

## Chapter 481

### Enemies Even I Would Fear

Jason left through the main doors of the temple of Fertility, his storage space freshly loaded with supplies. He was motivated, having discovered how critical the temple's delivery was during the monster surge. Fortress towns were of paramount importance during a surge, sheltering the evacuated populace of the surrounding villages and towns. Most of those people were normal citizens who could not live on spirit coins the way an essence user could, making the food supply a significant logistical problem.

The temple of Fertility maintained a series of secure stations in the outlying areas where regular supplies runs weren't viable during a surge. These stations were much like fortress towns except that instead of people they contained the infrastructure to rapidly grow large amounts of food in a short time and relatively small area.

These fortified farms were critical to preventing starvation in the more remote fortresses while being just as subject to monster attack. This meant that they not only required the resources to maintain their defences but also their ability to grow food. While the supplies could be at least somewhat intermittent, going too long without fresh magical provisions meant that whole crops would be lost. That, in turn, consigned people in the forts to a slow, hungry death.

Leaving the temple, Jason had a renewed sense of purpose. It was a job well worth doing and, for once, he was the appropriate person to do it. The Builder and his interdimensional circus was the job of the people with the power to actually do something about it, at least until Jason was inevitably dragged back into it all.

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The royal palace was an opulent paradise the size of a large town, with marble buildings set amongst gardens landscaped to the level of art. The grounds were vast enough to have districts, from walking trails meandering through a rainforest to a sea of flowers. A painstakingly sculpted and maintained hedge maze formed a massive disorientation ritual. Ordinary mazes posed little challenge to those with potent magic senses.

It wasn't just the look of the palace that made it feel like a slice of heaven. The invisible protective dome over the sky island also filtered the sunlight to fall on the palace exactly the way the designers intended, varying from district to district. Soft light fell on courtyards of people taking tea while bright rays lit up the gardens. Fresh aromas from the

rainforest and the sweet scent of flowers wafted through the grounds on a meandering, magically cultivated breeze.

While the palace seemed open and inviting, it was the most heavily defended area of the most heavily defended sky island in Rimaros. Only a small handful of people knew the full scope of the defences it could call upon at need.

In Pallimustus, there was always tension in any powerful group between its members and the people who protected them. When power meant being a high-rank essence user, usually an adventurer, did such people truly need protection? If so, who would do the protecting? If the people protecting them were more powerful, then why were they not the ones in power? Historically, more than a few coups had been born from this very question.

In many places, the role of guard had become ceremonial, more akin to servants than being required to repel attacks. In Rimaros, the solution came in the form of a guild. The Sapphire Crown was one of the most powerful guilds in Rimaros due to the support it received from the royal family, many of whom were amongst its most capable members. In return for the excellent support they received, all non-royal guild members were required to periodically serve within the royal guard.

Membership in the Sapphire Crown was incredibly stringent, with most members coming from guild families. Loyalty was paramount and all members were put through rigorous examinations to shield against compromise. All members underwent examination quarterly but while serving in the guard, this increased to anywhere from monthly to weekly, depending on specific duties.

Trenchant Moore stood out in the guild for being a human. Rimaros was one of the few cities where celestines were in the majority and humans were an even smaller minority in the royal guard than in the population at large.

Amongst people that mixed darker skin tones with hair of metallic and gemstone colour, Trenchant stood out with his pale skin and dark hair. He was lean and angular, his features as sharp as the gaze of his icy blue eyes. If not for his gold rank, his white skin would have long ago tanned under the tropical sun.

Trenchant was not currently serving in the guard, so was curious as to why he'd been summoned to the palace. The guilds had huge activity quotas to fill during the monster surge and the royal family did not shield the Sapphire Crown from those requirements. As a gold-ranker, Trenchant was responsible for meeting a good portion of that quota.

Not being on duty, Trenchant had a rare chance to appreciate the beauty of the grounds instead of being on alert for potential threats. Even so, he couldn't break the habit of sweeping his senses over the places where aesthetics had been chosen over security.

Moving along an open walkway, he was headed for a building that was only small by palatial standards. It was a place where royal family members and upper-tier officials conducted high-level but generally unimportant business, usually related to administration.

The choice of location, combining high security with low-key affairs, drew Trenchant's attention. Having served a guard on and off for decades, he knew that while such places were mostly used for mundane affairs, they were also the ideal place to hold significant meetings without drawing significant attention.

He went in through the main doors to the security station where he was checked with several magical devices by the guards on duty. He knew them well but in their stoic professionalism, they treated him as a stranger.

"You're not on duty," one of the guards said. "You'll need to leave your sword."

Trenchant's hand instinctively moved to the hilt of the sword at his hip, the reaction of a sword specialist when told to relinquish his blade. The guards moved their hands to their own weapons.

"Sorry," Trenchant said, unbuckling his sword belt.

"He can keep it," a female voice said through the door. Trenchant recognised it as that of Vesper Rimaros.

"With respect, your highness," Trenchant called back, "the protocol is the protocol. I shall hand over my weapon."

"Keep it and come in," a male voice said, seemingly from all around him. He didn't recognise the voice but it carried an overpowering authority that left his instincts screaming to obey. He looked at the guards, themselves looking shaken. They shared a nod and Trenchant rebuckled his belt as a guard opened the door for him to move deeper into the building.

Inside was a conference room containing two members of the royal family and several guards. The royals were Vesper and Liara Rimaros; there was no sign of the man whose voice had ushered him in.

