

Chapter 626

Rage, Authority and Otherworldly Power

Jason moved through the night-covered city, flickering unseen from shadow to shadow. There was no shortage of them under the light of the twin moons, allowing him to make a blistering pace. With the blanket of stars, the city was relatively bright, given the early hours, making it a shadowy realm that was perfect for Jason.

He didn't expand his senses too far as his magical senses were an expression of his aura. Pushing them too far would broadcast his location to any aura-sensitive being in a wide area. He wasn't worried about nocturnal monsters but the adventuring teams patrolling at all hours that hunted them. He neither wanted to explain his presence nor be mistaken for one of the monsters being hunted.

Even retracted, Jason's senses were still excellent over shorter distances, allowing him to avoid any teams he encountered. Unlike him, they were blasting their senses out to detect monsters and attract the aggressive ones. That made them easy to avoid by withdrawing the moment his senses encountered theirs, as their perception was weakest at the limits of their range. He was careful nonetheless. Not only was letting himself get sloppy a bad habit, but there was every chance an elite scout would notice him, despite his caution.

Jason's goal was the inland side of the city, the opposite end from where his ship was docked. His day spent working as an auxiliary had proven fruitful in terms of information gathering for the simple reason that if you show up, get to work and don't be a tool, people will talk to you. He had spent the day surrounded by Adventure Society and Magic Society functionaries, along with a few other auxiliaries as well. This had given Jason plenty of opportunities to learn about the situation in the camp.

Estella Warnock's job was to scout out civilian locations for the team, but she was a bad fit for a work camp at a ruined city, which is why she had gone ahead to the team's next destination. Jason himself was much better suited to the specific circumstances. Despite Humphrey's concerns about Jason fighting the power against people who didn't have any, Jason had always been good at getting along with regular people.

It took Jason very little time to fit in with the primarily low-ranked workers organising resources, logistics and food. With conditions tight, essence users were mostly getting by on spirit coins, with the food Jason and his new co-workers produced being shipped off to the surrounding areas. Jason's looting ability was useful for producing fresh meat from

monster carcasses, along with other materials. His cooking magic took that fresh meat and turned it into preserved meat.

There were already resources on site that allowed Jason to get a lot of work done quickly, with smokehouses and salting sheds designed for use with cooking magic that massively accelerated the process. While Jason's mastery of such magic came from skill books and was fairly basic, it was perfect for the setup in place. The learning curve was low, and by the time he was pumping out preserved meats, the people around him had gotten chatty. The bulk of what Jason learned wasn't wildly useful to the team, although it would help them. Knowing who to go to and who to avoid in camp leadership was always valuable.

The most important information was not about the base camp but the city the camp was set up to manage. One of the tribulations that had brought the city low was the wide-scale destruction following a local astral space getting torn off the side of reality. Such devastating events had been the end-goal of the Builder, and when a cell of cultists managed to accomplish this task, they usually evacuated their bases in the area.

Usually, cult evacuations would be carried out quickly and quietly, as the local adventures were generally on the warpath at that stage. As a result, there were frequently Builder cult lairs hidden around that contained large and dangerous construct creatures that the cult had been forced to abandon.

From what Jason picked up, there was likely an undiscovered Builder base somewhere beyond the city's inland border. Late in the night, Jason had moved to investigate in secret, to preserve his secret identity. Jason Asano was not meant to be around, and a cook shouldn't be able to find what teams of adventurers had not.

After reaching what should be the right general area, Jason started directing his senses down, careful not to let his aura spread in any other direction. Aside from his superior aura strength fuelling his senses, Jason was also sensitive to Builder-related energy. Since losing the Builder's magic door, he could no longer manipulate that energy. His ability to sense the touch of the Builder, however, predated Jason's acquisition of the door by some time. It was something Jason had been sensitive to ever since the Builder tried to steal his soul with a star seed.

Jason turned himself into a magical ground-penetrating radar as he started sweeping the area. He moved from the outer city into what had once been farmland, but was now a mix of withered crop remnants and bare soil. The land bore the marks of the destructive shockwave that had swept over it in the wake of the astral space being removed. The force had pushed everything out and away from the epicentre in a violent blast that had

thrown boulders, flattened portions of the city and uprooted trees. And this was just the shockwave area, not the blast zone.

The dimensional scar was something that Jason could clearly sense. Even more intimate than his sensitivity to the Builder was his sense of dimensional forces. The closer he drew to the former site of the astral space aperture, the more he was horrified by the gaping wound in reality left behind.

“This has left a scar on the side of reality,” Jason said. “It’s already starting to warp the ambient magic seeping through the dimensional membrane. I don’t think this city will be liveable for a long time.”

“It will have to be rebuilt from the ground up.” Shade agreed. “There is almost nothing left to repair.”

Magic came into the world from the astral through the dimensional membrane that separated their physical reality from the astral. A monster surge was the result of temporary damage to that membrane, but the damage always, eventually, recovered itself. That had already happened, ending the monster surge, but to Jason’s perception, an ugly scar had been left behind.

“This is going to impact the magic in this area for some time,” Jason judged.

“You believe the effect will linger?” Shade asked him.

“Without intervention, yes,” Jason said soberly. “It’s going to affect the monsters here, I suspect, and the people using magic, too. It’ll be slow, over time, like a taint in the groundwater that slowly accumulates toxins in the people using the land.”

Jason had a unique insight into this. His connection to dimensional forces allowed him to recognise the wound in a way that others did not, and his increasing proficiency in astral magic allowed him to at least partially understand it.

“Will you warn the locals?” Shade asked. “They may not recognise the danger.”

“There are Magic Society representatives here,” Jason said. “They likely know what’s happened and what to look for. But I’ll have Clive double-check with them.”

Clive was not on good terms with the Magic Society, but he was an astral magic specialist whose expertise exceeded Jason’s, despite Jason’s insights into dimensional forces and being tutored by Dawn herself. Jason was already sharing his unique insights with Clive and seeing Clive make leaps that Jason himself never realised. Without his advantages, Jason wouldn’t be close to Clive’s level in astral magic studies.

Jason pushed his senses as far as he was willing to risk, but one hour turned into two and then three without result. The sky was starting to lighten when he finally felt a twinge. There was something below him that prevented him from getting a proper sense of what it

was due to some magical screening. Only the strength of his perception and sensitivity to the Builder allowed him to detect anything at all.

“Good,” said Amos, whose sudden presence behind him startled Jason. Very few people could get that close to him undetected.

“What are doing here?” Jason asked. “You liked how I managed to find the place, did you?”

“No,” Amos said. “It’s good that you have so thoroughly demonstrated your shortcomings. There will be new exercises, once you’ve rested.”

With that, Amos walked away.

“You know,” Jason said after watching Amos leave. “He could have at least helped us find the entrance. Shade, spread out and take a look, if you please.”

Shade bodies started spilling out of Jason’s shadow to search the area. The fact that the lair hadn’t been found yet by someone else suggested that the entrance had been permanently collapsed. Only with a narrow area to search was it worth grid searching, even with Shade’s cohort of bodies. In the end, it was under a cluster of heavy rocks that looked like they had been piled up by the shockwave. Instead, they had been placed to obscure a shaft that had been deliberately caved in.

While he knew the right move was to bring in the team, Jason felt a temptation to act on his own. He wanted to send Shade down so he could shadow jump into the base, keeping all of the Builder constructs to himself. He could take his time, buried and hidden under the earth. Pull each construct apart with his own two hands, stripping them down to parts, one by one. Grinding every last trace of the Builder’s power out of them.

“Mr Asano,” Shade said. “I remind you that it is a time for discretion, not rage.”

Jason hadn’t noticed the aura pulsing out of him or the growing luminescence of his alien eyes as he stared at the ground, fists balled at his sides. He drew back his aura, frowning in self-admonition at the loss of control. He concentrated his senses and felt one of the patrol teams moving in his direction.

