

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."