered what we need for the next couple of weeks, which is that we’ll be given contracts that we should carry out with the kind of quiet professionalism that we have failed to demonstrate today. We can reconvene the briefing once we’re in the city and everyone has cooled down.”

At the back of the briefing room, Zara shrank into her chair, trying to make herself as small as she felt.

## 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.”

\*\*\*

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.”

\*\*\*

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.

\*\*\*

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.”

\*\*\*

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.

- 
- 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.
- 

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.”



## Chapter 638

### The Same Thing as Telling the Truth

Jason was cooking breakfast in the pub's kitchen when the chef, Kellance, arrived through the door leading directly into the kitchen from the alley. In Yaresh, alleys were much nicer than the norm, usually having more in common with a garden. In this case, a gravel path meandered through long grass and around a couple of trees with long leaves of lush green.

Jason had learned the day before that the elven chef was the cousin of Bellory, the pub's owner.

"Morning, bloke," Jason said as he entered, only briefly glancing from the frypan in front of him.

"John, you're still here," Kellance said. "I had a feeling you might be."

"Oh?"

"Bell likes men she knows for sure won't stick around longer than it takes fruit to go bad. Her husband running off, leaving her with this place and a pile of debt did some damage. She's scared of opening up again, you know?"

"I can imagine. She glossed over it last night, but I got the impression that there was a wound there. I hope you don't mind me plundering the kitchen to make breakfast."

"That depends. Did you make enough for three?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. If you want to grab some..."

Jason trailed off, frowning as he looked at the wall.

"What is it?" Kellance asked.

"Three men are coming this way, and I don't think it's for a breakfast fry up."

The pub, like most buildings in the area, was made of dark grey stone. The door to the alley was a rectangle of wood that looked to have grown into that shape, with some kind of light ceramic used to fill it in. There was a window in the top half that Kellance looked out through, swearing under his breath.

Almost immediately after, a trio of elves moved in front of the door. They had looks typical for the locals and wore neat casual suits that Jason recognised as fitting the local fashion. They looked something akin to business suits but worn loose, with long, tapered sleeves and coattails. He had seen the pub's more upscale clientele wearing similar outfits the night before, although most of what he'd seen had been in light colours. These three wore significantly darker shades. The one in front was clearly the leader, flanked by the others as he grinned at Kellance through the window before pushing the door open.

“Hello Kell,” he said, his voice snide. “Something smells good.”

It was clear to Jason that the newly arrived elves were some kind of local thugs that delighted in the petty power they held. If their body language wasn't enough, their auras reeked of insecurity and glee at holding power over anyone. Jason tapped the crystal that turned off the stove's heat stone and moved the frypan onto a wooden board.

“And who do we have here?” the lead elf said, looking over at Jason.

“A temporary cook,” Bellory said as she came down the stairs. Jason noticed that the pub owner had quickly tossed on the same clothes she'd been wearing the night before.

“And here we have it,” the lead thug said. “Bell and Kell. Why would you need new kitchen staff, Bell?”

“The rest got caught up in that tri-ball brawl yesterday.”

“Oh, I heard about that. It's the very reason my father sent me along. Wanted to make sure that you didn't come up short after having to cancel food service.”

Jason had been wondering how a sports punch-up had led to arrests when Pallimustus was usually so open to violence. He had put it down to local laws or culture, but now he realised that there had been outside intervention. He guessed the thug's father was some local boss, shaking down Bellory's pub and other local businesses. For whatever reason, he wanted some extra pressure put on Bellory.

“I've got your loan repayment, Emresh,” Bellory told the thug. “Just give me a minute to get it together.”

“Take your time, Bell,” Emresh said as he sauntered up to Jason. “Gives me a chance to get to know your new employee.”

“He's just a drifter passing thorough, Emresh,” Kellance said as Bellory left for another part of the pub.

Emresh got right up in Jason's face, sniffing him like an animal. Like the thug and his offsidars, Jason's aura was silver rank with a heavy mark of monster core use. He's been practising his aura masking a lot, and Amos Pensinata had especially helped him refine it.

“Silver rank, not bad,” Emresh said. “Is that right, kitchen boy? You just passing through.”

“I'm an adventuring auxiliary,” Jason told him. “I'll only be around as long as my team.”

“Well look here, boys. We've got ourselves a big-time adventurer. You fight any monsters, adventurer?”