"The rest of you can leave," Vesper said, to the displeasure of the guards.

"Your highness, security protocols—"

"Out," Liara barked.

The guard looked unhappy but nodded his head as he waved his people out.

"My lady."

In the royal hierarchy, Vesper was the higher of the two princesses, but birthright was only part of the equation. Vesper was only silver-rank to Liara's gold, and while Vesper was a capable adventurer, Liara was a figure of accomplishment and respect in the

Sapphire Crown, the Adventure Society and amongst adventurers in general. Power, not legacy, was ever the ultimate authority.

“Seal the room please, Trench,” Liara said. “Then take a seat.”

Trenchant activated the privacy enchantments on the room and then sat opposite the princesses at the conference table.

“You are no doubt wondering why you’ve been called in here,” Liara told him.

“Yes, my lady.”

“There are sky pirates who have been spotted moving around in the outskirts of the kingdom,” Vesper said. “It’s a known group. We believe that they intend to prey on airships and lone adventurers doing supply runs to the fortress towns.”

“Scum,” Trenchant said. “Taking from those who are in most desperate need.”

“Yes,” Liara said. “Normally, those supply runs have only silvers, maybe a low-value gold-ranker on board. These pirates, however, while a bunch of core-using trash, have two gold-rankers. With the demands on the time of gold-rank adventurers during the surge, the outer reaches of our territory aren’t as defended as they normally would be. Add in a regular schedule of heavily supplied airships and the pirates have grown bold.”

“You’re dedicating some adventurers to the supply ships to catch them out? Bait ships?”

“The Adventure Society is, yes,” Liara said.

“But that isn’t why I’m here,” Trenchant said. “Not all of it, anyway. You don’t have secret meetings just over trapping some pirates.”

“We’re going to place you on a ship,” Vesper said. “Unlike the other vessels, where the gold-ranker will be supported by silvers, yours will be a normal crew complement.”

“If I end up fighting pirates... I can handle a couple of core-using bottom feeders, even if they are gold, but not while protecting the rest of the crew from whatever silver-rankers the pirates have. You know they don’t exactly send the best adventurers on those runs. It’s all utility powers and second-raters. A lot of them won’t be adventurers at all.”

“Use your discretion,” Liara said. “Don’t risk the airship and the people aboard if you feel they aren’t up to the task. Run, if that is the best course. We will stand by whatever judgement you make.”

“Then what is any of this in aid of?” Trenchant asked.

“There will be an adventurer on that ship. Silver-rank. We want your assessment of how he conducts himself. You are not to mention this aspect of your assignment, how it was assigned or by whom to anyone outside of this room. You are not to discuss it, even with us, outside of a secure environment.”

“On the understanding that I can only agree so long as no one with more authority asks me to break those terms,” Trenchant said.

“They won’t,” Vesper said. Liara nodded.

“By what criteria do you want me to assess this man?” Trenchant asked.

“Any and all you feel warrant mention,” Liara said.

“Should I protect him?”

“Yes,” Liara said.

“No,” the male voice countermanded her. Trenchant still could not place where it was coming from. His gold-rank senses detected no one else in the room and no one should be able to listen in or communicate from outside it. The implications of that were not lost on him.

Vesper and Liara shared a look.

“However foolish the man and his choices may seem,” the voice continued, “let them play out to their conclusion.”

“Don’t let him know that you’re anything but an ordinary gold-ranker protecting the airship,” Vesper told Trenchant.

“He will know,” the voice said. “Guard, your aura has the sharpness of a blade. You cannot hide it from him, even in a scabbard. If you do run into trouble and he wishes to work with you, accept it.”

Trenchant looked to the two princesses. They nodded confirmation with troubled expressions.

“Who is this man you want me to look at?” he asked.

“Jason Asano,” Vesper said. “Outworlder. Go to the jobs hall and you’ll be given the assignment.”

“If there are no more questions,” Liara said, her tone certain that there were not, “then you may go.”

Trenchant stood up, giving Vesper a short bow and Liara a slightly shallower one.

“Your highness. My lady.”

Trenchant deactivated the privacy magic and left, after which Liara got up and turned it back on as Vesper stood up and paced. Soramir was suddenly in the room and took a seat, both women bowing to him.

“Ancestral majesty,” they greeted in unison.

“Do sit down, girls,” he said, waving them into chairs.

“Ancestral majesty,” Vesper said. “May I ask why we’re putting Asano into danger?”

“We’re not,” Soramir said. “We’re giving him the chance to put himself into danger. I’m curious what he’ll do.”

“And if what he does is die?” Vesper asked.

“Then problem solved,” Soramir said. “Little Zara mourned a dead man and a dead man he will be.”

“Then why not kill him ourselves?” Vesper asked.

“This again?” Liara asked. “Vesper, we don’t kill innocent people when what makes them inconvenient is something we did.”

“Actually, we do,” Soramir said, “but other outcomes are generally preferable.”

“Why are we playing games?” Liara asked. “Why are you testing him?”

“Liara, you have at least some sense of the boy’s secrets,” Soramir said. “It’s why you sent Vesper here to go find little Zila, is it not? To dig them out?”

Both vesper and Liara paled at their revered diamond-rank ancestor being called ‘little Zila.’ Soramir laughed as the princesses shared a look.

“You have dug out his secrets, then?” Liara asked.