“Time to go,” he said.

“Might I suggest, Mr Asano, that you seek out Mrs Remore tomorrow, in addition to Lord Pensinata?”

“Yeah,” Jason said, the ferocity that clouded his mind having passed. “I’m starting to think that I might have some unresolved issues.”

“I may have noticed something of the kind myself, Mr Asano.”

The patrol team reached the location where they had sensed the strange aura. The archer, the swordswoman and the guardian specialist watched the darkness around them while their scout hunted for the aura. She pushed out her senses, looking for any trace. Their Adventure Society guide also kept an eye on their surroundings.

"I'm not sensing anything," the scout said. "It's like it flared up and then vanished."

"What was it?" the team ritualist asked as he examined the ground around them. "I've never felt a monster like that, but it didn't feel like a person, either."

"A priest, maybe," the guardian said as he watched the moonlit terrain. The relatively bright night and flattened terrain made watching for trouble an easier task than it might have been. "They sometimes use divine power that feels strange."

"That makes sense," the guide said. "I saw a priest of Wrath in combat once, and he felt kind of like what we sensed. Rage, authority and otherworldly power."

"There's something here," the ritualist said, crouched over a patch of ground. He pointed out the rocks scattered around "These rocks were moved, and not long ago. I think they were piled over this."

The guardian and one of the damage dealers stayed on watch while the others gathered around.

"Some kind of filled-in tunnel," the scout said. "You don't think...?"

"The Builder cult lair," the ritualist said. "I think whatever that aura belonged to was looking for this, sensed us coming and made itself scarce."

"Good," the guardian said. "I've never felt a silver-rank aura that strong."

"It's probably just some ability to scare off other monsters," the swordswoman said. "Some kind of aura flare; more performance than power."

"More scared of us than we are of it," the archer suggested.

"I'm not so sure," the scout said. "That aura didn't feel scared."

"Wouldn't that be the whole point?" The swordswoman asked. "What kind of power to scare people off would let you know it was the scared one?"

"She's got you there," the guardian said.

"I don't think assuming it's afraid is the right move," the scout said. "What if the idea is to make us think that it's gone so it can stalk and ambush us?"

"Well, isn't that a cheerful thought," the ritualist said.

"We should go," the guide said. "We'll report this in, get someone watching the site and see if it really is the cult lair once the sun comes up."

"Shouldn't we check it now?" the archer asked.

“It’s been here for a good long while now,” the ritualist said. “I don’t think we have to worry about constructs spilling out unless we start digging down. If we hadn’t come along, whatever we sensed might have and set off gods know what trouble.”

“I’m worried about what that thing was,” the scout said. “It’s still out there somewhere.”

Chapter 627

Asset

Having returned in the pre-dawn, Jason emerged from his cabin when it was almost time for lunch.

“Oh, thank the gods you’ve come out,” Neil said, rushing up to him. Jason narrowed his eyes, about to probe his aura to confirm his identity as Neil continued.

“Clive made... I suppose we have to call it breakfast,” Neil lamented. “Taika threw him into the river.”

“Taika’s only bronze rank,” Jason said with a laugh.

“He’s strong,” Neil said. “The monster surge got him pretty close to silver. He also had the element of surprise, and Clive was very surprised.”

“We probably shouldn’t be wasting food when people are putting so much effort to feed people in this region.”

Jason remembered the food rationing on earth during the monster waves when refugees were crammed into the largest urban centres for safety. Food production and distribution had broken down. As even the smaller cities were abandoned due to a lack of people to protect them, let alone rural areas. Jason went for almost two years without eating anything but spirit coins.

“It was fairly basic in the first place,” Neil said. “Just cereal and bread.”

“He messed up cereal and bread?”

“It turns out that all Clive knows how to cook is eel,” Neil explained. “I can assure you that adapting those recipes to a simple breakfast does not work.”

Jason winced. He could sense Taika in the yacht, his aura strong and steady. The proto-spaces and then monster waves on Earth, plus Farrah’s training, had allowed him to rocket through the ranks, especially with being human as an accelerating factor. Between that and the monster surge after switching worlds, Taika had rarely seen the less hectic conditions that most adventurers faced. His progress was faster than Jason’s, whose lower rank progress was met with lengthy delays.

Taika's human abilities had been replaced with outworlder ones, but Jason had never sat down and taken a good look. He'd shared his party interface and let Rufus and Farrah manage his training and advancement, both being better teachers than Jason. Taika's power set was very much in line with Humphrey's, from his role as a high-mobility brawler to his mix of powerful and varied attack and defence options. They even shared the Might and Wing essences leading to a confluence based on a mythical creature.

In Taika's case, it was Garuda rather than Humphrey's dragon confluence, which made Jason wonder. Was the garuda a real creature in Pallimustus? If so, which of the various myths, legends and RPG flying monsters was it closest to.

"Neil," Jason asked. "You ever heard of a garuda?"

"Sure," Neil said. "Big flying creatures. Lots of variants, like griffins and dragons, spread across the ranks. Most fall in the silver-gold range, I'm pretty sure, but I've never seen one. Never been to the right part of the world. I think Pranay might have them."

Pranay was a city that Jason and his team had visited after their first trip to the Order of the Reaper's astral space. They hadn't left the massive urban centre, so the only magical beasts they had seen were familiars.

"You're thinking about Taika's abilities?" Neil asked.

"Yeah. I've never really seen him in the field since he was iron rank."

"He's got some impressive powers. You know, with another fast brawler and if we brought in Rufus, we'd have a monster of a team, here."

"Isn't it hard to train up in a team of eight? Don't you need to take on larger-scale contracts, which means expeditions, which means other teams which means more restrictions?"

"It doesn't have to be like that. Our team is built around different synergies. Remember when Humphrey's sister was training us? We took that road contract and she kept pushing us into different combinations."

"It's an interesting idea," Jason mused. "Mixing things up is always good as a training exercise. You know that Rufus and Taika are only with us temporarily, though. Rufus will go off the Greenstone, eventually, and Taika might end up with the other Earth people. I'm going to need someone to wrangle the pricks."

"What makes you think they're pricks?"

"They're from Earth."

"Not a lot of love for your own world, then."

"This is my world now."

"Well, we're glad to have you," Neil said, slapping Jason on the back. "So long as you make lunch. We need to go on afternoon patrol, soon, and Belinda said that Clive was eyeing off the bread again."

"Oh crap," Jason said. "I'd best get on it, then."

The base camp for Adventure Society and Magic Society activity in the area was laid out carefully into sections, somewhere between a school campus and a military base, but

all the buildings were magical tents. The tents were reinforced against the weather and included drainage, plumbing and other amenities. Many were the size of full buildings, with a few even reaching as high as four storeys. For the most part, they were all square or oblong, the rigid frames visible under the drape of the fabric.

Jason's team moved across the open marshalling area, although Jason's place in the group was taken by Rufus and Farrah. Leading them was Vestine, their assigned Adventure Society functionary. They moved towards a tent the size of a small aircraft hangar. It was the main vehicle pool for the camp, managed by the Magic Society but primarily used by the Adventure Society.

The marshalling area was a mix of adventuring teams and groups from the two societies in charge of the camp. Some were coming and going on foot, while others were using skimmers, making the yard's massive size a necessity to handle all the activity.

"This afternoon we're heading for the other side of the city," Vestine told them as they approached. "The far side of the city is the most dangerous zone in the area. It's where the diamond-rank monster fell, making it the most concentrated source of the lingering power that's drawing in the monsters. We haven't had a gold show up yet, but we've seen silvers come in very large waves, so be ready to fall back and regroup with other teams at all times."

"Yesterday you told us we wouldn't be assigned to the far side of the city," Sophie pointed out.