“I'm a cook.”

“And how’s your cooking?” Emresh asked. “Good enough that your team will come looking for revenge when we make an example of you?”

“If you want to try my cooking, it’s right there,” Jason said, nodding at the frypan on the bench.

Emresh laughed.

“I like this one.”

He plucked a piece of fried vegetable from the pan with his fingers and popped it into his mouth. His eyebrows went up and he laughed, turning around to look at his flunkies.

“You know what? He’s pretty good. Shame, really.”

Emresh turned back to Jason, the insincere friendliness dropping from his face.

“You think my father is afraid of some wandering adventurers?”

“I don’t know,” Jason. “I haven’t met him.”

“Oh, you’re funny,” Emresh said.

“I have my moments.”

Emresh drove a fist into Jason’s gut and Jason doubled over. Emresh leaned down to speak into Jason’s ear.

“Is this one of your moments, adventurer?”

“Sorry, what was that?” Jason croaked. “I couldn’t hear over the sound of how small your dick is.”

One of Emresh’s lackeys covered his mouth with his hand, letting out a wincing chortle.

“You should not have done that,” the other said as Emresh stamped his fist down on the back of Jason’s head, dropping him to the floor. Emresh then followed up with a savage boot to the gut. Jason let out a retching sound, but pushed himself and got to his feet.

“You should have stayed down,” Emresh said.

“You were going to kick the crap out of me either way,” Jason said.

“Most people would have run if they figured that out.”

“You’d only beat me harder if you had to chase me down first.”

Emresh let out his snide laugh once more.

“That’s true,” he said. “But do you know what I hate more than someone that makes me chase them before a beating?”

Jason theatrically sniffed the air.

“I’m going to say soap.”

Emresh gave him a malevolent smile.

“Someone too smart for their own good.”

“I can see how you’d resent smart people.”

When Bellory returned with a bag of spirit coins, Emresh and his lackeys were repeatedly kicking Jason, curled up on the floor.

“I’ve got the money,” she yelled. “What are you doing?”

“Call it an object lesson,” Emresh said, not pausing from the assault. “If my father decides your kitchen is closed, then your kitchen is closed.”

Bellory bit back her retort. There was no point asking how she was meant to meet her loan payments when the answer was that she wasn’t. She wanted to intervene, but the attempt would be as pointless as the repercussions would be severe. Finally tiring of their game, the thugs admired their handiwork as Jason was left moaning softly on the ground. His face was red from the pummeling and his skin abraded from their boots; the damage to the covered parts of his body was likely far worse.

“Silver rankers,” Emresh said. “They can take much more of a beating, so you have to put more effort in. Still, they don’t accidentally die on you, so there’s that.”

He pointed a finger in Bellory’s face, snatched the bag of money from her hands and roughly opened the door before swaggering out. Bellory looked to the still-moaning Jason but was surprised to see him looking up at her, wagging his eyebrows. He tapped a finger to his lips so she’d stay silent even as he continued letting out light moans.

Bellory and Kellance watched him, seeing the injuries on his face swiftly healing. He stopped moaning and sprang to his feet.

“Bloody silver-rank hearing,” he said cheerfully. “Had to make sure they were out of earshot.”

“John, are you alright?” Kellance asked.

“I’ve had worse than that, believe me,” Jason assured him. “That was practically a massage.”

Bellory cupped a hand to his face where the most visible damage had been, now completely unblemished.

“Why would you provoke him like that?”

“He was here to make a point, one way or another. Best if it’s on someone who can take his lumps.”

Jason turned his gaze to the door.

“I gather that he’s the son of whoever holds your loan? Someone not above interfering so he can use that loan to snake this whole place out from under you?”

Bellory nodded, bowing her head in shame, resting a gentle hand on Jason’s arm.

"I pulled you into my troubles," she said, her voice filled with self-recrimination.

"I've pulled myself into worse, believe me. It's kind of my thing. But you should tell me who that bloke's father is."

She looked up sharply.

"Don't get your adventurer friends to go after him," she said.

"I'm not looking for revenge. I know that will just bring trouble down on you."

"You could have taken those guys apart, couldn't you?" Kellance asked as he gave Jason an assessing up-and-down look.

"It doesn't matter," Jason said. "I'm only passing through, and anything I did today, you'd pay for tomorrow. But I need to know who I'm dealing with, so I can at least stay out of their way until I'm gone."