“I’ve seen the touch of allies and enemies on him that are not to be taken lightly. Enough to know that killing him ourselves would be unwise without learning more.”

“There are things about him that would be very useful to—”

Liara was cut off by Soramir shifting his eyes onto her, the words dying in her throat.

“It is uncouth to share the secrets of others,” he told her. “If it must be done then it must be done, but I’ve already done more than enough. Poking through the soul of a junior was already crass, especially when I was careless enough to let him notice. If you can’t tease out his secrets yourself, Liara then they aren’t yours to know.”

“Majestic ancestor,” Vesper yet. “You are so far above him that there is no etiquette you owe him.”

“This, Vesper, is your flaw. You assume knowledge before seeking it out. Jason Asano is already half a step into my world, to his suffering and regret.”

“What does that mean?” Liara asked. “Half a step into your world?”

“It means he has faced enemies even I would fear.”

“If he had enemies like that,” Liara said, “there’s no way he could survive.”

“He didn’t,” Soramir said. “That’s how little Zara got us into this mess.”

“Ancestor, if I may ask,” Liara said. “Why are you involving yourself? Family politics are below you and I was surprised that Ancestor Zila intervened, let alone, you. Is it because of Asano?”

“Yes. I suspect him to be a remarkable young man, which is why I want to put him to the test. I believe him to be the kind who finds himself in the centre of things over and over. A pawn of fate. A common destiny for outworlders, although the boy does seem to especially excel in this regard.”

“What are your intentions for him?” Liara asked.

“Marrying him into the family could potentially prove a very good idea. Or a very bad one. I think it best we find out.”

“You intend to bless the match with Zara?” Liara asked.

“Even if the family was willing to go for that,” Vesper said, “he wouldn't be. She pulled him into a mess with people more powerful than him, which sounds like a pattern he's been in before, if what the ancestor says is true. He will not be grateful for Zara adding to his troubles.”

Soramir gave Vesper an approving smile.

“You're thinking of marrying him off to someone else in the family,” Vesper guessed.

“If he's worth it,” Soramir said. “We'll watch him and see how he does. How he thinks. He could be a powerful asset or a dangerous threat, simply by his presence.”

“I still don't see how he could be either,” Vesper said. “He's just some silver-ranker. Zara pulled his name out of a hat because he conveniently died on the other side of the world with just enough accomplishments to be plausible.”

“And in ten years?” Soramir asked. “A hundred? A thousand? That boy is going to go all the way or die trying. In fact, he's done so already and it hasn't stopped him yet.”

“It won't be easy,” Vesper said. “It sounds like he's going to be hostile after what we've done.”

“Perhaps he will blame Zara,” Liara said.

“Zara didn't set a pair of diamond rankers on his path to pry out his secrets,” Vesper said. “That was you and I.”

“He doesn't know that.”

“If he can't figure out that more than Zara is moving, we definitely don't want him marrying in,” Vesper said. “I only briefly met him but he struck me as a fool, not an idiot.”

“He is angry at us,” Soramir conformed. “He's trying to put it aside because he knows that acting on it is not in his best interest but we took something from him. Something he's been looking forward to for a long time, only for us to snatch it away the moment he found it.”

“If you're serious about potentially tying him to the family, ancestor,” Liara said, “we cannot treat him as a tool.”

“We're all tools, Liara,” Vesper said. “This is why you make a better adventurer than politician.”

“Vesper is correct in this,” Soramir said. “My attention must be on the greater threats we face, so I shall leave this affair in your hands and check-in as I feel the need. The two of you make a good pair. Vesper has a grasp of the political realities while you, Liara, have thoroughness and caution. And ethics.”



## Chapter 482

### True Elites

On the island of Livaros, the sky port was the busiest part of the skyline. Looming towers were skyships docked up and down their exteriors while more ships drifted in and out of the port air space. It was busy enough that Jason wondered how air traffic control was managed.

The ships came in a startling array of designs. Some looked like ordinary ships, complete with sails, although Jason doubted they were propelled by anything so mundane as ordinary wind. Others were almost spaceship-like with sleek hulls of dark metal, but most fell somewhere in-between the sailing ship and UFO designs. The most common type of skyship looked like an ordinary sailing vessel but, instead of sails, had glowing crystals suspended from scaffolding outside of the hull. The crystals were the size of a small car and each ship using them had as few as three or as many as eight, depending on the size of the vessel.

Jason happily gawped like a tourist as he wandered through the port at ground level. He was also dressed like a tourist, once again in shorts and a very pink floral shirt. He relied on his magical senses to avoid bumping into anyone as he craned his neck around, watching all the activity above. Unsurprisingly, even the low-altitude air traffic present in the rest of the city was heavily restricted here. The only flying vehicles, aside from the skyships themselves, were magical wagons moving up and down the outsides of the towers to load the airships.

Dimensional storage was expensive, and people with personal storage spaces even more so. This was why some didn't even bother with adventuring and became professional porters. Most airships still used both, however, filling their holds with dimensional storage crates.

Jason arrived at the tower he was looking for, a circular edifice of steel and glass that was the closest Jason had seen to contemporary architecture from his own world. The main difference was the massive freight doors through which wagonloads of goods were being hauled in and out. Not all of the wagons moving goods could fly and the interior of the building, as Jason discovered going in, was an array of large elevating platforms ringing the interior of the tower.

