

## Chapter 489

### Going Overland

Outside of the rocky gorge, the coastal landscape was filled with greenery, white sand and blue water. Jason stood on a hilltop, looking out at a gorgeous beach and the sea stretching out beyond it. Next to him stood his familiars. Shade had once preferred a shape akin to Jason in his cloak but now looked more like the silhouette of a butler. Colin was in a humanoid form, the leeches that made up his body having melded together into what looked like a blood clone of Jason himself. Gordon was the most alien, being a nebula draped in a cloak, surrounded by floating orbs.

“This is the life,” Jason said. “Setting out together to have some adventures. No worlds to save; no gold-rankers to fight and no vampire uprisings.”

“Mr Asano,” Shade said. “While I am loathe to dampen your enthusiasm, I feel obliged to remind you that you do still need to anchor the bridge that will stabilise the other world over time.”

“The magic's too messed up right now,” Jason said. “There's no way I get that right until the monster surge is over. That makes it a tomorrow problem. Today, our problem is where to stock up on local snacks for our tropical paradise road trip.”

Jason had dropped off the airship over the coast of what was, in his world, Honduras. He would need to make his way south through Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama to make his deliveries before portalling back to Rimaros. He wasn't sure how close the geography and climate would be, lacking familiarity with Central America in either universe. He was anticipating fewer resorts.

They were not far from the Arcazitlan fortress. Shade had taken the form of a land skimmer to carry Jason along the road out of the gorge on a smooth cushion of air. The road was part of a well-maintained network running through the jungles and hills, although he had stopped shortly into the journey to take in the panorama as the road crested a hill. He had called out his familiars to share the moment with him, although he had no idea if any of them appreciated sightseeing as a pastime.

Jason slapped Colin on the back.

“What do you say, blokes? Get moving?”

“Very good, Mr Asano.”

Shade was the only one able to speak but the others had their own means of communication. Gordon lit up one of his orbs with blue light, meaning yes. Blood clone

Colin opened his mouth and let out a noise that sounded like it rumbled up from the darkest pits of hell.

“I know you’re hungry,” Jason said. “You’re always hungry. It’s kind of your thing.”

Colin opened his mouth again, this time releasing the shriek of a soul being dragged to damnation.

“Yes, I know the bone feasters were skinny, but at least there were a lot of them. We’ll find someone for you to eat along the way. Would you like a sandwich?”

Colin’s response was a quiet, eerie sound, like wind whispering through a graveyard.

“Fine. A big sandwich.”

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Jason could have moved faster than his current travel speed by having Shade take the form of a flying vehicle. He was certainly interested in the local equivalents of planes, which he hadn’t seen any of yet. Magical constructs built in the shape of flying creatures, they were typically private vehicles for wealthy families and high-ranking adventurers. Compared to airships, flying constructs were smaller and far less efficient in terms of capacity to cost, both for passengers and cargo. Jason appreciated the two advantages they had, though, which were speed and being giant robot birds. He would be willing to give up the speed.

The airship that had carried Jason away from Rimaros had not been travelling at its maximum speed. One of the things Jason had learned while talking with the airship crew was that any magical vehicle became exponentially easier to detect the faster it was moving. During a monster surge, full speed ahead was a recipe for disaster. It was probably why he had yet to see one of the small, swift flying constructs.

Since he wasn’t going to have Shade rocket him across the sky, Jason took the approach that had been recommended by the Adventure Society, which was to stick to the roads and follow the route he’d been given. He was allowed to take whatever pathway he wanted so long as he met his delivery deadlines but, for once, Jason decided on the path more travelled.

He followed the roads using the land skimmer, which was more or less a hovercraft. Jason was familiar with the vehicle type from his time in Greenstone. He’d ridden skimmers specialised for navigating wetlands and sandy desert, both of which were quite like airboats in their construction and operation.

Shade took a more heavy-duty form that resembled a large, open-top car. It reminded Jason of a land speeder from Star Wars if the props guy only had black paint. Rather than pushing air out the back for propulsion, like the vehicles he was familiar with, this one

moved through silent magic. Shade's ability to take on the form of transportation was much stronger at silver rank, meaning he could replicate more magically sophisticated vehicles. This was especially true when not working with Greenstone's limited ambient magic.