"Thank you," Kellance said. "That was Emresh Vohl. His father, Urman Vohl, is a major figure in the entertainment district."

"Crime lord?"

"Not exactly," Kellance said. "The city administration doesn't let crime bosses grow too strong without slapping them down. Vohl is legitimate in his actual business interests, even if the way he conducts them is criminal. So long as he doesn't trample on the interests of anyone who can match or exceed his influence, he can run his legitimate interests in a less-than-legitimate way."

"That's pretty much what I guessed," Jason said, then sighed as he looked at the cooling food in the pan. "So much for breakfast. I should go."

"I feel bad just letting you leave after that," Bellory said. "But you're probably right."

"Are you sure you're alright after all that damage?" Kellance asked.

Bellory reached out to Jason's face again, running a delicate thumb over the scar on his chin. Her thoughts went to his other scars, revealed to her the night before.

"He is," she said. "He's not just a cook."

"Yeah," Kellance said. "I'm getting that impression."

He looked at Jason's blood on the floor.

"I'll go get a mop."

Jason smiled after Kellance left.

"Tell him to keep the mop outside for an hour or so," Jason said. "My blood will dissolve and leave the worst stench you've ever smelled behind."

"We get a lot of scarlet-comb beetles here."

"Beetles?"

“I kill lesser monsters with my broom a couple of times a month. I know to air it until the rainbow smoke clears. Your body is that magical?”

“You tell me,” he said, prompting a snort of derision she failed to stop from becoming a laugh as she dropped her hand.

“John,” she said, “if I went looking into that tattoo on your back, would I learn who you are?”

“Yeah,” he said softly. “I’m not hiding anything you can’t figure out if you try. I’m hoping you won’t, though. I like the idea of living in your memory as a mysterious stranger who passed through one day.”

“Oh, you think you’re worth remembering?” she teased.

“I don’t imagine you forgetting someone with that many magic hands.”

She gave him a beaming smile, but with a hint of sadness in her eyes.

“How many lies did you tell me?” she asked.

“Two. But not telling lies isn’t the same thing as telling the truth. I’ve hidden a lot from you.”

“I don’t need your life’s story. Your name was one of the two lies, wasn’t it?”

He nodded.

“And the other one was about only having four talents.”

“I only have four that I like.”

He leaned in for a lingering kiss that felt like goodbye.

\*\*\*

Jason wandered down the street, letting his feet guide him as he explored the city.

“Shade,” he said. “Estella will be looking into local power brokers as part of her work, right?”

“She already is, Mr Asano.”

“Do me a favour and have her take a closer look at Urman Vohl, will you? As much detail as she can get without alerting them to her interest.”

“I shall let her know, Mr Asano.”

“How do you think she snores if she doesn’t have her body control techniques completely down? Something to do with half-learned methodology?”

“I never told you that she snored, Mr Asano. That would be an invasion of privacy.”

“Maybe she has a secret familiar and that snores.”

“I do not think she has a secret familiar.”

“Like a gerbil. A gerbil that snores like a lumberjack choking on a peach pit.”

“What relevance would a person’s profession have on the sound they make while choking?”

“I don’t know,” Jason said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “It feels like a lumberjack would snore worse than a ballet dancer, though. Am I subconsciously conforming to gender norms or am I just thinking about the difference in diet? Diet’s a factor in snoring, right?”

“I don’t know, Mr Asano.”

“Could you find out?”

“Yes, Mr Asano.”

Jason stopped and stared accusingly at his shadow.

“*Will* you find out?”

“No, Mr Asano.”

## Chapter 639

### The Point of Sacrifice

On Earth, the Asano Clan had a deficit of silver rankers. Taiko had been amongst the first trained in Farrah's training methods that did not use monster cores, placing him in the first wave of non-core essence users. The monster waves and proto-spaces were both outstanding places to grind out experience, working alongside the network, before the factions started fragmenting and his association with Jason became a problem.

Once magic came out into the open, Taika had moved his family; first to Asano village, and then to Jason's spirit realm in France. He had already blazed into bronze rank by that time and continued pushing towards silver. The revelation that the US and Chinese had cracked non-core training long ago and had hidden their elites from the rest of the world only pushed him harder, especially with Jason's departure.