In the centre of the busy room was a series of reception desks, all rushing through the queues assembled in front of them as quickly as they could. Jason spotted Autumn, the elf he had met the other day, in one of the queues as he joined. She was a few spaces

ahead of him but after she was done, stopped to wait. Jason reached the desk, showed his delivery contracts and was given a boarding document. He then went over to talk to Autumn. Her frog, Neil, was sitting on her shoulder again.

“I thought you had a portal power,” she said.

“I’m a new boy,” Jason said. “Unless they want me to portal around town, I need to do some travelling, first. I’m only shipping out, though. I’m getting dropped in the outer reaches and making my way alone from there. It’s all very scary.”

“You’re a stealth specialist?”

“A friend of mine told me that the powers you awaken reflect who you are.”

“I’ve heard that. It’s a common theory.”

“Well, it’s cowardice all the way for me, so, stealth powers.”

“Just be careful and I’m sure you’ll be fine. They wouldn’t send you out if they thought you’d die.”

“Don’t worry; I have special skills. Did you know there’s a high-pitched shriek you can make that tricks monsters into thinking you’re a mewling infant and many of them leave you alone?”

She gave him a sceptical look.

“It’s not even a power,” he continued. “It’s just something I discovered by accident.”

“We’re probably on the same ship since we picked up our supplies together,” she said, ignoring his ongoing nonsense. “Which ship do they have you on?”

“It’s called, hang on...”

Jason checked his boarding paper and then frowned, his expression thoughtful.

“...*Zila’s Promise*. Hmm.”

“Same here,” Autumn said. “Is something wrong?”

“It’s nothing,” Jason said, looking around and then pointing. “Elevating platform six, that’s us.”

They went over to the platform and waited for it to come back down, all the platforms being in heavy use. They rode up, crowded in with wagons and carts. These were all magically propelled, even if they didn’t fly. From what Jason had seen, animal-drawn vehicles were a minority in Rimaros. In Arnote, around the town market, he’d seen wagons drawn by heidels. He still didn’t care for the creepy, two-headed lizard-horses.

In Livaros, animal-drawn vehicles seemed to be a point of prestige and he’d occasionally spotted wealthy carriages, flying or otherwise, drawn by exotic animals or magical beasts. The rich seemed to share Jason’s aversion to heidels, but probably because poor people used them.

"You're not human, are you?" Autumn asked him as the platform ascended through the inside of the tower. They were close to the glass and got a good view of the city. The platform made regular stops for wagons, carts and people to unload onto the airships docked to the exterior of the tower.

"No," Jason said, pulling out a sandwich. "Want one?"

"I brought my own snacks," she said, tapping Neil on the back. The frog opened his mouth and a bag larger than the frog himself emerged. Jason smiled as the bag warped to its full size. Watching larger items come out of small storage spaces was almost cartoon-like in how the object seemed so pliable only to spring into its normal shape and size, wholly unaffected by the process.

"What?" she asked him, then popped a glazed nut from the bag into her mouth.

"You don't want to know what I was thinking."

"Now I really want to know."

"I was just wondering about tying a giant firework to a cart so I could ride it and chase down a flightless bird."

Autumn blinked, nonplussed.

"That's really what you were thinking?"

"It probably wouldn't work. I'd fly off the edge of a desert gorge, hover in the air briefly with a put-upon expression and then fall, kicking up a dirt cloud as I hit the ground."

"A desert?"

"Yep."

"In the famously wet and humid sea of storms."

"I don't make the rules."

"Is this some kind of ruse to make people underestimate you?"

"You asked."

"What about your eyes? Is that something to do with not being human?"

"No, that's just the side effect of a power."

"A perception power?"

"Partly. It helps me sense dimensional anomalies. Astral space apertures, that kind of thing."

"Why do I get the impression that you're never quite telling the truth, even when you aren't lying?"

"Because I'm clearly a man of mystery. I lead a life of danger, excitement and baked goods."

"I can tell by the way you're dressed."

“How good is this shirt? I found it in one of the smaller market districts near supply depot seven.”

“Is it designed to repel any princesses that try to marry you?”

“You don’t think they’d like it?”

“It doesn’t exactly scream ‘man of action.’ Don’t princesses normally go for the manly, heroic type?”

Jason immediately thought of Humphrey. He also vaguely recalled hearing something about Rufus and a princess.

“You may be right; let’s call that a bonus on top of getting to look so snazzy.”

He jabbed his half-eaten sandwich emphatically

“I am not going to marry any princesses,” he insisted. “That’s how you end up slaying dragons and I’ve got nothing against dragons. One of my friends is a dragon.”

“One of your friends is a dragon?”

“Yeah, he’s a real little scamp. Loves biscuits. Proper biscuits, not scones. Ooh, I should make some savoury scones. I’m just getting back into cooking. Maybe I shouldn’t. I think that’s where the princess problem started in the first place.”

Autumn was swiftly learning that, with Jason, it was tricky to stay focused as he hijacked conversations with nonsense.

“If you’re not human,” she asked, “what are you?”

“Rakishly handsome?”

“You’re silver-rank. Everyone’s good-looking.”

“Ah, but it’s not what you’ve got; it’s how you use it. Wait until you see me at the prow of the ship, wind tousling my hair. You won’t even be wondering where the sheep got that spatula from.”

“The sheep?” she couldn’t stop herself from asking.

Jason flashed her an impish grin then turned his gaze upward, as if having noticed something.