The forms Shade took were unable to mimic the weapons and defensive properties of similar forms of transport, with limited exceptions such as creatures with bladed arms or the impact bars of a vehicle. Even then, there was a fragility to such features that made them useful for little more than clearing rough terrain.

The only means Shade had to improve the defensive power of these forms was for Jason to share his cloak power with each of the bodies Shade used to construct the form. This could be relatively mana intensive, such as when Jason shared enough cloaks for Shade to create several passenger buses. That was in the Battle of Broken Hill, where many civilians required evacuating and there were more than enough monsters to drain.

"Going overland is better anyway," Jason explained, sitting in the back seat. One of Shade's bodies was pointlessly in the driver's position, with Gordon floating over the seat next to him. Colin was in the back, Jason's first familiar getting to sit next to him.

"Every time some open-world game puts in flying mounts," Jason continued, "it's more convenient but also more boring. Plus, you miss out on all the awesome stuff you just fly over without ever getting to see."

"Mr Asano, I don't believe any of us have played a video game."

"Gordon gave it a go, bless him," Jason said. "I had to buy Emi a new controller. Having beams of destructive force instead of hands isn't super convenient."

The empty hood of Gordon's cloak dipped sadly.

"Don't worry about it, mate. How about we let you pick the music?"

Jason pulled out his recording crystal stand, which was a series of rotating trays on a central shaft, with a handle at the top. Each time he tapped a finger to a compartment, it projected a listing of what the crystal inside had recorded on it.

"I need to get an artificer to make some kind of music player," he mused. "Something I can slot all these into and make some playlists. So, what are you thinking Gordon? The Doors?"

An orb glowed orange, a negative response.

"Beach Boys? Could be just right for a road trip along sandy shores."

Orange glow.

"The Hollies? A bit of *Long Cool Woman in a Black Dress*?"

Orange orb.

Jason tapped a finger to his lips thoughtfully.

“Okay, I think I’ve got it. Marlana Shaw.”

All of Gordon’s orbs lit up blue and Jason laughed. He took out a small crystal projector and leaned over the front seats to rest it on the dashboard. Jason missed the amenities of a car, like a music system, but not enough to get Shade to take a car form. Shade had never so much as suggested it, knowing Jason wanted to put Earth and its problems behind him.

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Jason could have stealthed his way south. Even using Shade as transport, the familiar retained his ability to mask Jason from various forms of detection. Instead, he and his familiars were riding in the open-top vehicle along an empty road, *California Soul* blasting out of the crystal projector. He wasn’t going to reach gold-rank hiding from monsters and the surge would be his last chance to see them en masse for a while.

Ever since leaving Greenstone to spend months in an astral space, Jason had no shortage of readily accessible monsters. The astral space itself, then the proto-spaces of Earth, the monster waves and the transformation zones. For all the misery and tribulations he had been through, raising his rank at an impressive pace had never been an issue.

Jason had checked on his team’s status at the Adventure Society and they had all ranked up fairly recently. Even with the boost to advancement speed that humans enjoyed, Jason had beat out Humphrey and Clive by a good margin. After going through iron-rank at a sedate pace, Jason had raced through bronze.

Now Jason was in a more normalised space and had hit the grind-wall on the long path to gold. Once the monster surge was over, it would take years to make real progress. Even so, he wasn’t sad about that fact. After what he’d been through, he was ready to slow down, if only events would let him. That wouldn’t stop him from making the most of the monster surge while it lasted, though.

The most disappointing part of the trip turned out to be the lack of people. The coast was dotted with abandoned towns and villages, the citizens having evacuated to fortress towns or one of the local cities. None of the cities could match the size of Rimaros and lacked the resources to supply the forts with all their needs. This was where Jason and adventurers like him came into play.