Advancement slowed down once Jason stabilised the Earth's dimensional barrier and left. This brought an end to both proto-spaces and monster waves, and instead causing ordinary magical manifestations. This meant that monsters could randomly appear anywhere, along with essences, awakening stones and quintessence. They had none of the concentrated numbers of a monster wave or proto-space, however, and were considerably weaker in most zones. Only a handful of places had sufficiently high magic to produce genuine threats.

Opportunities to use combat for advancement became more scarce. That changed when Taika was drawn through the anomaly into Pallimustus, but not in an entirely welcome manner. Suddenly the level of everyone around him, bar his fellow Earth refugees, was higher than ever before. After reuniting with Jason his training stepped up, guided once more by Farrah, as well as Rufus. Humphrey also made a helpful guide.

Taika's power set fell under the same broad category as Humphrey's. They were both high-mobility brawlers, even sharing similar essence combinations. Not only did they both have the might and swift essences, but also confluence essences of magical flying creatures. For Taika, it was garuda, with Dragon for Humphrey. They even had abilities that were alike, such as conjuring wings, and both possessed the potent survival power called Immortality.

Taika's biggest issue was finding appropriate challenges. With all his friends and allies at silver rank, he'd been stuck in Rimaros taking what bronze-rank contracts he could. Given the team and multi-team approach favoured in the Storm Kingdom, as a



teamless bronze-ranker, Taika regularly found himself sidelined and stuck as a guard or a lookout.

It was only late in the monster surge that it started to change. As Jason rose to prominence, suddenly Taika found himself getting contract after contract that seemed custom-made to give his advancement the push it needed. Combined with the training from Rufus and Farrah, Taika pushed himself achingly close to silver while Jason was variously unconscious or healing after his latest insane feat.

By the time the monster surge ended. Taika was on the very cusp of silver, but had not quite made it. As the convoy made its way south, Taika was on the lookout for opportunities to get over that line, finally becoming an asset that Jason's team could make use of.

During the convoy's first night in the city of Yareh, Taika found himself alone on the roof deck, laying back in a lounge chair. In the cheap camping grounds on the city outskirts, there was little to look at, aside from enclosing rainforest and other large vehicles, no few of which belonged to other adventuring teams. That left the stars above as the only appreciable vista.

Rufus made his way up the stairs, taking a lounge chair next to Taika, but not laying back. Instead, he sat on the edge, looking at Taika.

"Humphrey's a pretty good adventurer," Rufus mused, as if the thought had just struck him. "He's dedicated. Like me, he has that human advantage of his essence abilities advancing a little faster than most. Not much good at low ranks, but it really starts to shine at silver. But he made silver rank in good time."

"Okay," Taika said, unsure of what Rufus was leading up to but knew it was something.

"Jason and Humphrey reached bronze rank close enough to simultaneously as to not matter," Rufus continued. "And as I said, Humphrey made silver in good time. Jason beat him by about a year and hit the wall fast. He's been sitting there ever since, waiting for the rest of us to catch up, which most of us have, more or less. The ridiculous duration of the monster surge helped, especially given how much of it Jason spent laying around healing up."

"Jason did a lot of fighting back on Earth," Taika said. "A proto-space or a monster wave is like monster surge concentrate. That's even without a ghoulish army, hundreds of thousands of zombies or whatever weird stuff he went through in those transformation zones."

“So Farrah has told me. At length. Adventurers manage their risk, but that wasn’t an option for him, from what I can tell.”

Taika sat up, turning so that he was also sitting sideways to his lounge, now face to face with Rufus.

“I know all this, bro. What’s your point?”

“At this point, Jason has probably faced more exotic and deadly combat situations, than anyone of his rank that I’ve ever heard of. I don’t think anyone with less than a half-dozen years of experience has come that close to death so many times without falling off. Not even Jason himself.”

“I’m still waiting on that point.”

“We’re all chasing him, now, and it’s not just about rank. He’s run a gauntlet and come through it hurt. He’s with us now, but not completely, because we haven’t seen what he has. None of us but Farrah.”

“She seems pretty strong.”

“She seems that way, yes. But she’s not here, is she? Jason is dramatic, and the way he handles damage is too. Farrah’s quiet about her wounds, but they run deep and are hidden well. She needs time, but only limited guidance, at least according to my mother. As you said, she’s strong. But Jason needs coddling, or he might break. Have you noticed how he’s withdrawn? How he spends more and more time with the higher rankers?”