“You’ve done delivery runs like this in the past, right?” he asked.

“Not during a monster surge, but yes. It’s not monster-hunting money but it’s a way to make some relatively safe money if you have a storage power.”

“Do you know if these trips normally have a gold-ranker on them?” he asked.

“Sometimes,” Autumn said. “No one guild level, if it’s a gold. I don’t want to say dregs but they aren’t the best. I even saw one almost crash a ship because he got turned down for... anyway, he got angry and lost control of his aura. Distracted the port pilot while he

was bringing the ship into port and scraped the whole side of the ship against a docking tower.”

“That’s not ideal.”

“I prefer not to have a gold-ranker because then you get high-end silvers instead. I’ll take a team of guild silvers over a garbage gold-ranker any time, even if they do look down on the rest of us. At least they’re professional when the monsters show up. Flying monsters are frequently attracted to skyships, so it’s all but guaranteed we’ll see them now.”

“What about sky pirates? I’d love to see some sky pirates.”

“Because you’re a man of mystery and danger?”

“Exactly.”

“I’ll be happy to avoid them, thank you very much. Story pirates might be all about romance and swashbuckling but real pirates are all about murder and avoiding soap.”

Jason laughed.

“You’re probably right,” he agreed.

What Autumn said about the gold-rankers assigned to such missions didn’t match what he sensed from the ships above them. There were multiple ships with rigidly-controlled gold-rank auras, far from the dregs that Autumn described. They were accompanied by similarly elite silver-rank auras.

Given that he was sensing elites on multiple ships, was it a matter of increased security for the monster surge? That didn’t track with Jason’s understanding that the delivery missions were lower priority. Perhaps the ships in question weren’t supply ships. What drew Jason’s attention the most was a ship that had a single gold-ranker and no other auras of note.

This aura put even the other gold-rankers to shame. Even compared to gold-rankers, Jason had never felt that his aura control fell short, but this man’s control was on a whole other level. It felt less like observing an aura than it did like observing a sword. Jason kept hearing about the level of true elites, but now he understood what that looked like. The only gold-rankers he’d seen that might come close were Rufus’ father, Gabriel, and Gabriel’s teammate Callum. He couldn’t be sure, though, as he’d last sensed their auras when he was an iron-ranker with feeble aura senses.

“I think we’re here,” Autumn said as the platform stopped once more. It was on the level of the ship containing the remarkable gold-ranker, which didn’t surprise Jason at all.

“Every bloody time,” he muttered.

“What’s that?” Autumn asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” Jason said. He ate the last of his sandwich and pulled out a fruit drink in his coconut cup.

“I don’t suppose you found a line on those tiny umbrellas?”

“Sorry.”

“Did you even check?”

“I did not, no.”

Doors in the side of the building opened and the people on foot moved through while the wagons jostled for position. Unlike non-magical variants, they were better able to rotate in place, but it was still awkward.

Through the doors was a metal walkway connecting the building to the ship, ending in a cradle in which the ship was resting. The walkway led directly on deck where the first mate quickly checked their papers and ushered them out of the way. They headed for the gold-rank aura near the stern of the ship.

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Trenchant Moore stood at the stern of the *Zila’s Promise*, taking in the surroundings with his aura senses. There were gold-rankers accompanied by silver-rank guild teams aboard the other ships, ready to eliminate the pirates if they showed themselves. It was an operation that needed to be wrapped up quickly with the demand for capable gold-rankers rising every day.

Adventurers and other essence users assigned to delivery contracts were boarding the ship. The adventurers with society-issued contracts sensed Trenchant’s aura and approached. He confirmed their details and warned them to stay out of the crew’s way. A couple tried to make more social approaches, guessing he was a guild member from his aura. Monster surges were a prime recruiting period for guilds and those hoping to score a membership would always be looking for opportunities. Trenchant rebuffed the smart ones with a standoffish attitude and the stupid ones with a burst of aura suppression.

Trenchant’s senses detected an unusual aura moving up through the tower on an elevating platform. It was silver-rank but with a strength rivalling that of a gold-ranker and the precise control to match. He was unable to see through the aura at all without pushing out his senses aggressively, which he would hardly do in the heavily crowded dock. If he distracted some port pilot in a critical moment it could lead to a crash. There had been a near-miss for that exact reason a couple of years ago, incurring expensive repairs and even more expensive port delays.

It was the second-strongest silver-rank aura he’d ever seen but had no trace of the overlap that marked a fourfold aura. This was a singular aura power with formidable

strength in and of itself. It was exactly the kind of aura it would take to arrest the attention of whatever Rimaros ancestor was behind Trenchant's current task. As to which ancestor, Trenchant could only guess. As far as he had known, the only diamond-ranker in the city was the namesake of the ship he was on.

As expected, the aura's owner boarded the *Zila's Promise*, approaching with a more ordinary adventurer. From the emotions in her aura, they were casual acquaintances, although she seemed to harbour a strong curiosity about her companion. Even up close, Asano's emotions were completely hidden; his aura's control every bit the equal of its strength.

At most, Trenchant could see that Asano was hiding his true strength and level of control, passing himself off as one of the less capable adventurers that otherwise occupied the ship. No one short of a gold-ranker would be able to see through it, and some of those would need to be up close. This image was reinforced by the man's outfit, from the garish shirt to the open-toed sandals to the ridiculous beverage with fruit sticking out of it.