"The situation changed overnight," Vestine told them. "A Builder cult lair was found and multiple teams that normally patrol the far side of the city are currently engaging in a suppression action against lingering Builder constructs. We had to dig our way down using rituals to access the lair, as the access shaft had been completely sealed. There were so many rocks in there it wasn't worth clearing them out, and so we dug straight through the earth."

"I remember that ritual," Humphrey said. "You could have warned me it was going to spray mud everywhere, Clive."

"It was a digging ritual in a swamp," Clive said. "Do you want me to warn you that dumplings are available in a dumpling shop?"

Humphrey shook his head.

"We were aware of the cult lair," he told Vestine.

"Word gets around a camp like this very quickly," Vestine said, her voice disapproving. "On a related note, be aware that there is an unknown, potentially hostile entity in the area, but we don't have little information on it. We can't even be sure if it's a

monster, magical beast or essence user. It's potentially a priest from one of the dark gods, so be wary. Its aura is very distinctive, being silver rank, extremely powerful and extremely sinister."

"I don't suppose this entity happened to be found where the cult lair turned out to be?" Belinda asked.

Vestine stopped walking across the marshalling yard and turned to look at Belinda.

"Do you know something you should be reporting?"

"I've never known anything I should be reporting," Belinda said. "That's how they get you."

"Your patrol sensed a particular asset to which our team has access," Humphrey said. "It reported finding a Builder lair, but it left when it sensed a patrol approaching. Since the patrol found the lair, we didn't report the discovery ourselves."

"You're claiming this asset found the lair. Are you trying to claim credit?"

"We don't care about credit," Humphrey said. "I'm only telling you this so you don't have the patrol teams jumping at shadows."

"And what is this asset of yours? Why is it a secret?"

"It's not a secret, strictly speaking," Humphrey told her. "Our team has access to a certain special asset that people often find confronting, sinister or outright evil. It's not. But this asset is known to the Adventure Society, and the branch in Rimaros decided to keep our asset mostly off the books. If anyone were to go digging, contact the Adventure Society branch and ignore their polite suggestions that you leave it alone, you'll find the answers you're looking for. You can check all this for yourself, of course. I noticed the temporary water-link chamber that's been set up for communication, although I know those devices are extremely resource-intensive. You likely only use it when strictly necessary, which means that you're left either taking my word for it or not."

"The water link we have is expensive to operate," Vestine acknowledged. "We only use it when truly necessary. Lacking ready access to the Adventure Society administration in Rimaros, the best solution is that you brief me and I determine how much needs to be shared with the officials here."

"No," Humphrey said.

"And if I march a few teams onto that boat of yours to find out for myself."

"Then that would be unfortunate," Humphrey said. "It's always sad when bad things happen to good people."

"Are you threatening me, Mr Geller?"

“No, Miss Calhoun, I am not. Imagine a mysterious pit of monsters. Imagine that anyone who manages to jump in the pit and survive will be punished by the Adventure Society, in the unlikely event of their survival. It is not a threat to warn someone of the dangers of the pit, Miss Calhoun. It is well-meaning advice that, I will admit, could easily be misconstrued as an attempt to intimidate an Adventure Society official. But I will remind you, Miss Calhoun, that all the information concerning you about this situation came from a single source: me. I could have said nothing, but I did you the courtesy of warning you in the hope that you would not waste any time and resources.”

Vestine looked at Humphrey for a long time.

“Wait here,” she said finally. “I’m going to consult with the chief official of the camp.”

The team watched her turn and march off.

“How big a problem will this be?” Neil wondered aloud.

“Not very,” Rufus said. “The Adventure Society has many secrets. She’s going to ask someone in camp leadership what to do, and she’ll be told to be quiet and go along. If there’s no imminent threat, then anyone smart enough to be left running this place with minimal oversight knows better than to buy trouble they could avoid for free.”

“And if she decides to push?” Clive asked.

“Then they’ll use the water-link, regardless of the cost,” Farrah said. “At which point, they will be sternly instructed to leave us alone. They’ll assume Geller family interference and leave us alone.”

“And you’re okay letting people think your family is engaged in corruption?” Clive asked Humphrey.

“With politics,” Rufus said, “you need a little corruption. Just a little, or no one else will trust you.”

“Well, that’s just backwards,” Clive said. “I’m really starting to detest politics.”

“There are upsides,” Sophie said, bumping her body against Humphrey. “I like it when you go all officious and stern.”

Her voice then turned to a low whisper.

“You want to get out of here?”

“No!” Humphrey said, stepping away from her. “This is not the time. Or the place. Or the circumstance.”

Sophie’s expression turned vulnerable and hurt.

“So,” she said, her voice a trembling whisper, “you don’t really like me?”

“What?” Humphrey asked, taken aback. “Of course I do.”

“It doesn’t sound like you do.”

“It’s not that! I just...”

The tension in his bunched-up shoulders relaxed as he gave her a flat, admonishing look.

“...realised that you’re teasing me. Do we have to have the talk about professionalism again? There is a professional space and a personal space, and you shouldn’t be bringing the personal space out on the job.”

“There are lots of things you shouldn’t do on the job,” Belinda interjected. “You shouldn’t steal your Adventure Society guide’s watch.”

“Lindy,” Humphrey asked through gritted teeth, “did you just steal her watch?”

“No,” Belinda said, the picture of innocence. “I didn’t *just* steal her watch.”

Chapter 628

The Thing You Practise With The Most

It was raining again as a land skimmer moved over the rubble that was once a city. It hovered only a metre over the ground, but that was enough to float over almost every part of the city's inland reaches. A few buildings, once magically reinforced strongholds, had left remnants in the form of a partial wall or two.

"This side of the city was where the shockwave from the astral space being taken hit," Vestine said. She was driving the skimmer but had been quiet for most of the trip from the camp. Many adventurers had secrets, but when she stumbled on them, she did not like being told to back off, which she very much had been.

"That pond seems strange," Rufus said, pointing out a large and oddly-shaped body of water. "It's an odd shape, and doesn't fit with the surroundings."

They weren't going through a park that might have such a pond. Despite the city's annihilation, the location of roads could be determined from the relative lack of rubble, and the pond crossed multiple of them.

"It's an indent left behind by the diamond-rank monster," Vestine explained as she redirected the skimmer to run along the shore. "The monster rampaged through this part of the city, but most of the damage was covered up. The shockwave turned a damaged city into a levelled one. That indentation was one of the few signs that remained, and it was filled in by the rains."

"So, this is where the monster fell?" Neil asked. "It was big enough to leave a crater that big when it died?"

"The monster didn't die here," Vestine told him. "That's a footprint."

Amos and Jason were floating just above the deck, cross-legged in meditative poses. They were on the training deck as it was raining heavily outside.

"What I am going to show you is the methods of expanding your senses without your aura alerting the senses of others," Amos said, in one of the longest sentences Jason had heard him speak. Amos was taciturn by nature, but Jason was learning he didn't fetishise silence, not hesitating to speak when it was called for.

"You are already familiar with retracting your aura," Amos said, "but that retracts your senses as well. You need to learn how to mask your aura's presence without withdrawing it. You have aura stealth techniques?"

“I have one I’ve developed,” Jason said. “Partly it’s retracting my aura, but I have more subtle methods as well. One that I’m proud of lets me blend into crowds by adapting my aura to those of the people around me, and incorporating subtle aura suppression to make the perceptions of others pass over me. Basically, I can make people ignore me if there are other people around.”

Amos nodded and unfolded his legs, dropping them to the floor he was floating over. “We’ll go to the camp,” Amos said. “You can show me.”

While Jason was aura training, his team moved beyond the city ruins. The wall that had once held off monsters was now just a demarcation line between city and jungle, no taller than a speed bump. The jungle itself was little better off than the city, with trees uprooted and scattered like dandelion blossoms. Despite the flattened jungle, this was not the area designated the destruction zone.