“The ones who’ve been around enough to see the kind extreme situations that he has,” Taika realised.

“Exactly. So we’re all chasing Jason, not just in powers, but in experience. I know it’s been rough, being bronze when everyone around you is silver. That feeling is the reason that Farrah, Gary and I left Vitesse. But you’re just about ready to cross that threshold into silver now, and I want you to be ready for the change.”

“The change?”

“You’ll be able to fight with us, but that feeling of trying to catch up won’t go away. The power difference won’t be so great, and you’ll reach the advancement wall before any of us have put much of a dent in it. Instead, you’ll be chasing something more ephemeral: a sense that you’re just as ready to face what’s out there as the people around you.”

Rufus smiled, but his eyes were staring at the floor without really seeing anything.

“The pursuit never ends,” he continued, “even when the thing we’re chasing is imaginary. You chase us, and we chase Jason. I can’t even imagine what Jason is chasing. But we never feel ready, not really. Not unless we’re willing to stop moving forward.”

“What if I do want to stop?” Taika asked. “I never wanted to come here, and I want to get back to my family.”

Rufus nodded.

“Perhaps you’re closer to catching Jason than the rest of us,” he said. “He never asked to come here either, and found himself scrambling for power to survive. He has talent, and so do you, but it was desperation and challenge that let him grow so strong so fast.”

“I don’t think I can come back from the dead, bro.”

“You’re an outworlder,” Rufus said. “You’ve done it once. But don’t worry about that. Keep putting one foot in front of the other and you’ll get where you’re going eventually. The next step is silver rank, which is why I wanted to have this talk.”

“You think I’ll cross over here in Yaresh?”

“I do. The magic here is lower, and the Storm Kingdom’s ways aren’t as prevalent here. High-end bronze and low-end silver monsters are the bread and butter contracts here. It’s perfect for someone looking to cross the line. Go hard while we’re here. We want you standing beside us when we wind up fighting the messengers.”

“I don’t... you said I might be closer to Jason than the rest of you, but I don’t want to be the next Jason. I like him, bro, I really do, but he’s damaged. Even when I first met him there was something about him. I saw him let it out once, not long after we met. I saw him cow a room full of the hardest, cruellest people I’ve ever met, just by not hiding what he was underneath. He didn’t show me, though, and I sometimes wonder if I wish he had.

He shook his head.

“I’ve seen his family look at him and be afraid,” he continued, “and I’m not sure they were wrong. I don’t want power or to be important. Not if it leads to my family looking at me like that. Yes, they were sorry when he was gone, but he was gone. It’s easier to be sorry when they aren’t right in front of you.”

Taika let out a sigh.

“I’ll stand by Jason to the end,” he said. “He’s more than earned it. But I don’t want to make the sacrifices he made.”

Rufus grinned.

“That’s good,” he said. “The point of sacrifice is that others don’t have to make it. You seem to have figured out that you don’t have to walk the path life puts you on. It took me a lot of failure and loss to realise that. I guess you’re wiser than I am.”

“So, what now?” Taika asked.

"Well, you can step off the path, but you have to find the right spot. Otherwise, you'll end up in the weeds, and some of those weeds are prickly."

"Bro, if I hear one more metaphor I'm going to stab you in the eye."

Rufus chuckled.

"I'm saying get to silver. We'll find your way home, but you have to live long enough to see it."

\*\*\*

The revelation of a sprawling underground beneath the city was an enticing lure for Jason. He was shoulder to shoulder with young elves dressed in garish colours, some kind of punk trend, as they shuffled through tunnels where cheap plaster sealed the walls and ceiling between the roots of the trees above. The floor was hard-pack dirt, pressed almost to a stony firmness by countless feet. Cheap glow stones were embedded in the walls, some flickering, others fading and some missing altogether, pry marks around the indentations left behind.

The tunnel sloped down sharply and drunken young people slipped regularly, stirring confrontation as they tumbled into the people ahead of them. Eventually, the tunnel led out into a large subterranean chamber that looked to be one of several connected together. The walls and roof were made from sturdier brickwork, although patches of plaster with root systems poking through were still present. Brickwork columns supported the ceiling, placed regularly through the chamber.

Four of the columns marked out a square in the middle of the chamber, the sides of the square being metal cage walls. People were crowding around the walls, cheering and jeering at people fighting inside. Amongst the crowd, it was easier to watch the fight with his magical senses than with his eyes, and he quickly took stock. The combatants were bronze rank but wearing suppression collars, fighting it out with only their enhanced attributes.