The pair introduced themselves respectfully, confirming Trenchant's assumption of Asano's identity. He looked over the contracts from the two, seeing that Asano was to leave the ship mid-journey to make a solo trek through the outer reaches. During a monster surge, especially this one, it was a task that demanded guild-level skills. If Asano had been lacking in that regard, though, he wouldn't be worth paying attention to.

"There is a potential threat of pirates," Trenchant told Asano. "Security on the vessels delivering supplies to the outer reaches has been increased. What do you feel would be the appropriate action should the airship be attacked?"

This drew the attention of the other adventurers, especially the ambitious ones that had failed to draw any kind of positive response from the gold-ranker.

"The same thing you do in every situation," Asano said. "Assess the circumstances and use your best judgement. There's no point deciding what to do now, out of context."

Trenchant nodded but gave no further response, turning around to look out of the stern at the city spread out below.

## Chapter 483

### Diligent and Considerate

The *Zila's Promise* departed Rimaros airspace, heading west. It ascended to an altitude where only the most exotic or dedicated monsters would encounter them. Trenchant Moore ordered the adventurers to stay out of the way of the crew and most stuck close to where the gold ranker stood at the stern of the vessel.

Jason had a happy grin as he watched the city fall away and the Sea of Storms spread out below them. Once they moved into the clouds, he joined some of the other adventurers in sitting cross-legged on the deck, using the travel time to meditate.

The more ambitious adventurers stayed close to Trenchant, trying to engage him with very little success. Some of them threw looks at Jason, wondering why he had warranted extra attention from the gold-ranker. Most of the other passengers were experienced professional porters, either part-time adventurers or not adventurers at all. Autumn was counted in that number and joined them in heading below decks where they played card and dice games.

Several hours into the trip Jason opened his eyes and turned to look at Trenchant, who was already looking at him. Jason raised his eyebrows inquiringly and Trenchant gave a short nod. Jason got to his feet, walked to the side of the skyship and casually dropped himself over the side. No one noticed one of Shade's bodies move from Jason's shadow into one of those on the ship.

Jason threw his arms out, revelling in the sensation as he plunged through the air. Black mist shrouded his body, looking like a dark comet as he continued to drop. The mist dissipated quickly to reveal Jason in his conjured blood robe and starlight cloak. A pair of nebulous spheres that looked much like his own eyes orbited around his body.

Being a conjured item, Jason's robes were an adaptable item able to accommodate his newly purchased gear. Most prominent were the throwing darts sheathed diagonally across his chest.

Rising from below was a flock of flying dinosaur fish, more than two dozen in number. Something between a swordfish and a pterodactyl, the beaks of the silver-rank monsters were long, narrow spikes. Their wings were huge and leathery with an array of bony spines running along their forward edge.

The monsters were rising toward the airship at an angle with powerful flaps of their large wings, propelling them rapidly upward. Jason's cloak flared out around him as he descended on the reverse angle, rushing down to meet them. As he drew close, a storm of



spines rushed ahead of the monsters, shot from their wings to pepper Jason. These were no ordinary projectiles and the monsters were able to redirect them as they moved through the air.

Jason's cloak wrapped around him, shielding him from the small but numerous attacks. By the time he passed through the squall of spines unharmed, he was almost upon the monsters.

Jason didn't avoid a direct confrontation, diving straight at the monsters. He aimed right for the vanguard creature but was startled by its long head shooting forward on a tether of flexible tendons, its beak stabbing out like a spear. It missed Jason entirely. The sharp beak shot past him, to the monster's confusion, before the tether snapped back like a bungee cord and the monster's head returned to its body.

For adventurers and monsters both, higher rank meant an increasing reliance on supernatural senses. In the disorienting chaos of combat, even magically enhanced eyes and ears had their limits and could be deceived. Avoiding attacks that couldn't be seen and noticing enemies that couldn't be heard became increasingly important as enemies gained more exotic powers with each increasing rank.

Aura was critical in fooling supernatural senses, requiring far more finesse than a silence ability or invisibility power. An expert using their aura to feint created a dissonance between the ordinary and supernatural senses but, even amongst high-rankers, few could execute such refined manipulation in the chaos of combat. It was rarely considered worth the effort for a technique that was occasionally useful but never completely reliable. Only combined with the right ability did that change.

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#### Ability: [Cloak of Night] (Dark)

- **Conjuration (darkness, light, dimension).**
- **Base cost: Moderate mana.**
- **Cooldown: None.**
  
- **Current rank: Silver 4 (03%).**
  
- **Effect (iron): Conjures a magical cloak that offers limited physical protection. Can generate light over an area or absorb light to blend into shadows. Cloak can reduce the weight of the wearer, allowing reduced falling speed and water walking. Cannot be given or taken away, but the effect can be extended to others in close proximity, with an ongoing mana cost rising exponentially with each affected person.**
  
- **Effect (bronze): Cloak reflexively intercepts projectiles. Highly effective against rapid, weaker attacks, but less effective against powerful, singular attacks. Cloak allows gliding.**

- **Effect (silver):** Cloak passively manipulates physical space, slightly shifting the trajectory of incoming attacks. Manipulation can be actively managed for more directed effect or to allow passage through spaces normally too small to physically traverse. Cloak allows flight for a low ongoing mana cost, increasing to a moderate ongoing mana cost while in direct sunlight.
- 

Prior to reaching silver rank, Jason had long anticipated the personal flight promised by his cloak power. In practice, it was actually of limited use. Far more often, Jason used some combination of leaping with weight reduction, gliding or Shade's travel forms.