They arrived at the official destruction zone, where the astral space aperture had been, it was clear why this place had earned the name. It was a crater, but not a concave in the ground. It looked more like someone had attempted to replicate the Grand Canyon with a giant cake tin, creating a circular hole that stretched kilometres across and hundreds of metres deep.

The skimmer stopped and the team disembarked, lining up along the edge of the crater. It was a neat and round hole, with a dark green, glassy surface. The rounded wall and flat floor were polished-marble smooth, but scattered with debris. Rocks, trees and massive clumps of earth lay on the floor, along with what was left of animals and magical beasts devoured by monsters. It was large enough that, in spite of the rain, the water collected inside was not deep enough to consider it flooded, but merely wet.

“That is a big hole,” Neil said. “What does it count as? A canyon? A crater?”

“To think that this is only a fraction of the size it would have been outside of a monster surge,” Clive said, shaking his head in wonder. “If not for the damaged dimensional membrane, this could have covered ten times the area.”

“It makes me think of the astral space you stopped the Builder from taking near Greenstone,” Rufus said. “If you hadn’t, I’d be dead, along with everyone else in Greenstone and every desert village and delta town around it. This place shows just how great the deed you all did that day was.”

“Well, it wouldn’t have affected me,” Farrah said. “I was already dead.”

“You were dead?” Vestine asked, turning to look at her.

“For about a year,” Farrah told her.

“Then how are you alive now?”

“I know a guy.”

“What does that mean?”

“We know a guy who views death as less of an end than as a hobby,” Farrah told her.

“We’re not really meant to talk about it, though.”

“Like that asset of yours.”

“Exactly,” Farrah said. “The asset is something he left behind.”

“It’s horrifying to think that this has happened all over the world,” Humphrey said.

“Most of the Builder cult’s attempts to steal astral spaces were stopped,” Vestine said.

“But most isn’t all. We were lucky here, in that we managed to evacuate the bulk of the population. The explosion erased a town and flattened several villages, but their people had left for fortress towns long before, thankfully. There are places where people had it much worse.”

She spat aggressively over the edge.

“You’re all moving south from Rimaros, right?” she asked.

“That’s right,” Sophie said.

“Did some guy really convince the Builder to leave early?”

“That’s what we heard,” Belinda said.

“Well, why did he take so long?” Vestine asked angrily. “We lost everything, here. Our homes. Our pride. We might have saved most of the people but we still lost many lives.”

“You lived here?” Humphrey asked Vestine, who nodded.

“I wasn’t just stationed here,” she said. “I grew up here. It was my city. And now they’re saying that they might not even rebuild it.”

“I can’t even begin to imagine,” Humphrey said. “I won’t even try. I’ve never been through what you have. Lost not just a home, but the home of everyone I know. Whole communities. All I can say is that I’m sorry.”

Vestine turned and started marching towards the skimmer.

“You’ve seen it now,” she said bitterly. “We need to get back on patrol.”

“Are you sure about this?” Jason asked Amos as they stood on the dock at the outer edge of the busy base camp. “There are a lot of silver rankers here, and if they notice a cook wandering around under a sophisticated stealth technique, it’ll draw attention that we don’t want.”

“Do you lack confidence in your ability?”

“No, I'm quite proud of the ability. It's probably the most intricate in execution that I have, and it was self-developed. But it's designed to help me pass unnoticed through crowds of lower-ranked people, not to fool people of my own rank. I've got it to the point that it can, if they're not paying attention, but if they are, the technique will draw attention rather than deflect it. It's not a matter of confidence; it's about the right tool for the right job.”

“Good,” Amos said.

“Good?”

“Your aura manipulation skills are barely adequate, but at least you understand the value in cultivating a breadth of nuanced techniques, even if you haven't, yet.”

“Barely adequate?”

“The greater the potential, the greater the expectations should be to fulfil that potential.”

“I think I get it,” Jason said, still frowning over ‘barely adequate.’ “My skills are well above the silver-rank standard, but every rank scales, not just in power but the proficiency of those considered to be the best. The ones living up to their potential. You're saying that if I want to be great instead of just good once I hit gold rank, I need to push the limits of my capabilities.”

“Good, instead of adequate,” Amos corrected. “Master the basics before you start claiming greatness.”

“Aim low, got it,” Jason said. “This is why Dawn came to you specifically, isn't it? She knew you could get me ready for the future, at least in this regard.”

“Yes. Now, show me your technique.”

“But what if some silver-ranker pulls me up?”

“Then use the thing you practise with the most.”

“What's that?”

“Your mouth.”

“I can't tell if that's an insult or a compliment. Probably a bit of both, now that I think about it. Actually, examining it further, I'm increasingly impressed at the nuance you managed to incorporate into a simple statement and the way you both layered meaning and prompted a more in-depth exploration of the ramifications of your—”

Amos flicked Jason on the forehead.

“Ow!”

“Aura technique, not mouth technique.”

“You just said—”

Amos flicked him again, his gold-rank reflexes too much for Jason, even though he was watching for it.

“You’re training an essence user, not a dog,” Jason pointed out, rubbing his forehead. Amos responded only with a flat look.

“Fine,” Jason grumbled as he set out into the camp, initiating his aura technique. “Woof bloody woof.”

As Vestine had promised, the inland side of the city was more active in terms of monster activity. Humphrey and the others soon found themselves working alongside Korinne and her team, as well as one more group, in wiping out a massive pack of silver-rank monsters.

Arc lizards were among the weakest of silver-rank monsters, individually. Alone they were weaker than upper-tier bronze-rank monsters, making them a popular choice when high-rankers were curating battles for their bronze-rank trainees. As such, the local adventurers all had experience fighting them in small numbers.

An arc lizard looked like a cobalt-blue iguana, with a rough, milky white crystal emerging from its back. Their only real form of attack was an arc of lightning they could shoot from the crystal, but it wasn’t dangerous to a silver ranker. Even bronze-rankers didn’t have to be too worried if they were prepared and careful or had solid defensive abilities.

The problem with dealing with arc lizards was that they never manifested alone and they became exponentially more dangerous in number. Their electrical arcs could jump from one to another, growing in strength with each link in the chain, even splitting once they grew powerful enough. Too many arc lizards gathered in one place became very dangerous indeed.

Arc lizards were monsters that commonly spawned in this part of the world, and were normally a negligible threat. During a monster surge, however, they spawned in greater numbers than normal, often much greater. This meant that arc lizards went from a minor threat into a major problem, and while the monster surge was over, some monsters had appeared in wilderness areas and were still finding their way to population centres. Unlike short-lived iron-rank monsters, those of silver rank could easily last until the next surge, if not dealt with in the interim.

With multiple packs of arc lizards having found each other, they posed a major threat to the three teams sent to eliminate them. The key was to strike hard, strike fast and deliver definitive damage. The earliest parts of the battle were most dangerous, with the

lizards at their strongest. The healers on each team proved their mettle in the face of the prolific and powerful attacks, although the teams had gone in prepared.

Knowing what they were going to confront, their Adventure Society guides had prepared potions to resist electricity for each of the teams. Even so, the potions only went so far in the face of multitudinous powerful attacks, which overwhelmed magical shields and burnt through armour to scorch flesh. Only as their numbers reduced did the attacks of the lizards diminish in potency, making things easier after the harrowing start to the battle.

Korinne's team was the unquestionable star of the show, clearing out enemies faster than either of the other teams. Their specialisation was built around a pair of high-damage members with the rest of the team built around maximising their effectiveness. This made them something of a reflection of the lizards themselves as they focused all their efforts on unleashing powerful attacks. They even used the same chain lightning, with Kalif firing electric arrows that split and split, amplifying their power with each enemy struck.

"You'd think that electric arrows would be a bad choice against electric monsters," Sophie said as the teams rested in the aftermath of the battle.

"Silver rank is where power sets start to cover their own weaknesses," Farrah explained. "Take mine, for example. I have an ability called Child of Fire that helps me penetrate resistance to heat and fire, and even affect things that are immune. I'll need to be higher rank before I start burning fire elementals to death, but I'll get there."