Jason was using the crowd to practise extending his senses without a commensurate extension of his aura, which was still a task he was only beginning to learn. As such, he could only just sense similar spectacles in other chambers, all of which seemed to have bronze or silver-rank combatants.

There seemed to be some order to the proceedings that the locals knew, while the non-elves like himself seemed lost and confused. Jason didn't rush and used his aura senses, along with his ears to try and make sense of the madness. The first thing he found was a bar, where he discovered that cheap elven hooch had a sickly sweet nature that he was completely on board with.

From there he started getting a sense of the fights, how they were bet on and how they were organised. Eventually, he realised that hapless outsiders were regularly recruited into fights, relying on bravado and drunkenness to lure in the punters. The fighters were amateurs, for the most part, judging by their skill and the auras he sensed once the fights were over and the collars came off. It was in the deeper chambers where he found the real fighters.

The deeper chambers were less crowded courtesy of a need to pay for entry. They were also better organised, with an audience that was both older and more conservatively dressed. The security staff could have passed for fighters themselves in the other chambers, where the standards were lower, but not here. Jason could tell that the people in these cages were trained, experienced or both, and he guessed many of them were adventurers. There was even assigned seating, where the other areas had been standing room only. Jason discovered that most of the audience here did not come in with the rabble as Jason had, and had some manner of exclusive entry.

Jason froze, startled as he sensed something extremely unusual: an aura belonging to a species called the valash, who were not native to Pallimustus. Jason had only seen them when humans had been turned into them by transformation zones on Earth. He had needed Shade to give name to them.

They were a comical-looking species to human sensibilities, with skinny bodies and Chihuahua-like heads. Jason sensed the valash navigating the crowd in his direction, wondering if he had somehow seen through Jason's aura mask. What truly startled Jason about the valash wasn't his species, but something that made sense, given he should not have been present in this world. The valash was an outworlder.

## Chapter 640

### What You Want Instead of What You Need

Jason had accessed the restricted section of the fighting dens with a payment that was outlandish to the rebellious youths packed shoulder to shoulder in the main area, but negligible to any mildly successful adventurer. The restricted area was the largest of the subterranean chambers, with four cages surrounded by chairs. It was less crowded than the open areas, due to the exclusivity, while still being relatively packed.

The clientele weren't any kind of city elite, based on what Jason could tell from their clothes, auras and the general presence of thugs. He suspected this was a place where the mid-to-high level members of the local underworld congregated. Jason made his way slowly and carefully, even using some of his aura tricks for moving through a crowd, although he was careful about that as well. He didn't notice anyone that would be able to sense his manipulations, but that didn't mean they weren't present and just better at hiding themselves than he was.

Jason's attention was drawn to a valash, which was a skinny sapient species not native to Pallimustus. The man was not just lean but downright skinny, with a stature even shorter than Jason's and a chihuahua-like head. He wore a pristine white suit, not in the local style but more fitted. Compared to the flowing, tapered lines of local elf fashion, this would have been more at home in a Miami nightclub in the eighties.

The valash slipped through the crowd with practised ease. He was obviously familiar with the environment and making the most of his small stature. Despite being diminutive, he was not pushed and shoved, or disrespected by the people around him. His silver-rank aura meant more than shoulders the size of a park bench, especially as it had no signs of core use. Arriving in front of Jason, he looked him up and down.

"How do, new meat? Did the burly fellows at the entrance tell you the rules, or just take your money and usher you through?"

Jason was surprised on hearing the smooth, deep voice that came from the tiny man, suddenly imagining him and Taika in a body swap movie.

"They didn't tell me anything but the price of entry," Jason said. "Which makes me wonder if they were negligent or if you're trying to lure me into a game that isn't real."

"Disappointed as I am that you're not the ever-pleasant conglomeration of money and stupidity, I'm afraid you really do have some issues you'll need to work through."

"I already have a mental health professional for that."

"Not that kind of issues," the valash held out a hand for Jason to shake.

“I'm Zolit. Zolit Kreen.”

“John Miller,” Jason said, shaking the man’s hand. “How did you pick me out as a first-timer?”

“There's only so many silver-rank auras floating around in here,” Zolit explained, “and I know all the others. Plus, they don't come in through the public entrance, especially without an entourage.”