The second aspect of the power allowed Jason to manipulate the space around himself. He could shift the trajectory of attacks without actually affecting the attack by magically manipulating the space between them to constitute a greater distance. The power could, in theory, allow him to dodge without dodging.

While the power was ostensibly strong, the effect proved quite minimal, making it extremely difficult to use. It had taken months of fighting through astral spaces and transformation zones, along with significant self-healing from failed feints and dodges before Jason learned to unlock the power's potential.

The result of combining his exhaustively practised skills, vision-obscuring and space manipulating cloak and his aura manipulation formed a formidably deceptive defence. Even so, the technique lacked the reliability of an essence power that just did a thing and worked. It was Jason's most skill-intensive technique, where he matched his proficiency against the perception and skills of his enemies. While it was working more and more, only in the still-inconsistent combat trance state had Jason truly felt like the technique was mastered.

Even so, Jason continued to practise, fight after fight. Rufus had taught him to push himself to the limits and Jason has enough self-healing that his limits were pretty far. So, when faced with his first batch of monsters since returning to Pallimustus, Jason continued to push.

In this instance, the technique worked and the strange springing neck attack passed by Jason as he plunged into the flock. He reached out with a shadow arm, grabbing the creature that attacked him and pulled himself heavily into a standing position of its back. The monster went into a frenzy, thrashing in the air and shooting out more wing spines that twisted in the air to turn on Jason. He ignored the projectiles as his cloak intercepted them and he conjured his dagger into his second shadow hand while casting a spell.

*"Bleed for me."*

Blood started seeping from the eyes of the monster, which only made its frenzied thrashing worse and it stopped climbing in altitude. Maintaining his grip using one shadow

hand, he used his dagger in the other to leave a pair of shallow cuts on the monster's back. As he did, he cast a second spell.

*“Carry the mark of your transgressions.”*

A brand was marked in the monster's flesh by a wisp of transcendent damage. The creature's flailing was no longer allowing it to maintain flight and it started to drop. The other monsters arrested their ascent, swooping around to assist their stricken flock-mate. They all fired their wing spines, which danced around Jason like a living cloud. They still failed to penetrate Jason's cloak as it swirled around him, the attacks revealing that the article of clothing it appeared to be was a lie. It shrouded him in the magical darkness that was its true nature.

The other monsters continued to wheel around Jason and his unwilling mount, angling for a shot at Jason with their strange head-projectiles. As they jostled for position, Jason blasted out his aura at full strength. The raw power of it spooked the monsters, causing them to falter in their flight. They recovered immediately but were left in disarray.

\*\*\*

One the skyship, some of the adventurers had noticed Jason's casual departure and were wondering amongst themselves why he'd jumped off the ship. Some of them asked Trenchant but he just told them to keep their attentions to their own affairs. They went back to muttering amongst themselves until every essence user on the ship felt an aura explode below them like a bomb.

\*\*\*

Jason launched himself from the back of the stricken bird while casting another spell.

*“Your fate is to suffer.”*

As he did, one of the eye spheres around Jason left his orbit and sank into the wounded monster. At the same time, Shade's bodies swarmed out of Jason's cloak to float amongst the birds in their disarray. The familiar was unaffected by the spines still flying around as they passed through his insubstantial bodies.

Jason fell into one of Shade's bodies and emerged from another, on the far side of the flock. Again he used a shadow arm to grab a creature and pull himself onto its back. With his shadow arms as a tether, he stood astride the creature even as it bucked under him, surveying the state of his new mount's companions. They were starting to panic as radiant butterflies spread amongst them, bestowing their deathly payload and multiplying. It wouldn't be long until he was ready to take the extermination to the next stage; he just needed time for the afflictions to propagate and do their work.

There was a Shade body near each of the monsters and shadow arms burst out from all of them, entangling the wings of the monsters. The arms lacked the strength to bind the monsters entirely but could at least impede their ability to fly as they wished.

---

#### Ability: [Hand of the Reaper] (Dark)

- Conjunction (disease, magic, unholy).
  - Cost: Low mana-per-second.
  - Cooldown: None.
  
  - Current rank: Silver 4 (02%).
  
  - Effect (iron): Conjure a highly flexible, semi-substantial shadow-arm that can extend or shrink. Conjured items can be conjured into the shadow hand. Can be used to make melee special attacks. Special attacks made using the arm inflict [Creeping Death] in addition to other effects.
  
  - Effect (bronze): You can conjure a second arm. Special attacks made using the arms inflict [Rigor Mortis] in addition to other effects.
  
  - Effect (silver): Special attacks made using the arms inflict [Weakness of the Flesh] in addition to other effects. Numerous additional arms can be conjured from nearby shadows but only arms directly connected to the conjurer can bestow afflictions and use melee special attacks. The rank of conjured arms not connected to the conjurer is one rank below that of the conjurer. Up to two arms may be directly connected to the conjurer.
  
  - [Creeping Death] (damage-over-time, disease, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until the disease is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
  
  - [Rigor Mortis] (affliction, unholy, stacking): Penalty to the [Speed] and [Recovery] attributes. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Each time a new instance is inflicted, deals necrotic damage for each existing instance.
  