"The same goes for me," Humphrey said. "I don't use fire as much as Farrah, but my Dragon Might aura transforms my regular fire into dragon fire, which is much more effective."

"It's the same for anything," Farrah said. "Korinne's lightning is the same, I imagine, but look at Jason: he can make a golem bleed now."

"This is part of what makes essence users stronger than those with inherent magic," Rufus said. "With so many powers, our abilities have breadth and synergy, but they also grow to cover our weaknesses. Very few of those with inherent magic can compare to a high-rank essence user. Of those that come close, it usually requires years of training and practise."

"Like the blood magic of the intelligent troll tribes," Clive said. "Even then, they're mostly working with variant ritual magic. That's hard to use practically in combat; take it from a combat ritualist."

Korinne's team were having their own discussion of the battle's context.

"I don't see what's so special about their team that we need to follow them around and learn things," Polix said. "We showed them up today."

"This isn't the fight we need to learn from them in," Korinne said. "This battle was exactly the right kind of fight for us. A simple, if powerful enemy, in a large group setting. I hope you noticed how the other teams saw that we were the cornerstone of the group and pivoted their strategies to let us work uninterrupted. They shepherded the lizards away from us so we could maintain our offence without needing to beat-back counterattacks."

"That's what I'm saying," Polix said. "They are the ones who saw that we were the stronger team."

"Polix," Korinne said, "you need to listen to everything I saw, not just the parts you agree with. We were strong today because it was our kind of fight. What Geller's team has is experience with things going wrong and working just as a team, instead of as part of a group expedition."

"The difference between adventuring approaches in Rimaros and Vitesse," Rosa said.

Polix groaned.

"I'm sick of hearing arguments about one being better than the other," he complained. "It's obvious."

"So I thought myself," Korinne said. "I was taught that the Rimaros way is the superior option as well, but I've been discussing this with Orin's uncle since we came along on this journey. He pushed me to look past my own biases."

"You talked with Lord Amos?" Kalif asked. "Did he use words? With his mouth?"

"He's not a mute, Kalif," Korinne said. "He just doesn't believe in talking when it isn't necessary. An all-too-rare virtue."

"What did he say about the difference between adventuring in Rimaros and Vitesse?" Rosa asked.

"He told me that it's a difference in wider doctrine," Korinne explained. "The Sea of Storms and its surrounding region has massive tracts of undeveloped jungle and deep water. Vast leviathans and whole colonies of monsters can disappear for decades, often finding one another and grouping up before they ever move on a populated area. Because of this, the threats encountered in this region are massive, like this pack of arc lizards. As such, adventuring doctrine in this part of the world accommodates the nature of those threats by putting a large emphasis on multi-team expeditions. And when people work together but in multiple teams, it makes sense that each team has a speciality."

“You’re saying that it’s the Vitesse approach, but scaled up?” Kalif asked. “Instead of a team where the individual members do their own thing, we have expeditions where each team does its own thing.”

“Precisely,” Korinne said. “Vitesse is a much more developed region, which means the monster detection coverage is more comprehensive. Threats building up in the wilderness before being detected is rare, so teams are much more likely to operate independently, and there are even people that work alone. They don’t have other teams to cover them while they focus on just one thing. They have to rely on themselves, which means they need the ability to adapt. Working with another team that covers their weakness isn’t an option. They have to be able to cover their own, even if that comes at the cost of focus.”

“I don’t see the point,” Polix said. “If the threat is smaller, then our teams can just kill it before it does anything tricky with our overwhelming power. No versatility required.”

“And that attitude,” Korinne said, “is the exact reason we need to follow them around and learn things.”

Chapter 629

Just to Prove You Could

"Nope," Gary said as Belinda approached him in the yacht's dining and barge lounge. He was sprawled back in a chair reading a book with a mug on the table beside him, steam rising from the piping hot contents. His vantage allowed him to look out as the hover yacht proceeded down the river toward its next destination.

"You don't even know what I'm going to ask," Belinda complained.

"I'm not making you another set of lock picks."

"Alright," she conceded, "you apparently do know what I was going to ask."

"Well, don't bother," Gary said, not looking away from his book. "The answer is no."

"Why not?"

"Because I know who broke them and under what circumstances."

"I can explain that."

"You tried to steal Amos Pensinata's watch," Gary told her. "The only thing you need to explain was what was going through your head that made it seem like a good idea."

"I wanted the challenge."

"And you got the challenge," Sophie said, walking in. "Then you got the consequences."

"What's this about?" Humphrey asked, having come in with Sophie.

"Lindy tried to steal Lord Pensinata's watch," Gary said.

"It was a bit of fun," Belinda complained. "And his response was disproportional. I was going to give it back, not smash it."

"How did he even end up breaking your lock picks when you were trying to take a pocket watch?" Humphrey asked.

"Most high-end magical clothes have protections against it," Lindy said. "They aren't hard to negate, in most cases, but some clothes makers are different and know what they're doing."

"You learn to recognise the clothes of designers who cater primarily to adventurers," Sophie said. "And aristocrats who like wearing outfits from designers that cater to adventurers."

"If your target is wearing an Alejandro Albericci suit in Rimaros, or a Gilbert Bertinelli suit in Greenstone," Belinda said, "it's time to bring the tool kit."

"Shouldn't you just go for an easier mark?" Gary asked.

“Or no mark at all?” Humphrey suggested.

“Yes,” Sophie said. “Lindy, this new habit of yours is going to get you in trouble.”

“It already has,” Jason said as he arrived with the rest of the team, plus most of the yacht’s occupants. Travis, Taika, Rufus and Farrah, plus Estella and Vidal Ladiv were all present, although Amos was not. Korinne, Carlos and Arabelle had also joined from their respective vehicles. The dining lounge occupied most of the yacht’s largest deck with space enough to accommodate them all comfortably. There were enough plush seats and couches to go around, even without Jason reconfiguring the space to remove the dining and bar areas.

“What do you mean by saying it already has me in trouble?” Belinda asked Jason warily. “I don’t think you’re talking about having my lock picks smashed. Which he had to search me for, by the way.”

“I don’t control your actions off this boat,” Jason told her. “That’s for the team leader to do.”

“Stop stealing things!” Humphrey added.

“But while you live on this boat,” Jason continued, “there are rules. I don’t actively monitor you all to check if you’re breaking them, but Shade does.”

“No one told me about the rules,” Neil said.

“That’s because he’s making them up as he goes,” Sophie said.

“I prefer to describe it as actively learning about boundaries together,” Jason said. “But yes, I’m making them up as I go. And now we have our first rule: no one on this boat steals from anyone else on this boat.”

“It was more like a game,” Belinda argued.

“I have a lot of games, Lindy,” Jason said. “They were left to me by a friend of mine. None of them involve involuntary and unknowing participation. Admittedly, some have roll-and-move mechanics, which is arguably worse.”

“Try and stay on topic,” Farrah suggested.

“Sorry, yes,” Jason said. “So, Belinda, for violating the rules of the ship—”

“That I didn’t know existed,” Belinda cut in.

“Lindy, don’t steal is always a rule,” Clive said. “I don’t think you can plead ignorant on that one.”

“For violating the ship rules,” Jason continued, “Your cabin will be set to winter climate settings for a week.”

“What are winter climate settings?” Belinda asked.

“Full insulation,” Jason said. “Drawing in as much heat as it can from outside and letting none of it out.”

“Are you kidding?” Belinda asked. “We’re cruising down a tropical jungle river in summer.”

“You’re silver rank; you’ll be fine,” Sophie told her. “Have you already forgotten some of the places we lived? The places we hid out? Are you unwilling to put up with anything but luxury anymore?”

“Extremely unwilling!”

“Also, Belinda,” Jason added, “your shower will only work for four minutes a day.”

“Oh, come on.”