“I should have people with me?”

“I told you about those rules, right? Rule one is that if you’re new, you either put up a fighter or you fight yourself.”

Zolit looked him up and down.

“Human, core user, but your body language tells me that you aren’t some wilting leaf. You know where the boot goes if it comes to it. Adventurer auxiliary?”

Jason nodded.

“Sharp eye. I’m the cook for a team passing through the city. They want in on the messenger fight.”

“Them and every other team in this town. You know where glory leads? A glorious death.”

“I know that better than most,” Jason told him with complete sincerity.

“So, a cook huh?” Zolit asked.

“Yep,” Jason said. “Cooking, grocery shopping. Knife skills.”

Zolit grinned, Jason was surprised at how easy it was to read expressions on the small man, despite his unusual appearance. He suspected that Zolit was very good at showing exactly what he intended, especially given the tight rein he had on his aura. Jason wouldn't be able to read the man's emotions without pushing hard enough that someone would notice.

“You don't have anyone with you, do you, Cook? That means you either need to get out fast or get in a cage. You'll need a fight organiser for that.”

“Which you just happen to be?”

“One of life’s funny little coincidences,” Zolit said with another grin.

“And what if I say no?”

“One way or another, you fight. Do you think you can carve your way out past everyone here, with those knife skills you mentioned?”

“No,” Jason lied.

“Then you need to secure a slot in the fight slate. Single-round elimination, matched by rank and collared so no one gets killed.”

“Do I get paid if I win?”

“You get a slice of the betting take, so you want to put on a good show. Silvers can take a lot of punishment and no one wants to watch two of them slapping each other pointlessly for an hour. But something tells me you've got something ferocious inside, even without your knives. To be clear, you can't take your knives.”

“Don't worry so much about winning. Some proper adventurers fight here; mostly locals but some outsiders looking to make extra cash. You manage to make a decent showing against one of them and you can make some good money, even on the losing end.”

“So, how does it work?”

“Sixteen fighters, four rounds, single-round elimination. You fight until you lose. Come with me and I'll get you set up.”

\*\*\*

Jason was in a chamber underneath the cages. It was a changing room with a shower made of partly tiled-over brick. It also served as a waiting room for the fights above, with stairs leading up to a sliding panel that went directly into a cage. The only other exit was a heavy sliding door, also made of brick, opened and closed by a touch crystal on the wall.

With Jason and Zolit was an elf that worked for him. She was a silver-rank core user with plain, dark brown clothes and a big duffel bag.

“This is Bennie,” Zolit introduced.

“Benella,” she corrected with an annoyed shake of her head.

“Bennie will help you find your look since you don't want to fight in your regular clothes,” Zolit said. “Unless you want to end the night dressed in bloody rags, although maybe that's a look you want to go for. The savage brute who lives only to fight can be a good angle, especially for a walk-in like you. I'm not sure you have the size to sell it, though.”

“Let's try something else,” Jason said.

“Alright, then,” Zolit said. “Bennie?”

Jason was given a variety of options, pulled from Benella's duffel. Her offering ranged from gi-style outfits to things closer to regular athletic wear, as well as combat robes and flashy lucha-libre style costumes, complete with masks. There were far more clothes than would fit in a non-dimensional bag, which made Jason wonder why it was so big. He guessed that making it that large was less expensive, as opposed to the extravagant dimensional coat that Emir possessed.



Jason went for shorts and a top made from clingy, slick fabric that would resist being grabbed. The result made him look like a professional bicyclist. As he was changing, he did not miss the looks shared by Benella and Zolit when they saw his scars, but he kept the soul crest on his back out of their sightline.

“Okay,” Zolit said after he changed. “We’re going to head back upstairs and watch how you do. Just wait until that panel opens and head up through. You can figure out what to do from there.”

“What are the rules of the fight?” Jason asked.

“You’ll get stopped before anyone dies,” Zolit told him.

“The crowd usually doesn’t like eye-gougers unless things get desperate,” Benella added. “They have no problem with a little brutality, though. They want to see a fight.”

“Or a lot of brutality,” Zolit said. “Once the fight is done, the panel will open back up so you can come back down. Or get carried down, depending on how it goes. You can’t have familiars up there, by the way; the magic in the cage will sense them. If you have any, leave them behind in here until you come back.”