Without people around, Jason was able to extend his senses to their full reach, the way he couldn’t in a city. Mostly he just sensed herd animals that hadn’t be taken away. They’d been set loose outside the towns in hope of drawing monsters from the empty infrastructure. People were hoping to come home without some wandering monster having trashed it.

The roads were excellent but the lack of other traffic was a little unnerving. Like the empty towns and villages, it reminded Jason unpleasantly of Earth when all the rural areas had been abandoned for the safe zones.

He stopped regularly to go off and hunt packs of silver rank monsters. Once he detected a gold-rank one at the periphery of his perceptual range and withdrew his senses sharply. He turned down the music and slowed the skimmer to a crawl. Fortunately, the monster either didn't sense him or was one of the blessedly non-aggressive types. He marked the location on his map ability to share with the Adventure Society anyway.

Gold-rank monsters could live for decades or even centuries before their bodies started breaking down, sending them berserk. As such, the Adventure Society often left the non-aggressive varieties alone, while keeping track of their location and age.

Arriving in one of the small cities, Castistis, Jason was happy to see people again. He was far more thoroughly examined at the gate than he was at Arcazitlan fort, from magical scans to checking and rechecking his contract documentation.

"You all seem a bit jumpy," Jason mentioned to a guard as she scanned his body with a fourth different device. "Something happen?"

"A vampire got in with a big batch of refugees," she told him. "Turned about a dozen people before we caught on. Those evacuation accommodations aren't set up for pitched battle and things got bloody. We lost a lot of people, refugees and city guard both. Now we check everyone. Adventurers, nobility, it doesn't matter."

"That's fair," Jason said. "And I'm sorry. I can see why you'd be careful."

She let out an unhappy snort.

"If you could maybe share that attitude with your adventurer friends, that would be nice."

"I'll do my best. I'm not a local, though, so no promises."

Jason didn't want to linger in the city. It was massively overcrowded from all the people taking shelter, which he had no intention of adding to. He would report the gold-rank monster he sensed and then get back on the road.

The guards told him the personal flight was allowed, but vehicular flight required a permit. So advised, Jason set out across the city using his cloak wings, although their mana cost was greater when used in the sunlight. He wouldn't be able to take any detours unless he wanted to drop down to ground level and rest, but the city held nothing that seized his interest.

The city was pleasant enough, especially seen from above, but was rather unremarkable. Compared to Rimaros and its sky islands, Castistis was small and lacked

attention-grabbing features. It was just inland enough to be sheltered by hills, which was valuable in the Sea of Storms. The Buildings were low and widely spaced, with plenty of greenery. If not for the swarms of people it would have been open and inviting.

Jason reined in his aura once more in the populated area. Relying on the directions the guards had given him, he swiftly made his way to the Adventure Society office, picking up the auras of the local adventurers as he drew close. He felt perceptions passing over him as well and he modulated his aura to seem capable but not elite. This matched most of the auras he sensed around him.

Jason's experience of adventurers came from two extreme ends of the spectrum. Greenstone and Earth represented the bottom of the adventurer barrel. The mediocre aura control of most of the essence users Jason had met all but screamed sloppy skills and little, if any, proper training. On the other side were individuals like Danielle Geller and Rufus Remore, as well as the adventurers of Rimaros. Even the adventurers assigned delivery duty in Rimaros would have been absolute elites in Greenstone.

In Castistis, the adventurers fell somewhere in the middle. Based on their auras, their skills were respectable, but not enough to make it in the big city. Jason knew that many adventurers had gone to Rimaros for the monster surge, hoping to be recruited into a guild. The adventurers here apparently understood their level.

There were a few auras that stood out, their aura control a definite cut above the rest. He felt a cluster of them close together, presumably a team. There was one gold-rank aura present, which felt much akin to the mid-rage auras that were the norm there, but polished by experience.

The Adventure Society building was a three-storey office without any attached buildings. Castistis was too small for a trade hall or even a dedicated building for the jobs hall. Jason landed out front and opened the doors just in time for a voice to come whining out of it.

"Do you know who my father is? You're courting death!"

"Oh, great," he muttered under his breath. "There's a Thadwick."