“And you can’t access the ship’s crystal wash supply.”

“Now you’re just being vindictive.”

“And the furniture will all replicate plain wood.”

Belinda’s section of couch turned into an unpadded, straight-backed wooden bench. Sophie next to her was still on soft cloud material.

“What next?” Belinda asked. “Are you going to cut me off from food and make me eat spirit coins for a week?”

“Not yet,” Jason said. “I’m reserving certain options for repeat offenders.”

“You, Jason Asano, are a tyrant,” Belinda said as if she wasn’t already planning to hoard food just in case.

“So Dominion keeps telling me,” Jason complained, shaking his head. “I hate that guy.”

Vidal, their Adventure Society liaison, narrowed his eyes and asked Jason a hesitant question.

“Do you talk with him enough that it comes up a lot?”

“No, but every time I see him or one of his priests they always smugly imply that he’s happy with my progress on the path to iron-fisted autocrat.”

“Because you are,” Belinda said.

“How about we shift the topic to our next destination,” Humphrey said. “Miss Warnock, what did you learn in the course of investigating the town?”

“That we should probably accelerate our progress and not bother with the towns and villages in this region.”

“Oh?” Humphrey said. “They don’t have a lot to offer us?”

“No,” Estella confirmed. “More importantly, we don’t have a lot to offer them. From what I learned, they are all in more or less the same state, which is too many people and

not enough resources. A lot of places that would normally see minimal damage during the monster surge were wiped out entirely. Between the length and the severity of the surge, many people returned to find entire towns that were levelled to the ground. They were forced to turn around and go back to the fortress towns they had just left, or to other towns that weren't as hard-hit. Add that to the refugees from Cartise who fled the city before its destruction and every place still standing is overflowing with people."

"They'll need protection from monsters, though, right?" Taika asked.

"One thing they aren't short of is adventurers," Rufus said. He, Gary and Farrah had accompanied Estella in her forward scouting. "Cartise had a lot of adventurers who are now protecting the fortress towns."

"I think we all saw the same was true, even at Cartise," Humphrey said. "The Adventure Society had supplied no shortage of adventurers, so while they were happy to use us, they weren't desperate for our services. I think they were more appreciative of Jason and Vidal's efforts, frankly."

While Jason was playing butcher and/or cook, Vidal had lent his administrative expertise to the logistical efforts of distributing food and resources through the region.

"Circumstances are similar throughout this region, based on everything I've heard," Estella said. "What these places need is more of what Jason and Mr Ladiv were doing; people who can help with resources and logistics, not combat specialists."

"We do have some of that, between us," Humphrey said. "Maybe not enough to be worth the trouble, though. We'd get in the way as much as help."

"Stella is right," Farrah said. "The things we can do, those people don't need. We should just hit the road and stay there until we find people who do need a boatload of adventurers."

"It would be nice to get far enough from Rimaros that I don't have to be so careful," Jason said. "Even with what little I've done here, it wouldn't take that much poking around to put the pieces together. The biggest advantage is that no one cares that much."

"The people here just want things to get sorted out with as little extra trouble as possible," Humphrey said.

"I do have one cunning plan, should I get caught out and need to convince someone I'm not me," Jason said.

"I may regret asking this," Neil said, "but—"

"Then don't ask," Humphrey told him. "Please don't ask."

"Okay, now I have to ask," Gary said.

“I hate this so much,” Humphrey grumbled, leaning forward and looking at the floor as he shook his head.

“Jason,” Neil said, “what exactly is this cunning plan of yours?”

“I can just tell people I’m my own evil twin.”

“What?” Rufus asked, voicing a confusion that was reflected on the group’s faces. Another Jason came in, this one with a moustache. He stood next to the original Jason, who took out a bushy fake moustache and affixed it to his top lip. Then both Jasons flung out their arms like they’d just finished a performance and were waiting for applause.

“I don’t get it,” Carlos said. “This is your shape-shifting familiar, is it not, Master Geller? Is your familiar meant to be evil?”

“He didn’t mean literally an evil twin,” Travis said. “It’s a story trope from our world that probably should have been explained for context.”

“Oh, he did a Jason,” Clive said. “I’m with you now.”

“What do you mean, ‘a Jason,’” Jason asked.

“A Jason,” Neil explained, “is where someone says some nonsense with no expectation that anyone will understand it because the people they’re talking to lack the cultural context to be able to. It’s oratorical masturbation.”

“Masturbation is kind of my th—”

Jason put a handlover Stash’s mouth to muffle it, then handed him a biscuit. Stash turned into a moustachioed African swallow and flew out a window that turned to mist briefly as he passed through.

“Look what you did,” Jason scolded Neil. “Stash is a pure and precious boy, and you’ve tainted his mind with filth.”

“Lady Pescos,” Humphrey said quietly to Korinne, leaning closer to his fellow team leader. “Is your team, by any chance, accepting applications to join?”

“Is this how your team operates?” Korinne asked him.

“Yeah, pretty much,” Neil said.

“I’d call it a standard team meeting,” Clive agreed.

“How do you get anything done?” Korinne asked.

“Dashing heroics?” Jason suggested.

“How about we put aside Jason and any idea he’s ever had for a moment,” Humphrey said, “and return to our actual agenda of determining our next move. Miss Warnock, you’ve pointed out what we should avoid, but do you have any suggestion for what we should do?”

“Actually, yes,” Estella said. “I talked with a few Adventure Society officials and it seems that while their resources are understandably being deployed to the regions worst affected by the monster surge, it’s left a minor shortfall of adventurers in areas where the damage was less severe. These areas still need to deal with the monsters left from the surge, though, so the arrival of some temporary assistance would be very welcome.”

“You’re suggesting we skip over the areas in this region swiftly and head straight for lesser-affected ones?” Humphrey asked.

“It’s not out of our way,” Estella said. “It just means going past a few towns instead of stopping.”

“They aren’t great places to resupply anyway,” Rufus said. “These towns won’t have anything to spare unless we start bribing people, and then we’re just hurting those who would have gotten what we take.”

“Not only does this plan avoid the chaotic and overpopulated messes that all the local towns are reported to be,” Estella said, “but we’ll find locations where your team will be a welcome arrival.”

“I like it,” Jason said. “Let’s plot out some new destinations and I’ll give the to Shade.”

“Jason.”

“Yes, Humphrey?”

“Take off the fake moustache.”

“Belinda,” Humphrey said, catching her alone on the side deck outside her now-stifling cabin. He put up a privacy screen so no one would overhear. He joined her in leaning against the railing, looking out over the river. There was still plenty of other traffic, moving supplies between the hard-hit towns.

“Is this the part where you give me the serious talk about not stealing things?” Belinda asked wearily. “Instead of Jason turning it into a comedy show?”

“Yeah,” Humphrey said. “This is that part. He always gets to be the fun one.”

“I suppose you have a speech about how this is hurting me more than the team?”

“No, it’s definitely going to hurt the team more,” Humphrey said. “I get that you’re revelling in a freedom that you never thought you would have before becoming an adventurer. But when you and Sophie agreed to join us, that came with a caveat. Namely, that the consequences of your actions now fall on all of us, not just yourself.”

“I don’t think Sophie ever really wanted to be like me,” Belinda said. “She always stood out. I mean, she always looked like she does, but she was far from the only beautiful girl on those streets. It was her attitude that drove creeps like Cole Silva and Lucian

Lamprey to obsess over her. She's always had this... nobility to her, even under all the crime and the violence. They wanted to tame her, like a prize animal. Crush that defiance out of her, to prove they could."

Humphrey bowed his head, saying nothing.

"I think she was always meant for someone like you," Belinda continued. "I have a hard time thinking of anyone else good enough to deserve her. Which you don't, by the way. You're just the best we could find."

Humphrey turned to look at Belinda with narrowed eyes.

"Lindy, are you—"

"It doesn't matter what I am," she said, cutting him off. "Things are the way they are."