Zolit and Benella made their way to the large stone door that slid open or closed with a touch crystal set into the wall.

“Zolit,” Jason called out.

“Yeah?”

“I don’t like it when people run around asking questions they shouldn’t.”

“Is that so?” Zolit asked lightly.

“It inclines a man to start asking questions of his own.”

Zolit laughed, touching his face.

“You wouldn’t be the first to wonder what I am, Cook.”

“I know what a valash is, Zolit. My questions would be significantly more pointed.”

Zolit’s face went blank as Benella looked between the two men with curiosity. Zolit left, Benella in tow, the door closing behind him.

“A cook, my narrow ass,” he muttered.

\*\*\*

For Jason, it was refreshing to practise his unarmed techniques against someone other than Sophie, who regularly disassembled him without hesitation or mercy. His first opponent was clearly a cage fight veteran, given his theatrically aggressive tactics and use of the space. The cage walls, as it turned out, were barbed chain links. As the other fighter slammed Jason into it, his flesh was gouged as the opponent pushed him along it.

Jason's slick, flexible clothes didn't rip, their frictionless surface helping him out as it slid across the razors, only his exposed arms and legs being slashed. For Jason's part, he played possum at the start, feeling out his enemy. He made the most of his silver-rank resilience to tease out his opponent's weaknesses, which quickly became evident.

From the way the man fought, Jason guessed he was more cage experience than trained technique. Of the two, the experience was the better to have, but he also had weaknesses that Jason was able to exploit. After taking the time to feel out his opponent and let the bets stack up against him, Jason began his counterattack.

The critical strength of Jason's fighting style, The Way of the Reaper, was the versatility that allowed it to be adapted to different circumstances and different approaches. Sophie used it in a domineering fashion, relentless hammering on an enemy's weak point. Jason took a very different approach, employing deception and baiting his opponents into exposing themselves to counterattack.

Soaking damage, Jason set up rope-a-dope counterattacks that inflicted damage that would have crippled an iron ranker and debilitated a bronze. Baiting his enemy into an overreaching lunge, Jason stomped hard on the side of his knee. If he was going to take down a silver ranker, it would take that level of damage over and over, which he proceeded to do.

It slowly dawned on Jason's opponent that his hits were landing less and less often, and not hitting as hard when they did. Jason was no longer letting himself get rammed into the cage, and the aggressive assaults were exposing opportunities for Jason to counter with brutal strikes to knees, elbows or bell-ringing head strikes.

The audience watched as the initially aggressive cage fighter became more and more cautious, as if he were fighting a trap golem instead of a man. He didn't realise that he was instinctively backing off as Jason walked slowly across the cage until he heard the jeers of the crowd.

Knowing he needed to turn the momentum back in his favour, the fighter resumed his aggressive attacks but, by this point, Jason had his measure. Experience had taken the man a long way, but his range of attacks was limited and Jason had read them all. That was not to say that it was completely one-sided as the man certainly landed hits, but they weren't hard or repeated enough to take down a silver ranker. Jason's counters, by contrast, involved bending wrists, knees and elbows in directions they weren't meant to, and hammering other joints to slow down the opponent.

Jason had to admire the man's tenacity to keep attacking, but by the culmination of the fight, it was like watching someone charge into an industrial wheat thresher over and

over, coming out more broken and bloody each time. Finally, it became a one-sided beatdown of a man broken in body but not in spirit, refusing to surrender. As he demolished the man, blood painting his forearms, Jason absently thought back to a time his actions would have filled him with horror.

“Yield,” Jason said coldly, getting only a snarl in return. He repeated the offer before he broke each limb, at which point the fight was called in Jason’s favour. The floor panel opened and he glanced at the other three cages before descending. He had been ignoring the familiar presence in one of them, even though it meant he had no chance of winning overall. The Nightingale’s grace, speed, beauty and expertise put every fighter to shame.

Jason shook his head and descended to where his familiars were waiting for him. He stopped in front of Shade, blood dripping from his hands.

“Am I broken?” he asked, more curious than fearful.

“Everyone is broken, Mr Asano, and anyone in that cage has chosen to be there. Life is about working around the damage. You don’t have the luxury of showing mercy to those who choose pride over wellbeing.”

“But I want to be the guy that does. I like mercy.”

“There is a reason I called it a luxury, Mr Asano. If you do what you want instead of what you need to, it all goes wrong.”