Humphrey let out a sigh and they stood together, watching the water go by for a long time.

"You've got more speech," Belinda said finally. "I know you do."

Humphrey nodded.

"You've been stealing things, just to prove you could," he said, Belinda flinching as her own words were used against her. "If you keep doing things like this, it's going to hurt our reputations and get us all demoted. I won't let that happen. But even if I managed to remove you from the team, that would irrevocably break it. We both know that Sophie will leave with you instead of staying with me, even if she disagrees with what you've been doing."

"It's not that bad."

"Not yet," Humphrey said softly. "But if you keep putting fissures in this team, they will widen until one day it breaks. Clive would go with Jason, to whatever his next descent into dimensional absurdity is. I would too. We might be able to rope in Rufus and Farrah. We'd need to find a new healer. Neil has had his team break apart on him before, and I suspect that if it happens a second time, he'll give up on adventuring. A good silver-rank healer will have plenty of opportunities, especially with the Church of the Healer backing him."

"Damn," Belinda said. "Stop talking about the team falling apart like it's a set deal."

"I'm not worried about the team falling apart. I'm worried about it breaking apart. I'm the team leader, Lindy. That means more than just failing to keep Jason on-topic in group discussions. It means that I have to look to the future; to the dangers that we can't fight off with swords and magic. Your behaviour threatens to become the most existential danger to our team. Maybe not now, but somewhere down the line."

"You're overstating it."

“Am I? What happens when you play the wrong game at the wrong time on the wrong person? The team gets blowback at a time when we need to be discreet, or what passes for it on this team. What happens when we let what you’re doing slide and the thrill isn’t there anymore? Are you going to escalate? Bigger jobs, more challenging targets? You could get all our society memberships revoked.”

“They are never going to pull yours or Jason’s memberships.”

Humphrey’s hand came down on the railing hard enough that it broke, turning into mist before reforming back into its original shape.

“Belinda, listen to yourself. You’re talking about the Adventure Society refusing to revoke a third of the team’s memberships. Is that what you want it to come to?”

“Hey, you brought all this up. And what about Jason? He’s been doing insane stuff since forever.”

“Jason and I had discussions like this when we first met and neither of us knew how flimsy our principles were before the winds of practical reality. But since we formed this team, Jason has always kept the team in mind. Yes, he might have some wild ideas, but he’s learned to pull back when we tell him he needs to. He trusts us for that, and that’s all I’m asking for here, Belinda. Trust us.”

“I don’t know what you expect me to say,” Belinda said. “Am I meant to break down and admit my mistakes in the face of your wisdom? That’s not how it works.”

“I know,” Humphrey said. “I just need you to think about things. About your team and what you want your place in it to be. Maybe talk to Arabelle. She knows how to listen without having any personal stake in our team.”

Belinda gave Humphrey a side glance before returning her eyes to the river.

“I’ll think about it,” she said.

Chapter 630

A Matter of What You Want

The convoy left the river, passing by several towns on their way to the coast. From there they followed the coast roads for the most part, but they increasingly needed to find alternatives. Compared to the excellent road network maintained by the storm kingdom, these were not as wide or well-maintained as those to the north. Sometimes the hefty hover yacht needed to float over the rainforest canopy. Others they would ride along the beach, skim over a bay or take to the water, running under a shoreline of cliffs.

Jason found the variety to be very welcome. Their progress was not fast, but for that, they could have simply flown. Jason enjoyed the days of travel as the team interspersed training with the simple joys of luxury travel. They spent large amounts of time on the roof deck for both, especially as they left the monsoon rains behind in their continuing journey south. Jungle and rainforest continued to dominate the terrain, but they escaped the worst of the oppressive humidity.

Delays were made for day trips. If they spotted an interesting mountain, they would often pause to climb it. They explored town markets and misty gorges, with even the urbanite Belinda, sullen from her punishment, unable to keep from enjoying herself. Only Korinne managed to maintain a frown on the leisurely expeditions, muttering 'traitors' and 'mutiny.' The rest of her team were utterly won over by the relaxed approach of Team Biscuit.

Towns and villages started welcoming their arrival. Less resource-starved, their main issue was keeping up with remnant surge monsters wandering out of the wilderness. The overworked local adventurers were grateful for the relief that two elite teams brought. After several welcome receptions, Jason and Humphrey were up on the roof deck, watching the latest town seem to shrink as the convoy pulled away.

"We're doing alright," Humphrey said, "but the extra monsters from the surge are starting to thin out. We're running into the reason most adventurers find their advancement slowing down after reaching silver. It's harder to find regular challenges, which makes other interests all the more enticing."

The teams led by Humphrey and Korinne were having no trouble with the monster packs they were encountering, both being elite groups. Only the most powerful of silver-rank monsters posed any real threat, so both groups had started using only parts of their rosters for individual encounters.

“You want to change things up?” Jason asked. He too felt the urge to push his abilities forward, and not just because Dawn had told him to. His advancement had been stagnant since long before his return from Earth, and the monster surge had only done so much to help. He’d spent large portions of it in recovery.

Jason was conflicted, however, as he was quite enjoying their current pace. Travelling around in luxury, helping people who very much needed it. It was the adventuring life Rufus had promised him all the way back in Greenstone, and it didn't disappoint. Humphrey was fully aware of those feelings on Jason's part, making him hesitant to suggest a change.

“I don’t want to push you,” Humphrey said. “But I think we both know what we need to do to find a greater challenge. I know you've been looking forward to this travelling for a long time, though, and I’m not looking to get you caught up in larger messes all over again.”

“I appreciate that,” Jason said, “but I’m also past ready to push my powers to new heights. These contracts for silver rank monsters aren’t enough. Only a few of them have posed any real challenge at all; not enough to go around if we want the team to grow stronger, let alone the other team. But we aren't ready to go hunting gold-rank monsters, either. Not unless it's a matchup in our favour, and the Adventure Society won't let a group of silver rankers pick and choose gold-rank contracts.”

They were both aware they could likely finagle special treatment by leveraging the Geller name and Jason’s unusual status with the Adventure Society, but neither man suggested it. They both wanted to move away from politics and do some good, honest adventuring work.

“You know that even if we try and act like any other adventuring team, it probably won’t work out that way,” Humphrey said. “It never does with you. Once we start taking contracts related to the messengers, this may well escalate.”

“If it does, it does,” Jason said. “We were always going to have to go after the messengers, sooner or later. Sooner, really; I need to get something from them. Now that the surge is over, I have a job to do, and it’s become more complicated now that I don’t have the magic tools from the Builder and the World-Phoenix. I need the advanced astral magic from the messengers to finish building the bridge between worlds.”

“Clive will be happy,” Humphrey said. “I’m bringing it up now because there’s something in Estella’s latest report. She just got back this morning.”

Estella was taking her job seriously. She spent a lot of time away from the convoy, roaming ahead to investigate their upcoming destinations. She spied potential threats,

scouted potential opportunities and gave an overall assessment of the value of any given stop. Estella delivered an initial report to Humphrey and Korinne before making a broader presentation to the full teams.

"Messenger activity?"

"Reports of," Humphrey said. "Maybe two days out of our way, at our current sedate pace. A little way inland, in a magic zone at the high silver level. Even discounting the messengers, we should get stronger silver-rank monsters there. The occasional gold, although I wouldn't expect us to scoop those contracts up. The locals will get priority there."

"What kinds of activity?"

"Estella didn't get much, since she was working with third-hand information. There's a small holy army in the area, though. Goddess of Knowledge."

"Worth finding out more, at the very least," Jason said. "How about I notify the teams for Estella's briefing, and we can discuss taking the detour?"

Shade was serving as cruise staff, including being the primary means of relaying information.

"Very well," Humphrey agreed. "Let's go hunt some messengers."

Following Estella's presentation, Korinne's team returned to their vehicle while Humphrey's went off to pursue their own activities, elsewhere in the yacht. Korinne remained behind in the briefing room to talk with Humphrey.

"Do you object to a course that brings us into conflict with the messengers?" Humphrey asked.

"No. Given the choice, I'm confident that we would make the same one you have. My only issue is that we weren't given the choice. The thing I like the least in this arrangement is that our team lacks self-determination. We are stuck following you around."

"I understand," Humphrey told her. "But while I'm willing to hear you out on any issue, I won't surrender any amount of authority to you and your team. You are, ultimately, passengers. Passengers we will accommodate as we can, but decline when we can't."

"Or won't."

"Or won't," Humphrey conceded.

Farrah found the white archway leading to Jason's soul space, on the yacht's bridge, beside the door connecting the bridge to Jason's cabin. She stepped through and felt Jason's aura wash over her. It did the same on the yacht, but here it didn't feel like an

external force. It was more part of the fabric of the world around her, as inherent as the gravity holding her to the ground. The archway deposited her in an open square, amidst estate buildings centred on a towering pagoda.

“You’ve been spending a lot of time in here lately,” she said, despite being alone.

“Just when I’m doing my meditation training,” Jason said, suddenly standing next to her. “When I’m not doing specific exercises because of Amos, anyway. I’m still coming to grips with this place and what I can do with it, and I’m chasing something specific, at the moment.”

“Oh?”

He gestured and she nodded, and they started walking. They left the square and entered the sprawling gardens of Jason’s soul space.

“I’ve barely touched on what the astral throne and the astral gate are capable of,” he told her. “I need more power before I can truly tap into them, especially the astral gate.”

“Didn’t Dawn tell you to leave the astral gate alone for now?”

“And I have been. Mostly. I’m concentrating on the astral throne, for the moment. I’ve come to realise that I’m going to need time as much as I need power. There is so much to learn about the nature of these items and what I can do with them.”

“Do they affect anything outside of this soul space?”

“Yes,” Jason said. “My spirit domains, being the regions on earth and anything I make with the cloud yacht, are directly affected by not just my power here, but also my understanding. The domains on Earth I manipulated subconsciously. I was able to actively change things, but that was all surface-level alterations.”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“It means I could change a house, not the laws of thermodynamics.”

“Is that an option?”

“I think so. Eventually. When I meditate here, it’s like this whole place is meditating, because it is.”

“Because it’s you.”

“Exactly. But this place is its own physical reality. Kind of. When I meditate here, my senses expand in a way that reflects that.”

“Meaning?”

“That I’m starting to understand physical reality on an intrinsic level. It’s something I only recognised because of all the time I spent in the space opened by the Builder’s door. It was an introduction to how the building blocks of reality work, and I can feel that, sometimes, when I’m meditating here. I don’t know if that’s because I used the authority

that used to be in the door, and affected this place, but the astral throne is definitely part of it. It's designed to govern physical reality, after all, compared to the astral gate which governs dimensional forces."

"It's not a wild surprise that you can sense the space you accessed with the Builder's door, is it?" Farrah asked. "You obtained the astral throne when the door broke down, right?"

"Yeah."

"Do you think you'll be able to access that underlying physical realm again at some point?" she asked.

"Not out in the world, no. I can glimpse it, but it's not mine to change anymore. I can feel that. What I'm looking for now is a more conscious ability to change things on that level here. Right now, I have control, but lack understanding. If you think of this place like a car, I know how to drive a car. I need to learn how to build one."

"And how are the results so far?"

"Preliminary. Not enough to make me confident of successfully helping Carlos or Sophie's mother. I'd say the biggest change is in my ability to control constructs from the cloud flask. They respond to me by design, and that control has become immensely more refined. I deepened the soul bond with my cloud flask, infused it with authority and turned the material it produces into extensions of my spirit domains. The flask has undergone a fundamental change, in more ways than is readily apparent."

"Oh?"

"Let me change the subject for a moment before I come back to it," Jason said.

"While I have been focusing on the astral throne, the astral gate has brought some surprises of its own."

"I thought you weren't meant to be messing with that yet. Dawn told you to leave it alone."

"Dawn's guidance is valuable, but she's not an astral king. There are some roads she can't guide me down, but it doesn't mean I shouldn't walk them. That being said, I haven't been fiddling around with the astral gate. It's just that its power has allowed me to notice something. Bonds."

"Bonds?"

"Magical bonds. I can feel the bonds between myself and my bonded items now. I feel the bonds spanning off into the astral that connect me to my spirit domains on Earth, even if I'm too weak to feel the other end. But these are deliberate bonds. They're strong,

firm and don't disconnect. I've noticed other bonds as well, that I suspect have formed incidentally."

"Such as?"

"Such as between you and me. Farrah, you and I formed a special bond."

"I don't care how powerful you are here," Farrah told him. "I'm not going to sleep with you."

"What? No. I wasn't talking about that. I'd sleep with Humphrey before you."

"It did always seem like there was something there," Farrah said.

"I know, right?" Jason asked. "He's the upright, uptown boy, and I'm the sassy girl who restores classic cars. He gets talked into borrowing a car from his dad's collection without asking by one of his gadabout friends and gets in a fender-bender. I agree to fix it without his dad finding out."

"You've put a lot of thought into this."

"No."

"What's the title of this little story you've got going on?"

"It doesn't have a title. This isn't something I think about."

Farrah gave him a flat look.

"Humphrey's Big Engine," he mumbled sheepishly.

Farrah burst out laughing and Jason joined her. The path they were on led into a cave, running alongside an underground river. Their way was lit by luminescent fungus and flowers, growing out of crevices or on creeper vines.

"I think the bond between us is a remnant of when you came back to life," he explained. "The Reaper somehow bound your soul to mine, but I don't think the bond was intended to last, like string around a delivery package. When our souls entered Earth that bond broke, by design. It's why we didn't arrive in the same place. But the remnants of that bond are there, even now, but the connection is intermittent. Now that I can sense it, I feel it link us, sometimes, and fall away at others."

"What does this bond do?"

"Not a lot, from what I can tell. I've been using the astral gate's power to examine it, but I'm even less well-versed with that than the astral throne. All I've managed to figure out thus far is that I can use the bond to treat you, in terms of my abilities, in a similar way to my familiars."

"You're saying I'm your familiar?"

"No," Jason said. "But it means I can treat you like one in certain respects, while the bond is active. Things like having you use my portals without consuming extra energy

beyond what it takes for me to go through. I think it's been going on ever since Earth, but I've only just realised it was happening, and why. As for what else the bond can do, that's something we'd have to explore. I think that potentially, we could use it for effectively infinite range with my group chat ability. The only limits would be dimensional barriers, although the results would vary by circumstance, I suspect. The same way that Shade can sometimes connect to his other bodies through an astral space boundary and sometimes not, depending on the specific nature of the astral space."

They paused in an underground grotto, sitting on a bench that overlooked an underground pond.

"You can manipulate this bond?"

"I think that I can restore the bond to full strength," Jason said. "Make it permanent. I can also eliminate it entirely. It's a matter of what you want."

Farrah nodded absently.

"You know why I'm here," she said.

"If we're going after messengers, it means that I'm getting down to business," he said. "Which means it's time for you and Travis to head back to Rimaros and get to your own business."

"I worry about you, Jason. We've been constant companions ever since you finished your walkathon on Earth."

"Walkabout."

"Whatever. Are you going to be alright without me?"

He let out a chuckle.

"I wouldn't have gotten this far without you. Not even close. It's why they sent you to me, and if nothing else, I'll always be grateful to the Reaper and The World-Phoenix for that. But I think I'll be okay. It's not just us against the world anymore, and it's past time we stopped acting like it is."

"Oh, I'm fine," she said. "You're the wobbly one. We're here in your magic god realm and you're still anxious."

"I am not anxious."

"Of course you're not."

"I'm not!"

"Uh-huh."