  - [Weakness of the Flesh] (affliction, magic): Negates immunities to disease and necrotic damage. This includes intrinsic immunities, such as from not having a biology or corporeal form. Cannot be cleansed while any disease affliction is in effect.
- 

The frantic monsters were no longer controlling the spikes that had been flying through the air, which had fallen away as the monsters tried to flee. The shadow arms gripping their wings meant they struggled to remain aloft, let alone control their flight. They kept getting in each other's way as they struggled to free themselves from the annoyance. Shade made sure to position his bodies to obscure the creatures' vision, exacerbating the

problem. All the while, Jason's afflictions were marking their flesh with patches of dead flesh pustules seeping dark blood.

The damage was progressing faster than was normal for silver-rank monsters. They had sealed their fate from the outset by levying hundreds of attacks against Jason with their spines.

---

Ability: [Hegemony] (Sin)

- Aura (holy, unholy).
- Base cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Silver 4 (03%).
  
- Effect (iron): Allies within the aura have increased resistance to afflictions, while enemies within the aura have their resistance to afflictions reduced. Enemy resistances are further reduced for each instance of [Sin] they are suffering from.
  
- Effect (bronze): Inflicts an instance of [Sin] on enemies that make physical or magical attacks against allies within the aura. Instances applied in this way cannot be resisted.
  
- Effect (silver): Aura can be extended over a larger area before aura strength becomes compromised. Transcendent damage dealt by enemies within the aura is downgraded to either resonating-force or disruptive-force damage, depending on the source.
  
- [Sin] (affliction, curse, stacking): All necrotic damage taken is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

---

All the monsters that attacked Jason were drenched in sin as the price of their transgression against him. As a result, Jason's other afflictions desiccated their life force with necrotic power as their bodies died for no more reason than Jason wanted them to. The afflictions continued to multiply with every passing moment, the damage rising at an exponential rate.

Jason didn't want them to scatter too far but their suffering gave them powerful motivation to break away. The monster under him rolled and thrashed as Jason held on with his shadow arm and he let it go, his cloak taking the shape of dark wings, speckled with starlight. He cast another spell.

*"Feed me your sins."*

The red glow of life force shone from each of the monsters, but every light was filled with black and purple taint. The taint drained away in streams to converge on Jason who absorbed it all. As the taint rushed out of the monsters, shining blue, silver and gold light

was left its place. The glow of life force returned to the bodies of the monsters, taking the bright light into their bodies with it.

---

#### Ability: [Feast of Absolution] (Sin)

- Spell (recovery, cleanse, holy).
  - Base cost: Low mana.
  - Cooldown: None.
  
  - Current rank: Silver 4 (02%).
  
  - Effect (iron): Cleanse all curses, diseases, poisons and unholy afflictions from a single target. Additionally, cleanse all holy afflictions if the target is an ally. Recover stamina and mana for each affliction cleansed. This ability ignores any effect that prevents cleansing. Cannot target self.
  
  - Effect (bronze): Enemies suffer an instance each of [Penance] and [Legacy of Sin] for each condition cleansed from them.
  
  - Effect (silver): Increase cost to moderate to affect all afflicted enemies and allies in a wide area.
  
  - [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.
  
  - [Legacy of Sin] (affliction, holy, stacking): Target is considered more damaged for the purpose of execute ability damage scaling. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
- 

Transcendent damage started burning the monsters from the inside out and they began falling from the sky, screaming. Even before they died, rainbow smoke trailed behind them as they fell. None of them struck the water, burned into nothingness before reaching the sea below.

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- You have defeated [Skyhunter Marlin].
  
  - [Skyhunter Marlin] has been wholly annihilated. It has been looted automatically.
  
  - [Monster Core (Silver)] has been added to your inventory.
  - [Skyhunter Needle] has been added to your inventory.
  - 10 [Silver Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - 100 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - 1000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

As loot piled into Jason's inventory, Shade's bodies gathered around Jason and started vanishing into his shadow cloak.

"Mr Asano," Shade said. "I will take the liberty of masking your enhanced mana and life force, since the adventurers on the ship may be able to sense them."

"Thank you, Shade. Diligent and considerate as ever."

Jason's mana had already skyrocketed from draining the afflictions of the monsters. His life force was quickly climbing due to the passive power that worked alongside his Feast of Absolution ability.

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#### Ability: [Sin Eater] (Sin)

- Special ability (recovery, holy).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Silver 4 (02%).
  
- Effect (iron): Increased resistance to afflictions. Gain an instance of [Resistant] each time you resist an affliction or cleanse an affliction using essence abilities.
  
- Effect (bronze): Gain an instance of [Integrity] for each affliction you resist or remove using essence abilities.
  
- Effect (silver): Health, mana and stamina gained through your own essence abilities of the drain and recovery type can exceed the normal maximum. Excess health, stamina and mana deplete over time until the normal maximum is reached.
  
- [Resistant] (boon, holy, stacking): Resistance to afflictions is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Consumed to negate instances of [Vulnerable] on a 1:1 basis.
  
- [Integrity] (heal-over-time, mana-over-time, stamina-over-time, holy, stacking): Periodically recover a small amount of health, stamina and mana. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

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Sin Eater transformed the vast number of afflictions on the monsters into a healing effect on Jason. He hadn't been injured, but the same power meant that Jason could exceed what would otherwise be his maximal life force, taking him from the range of an essence user into that of a large monster. The extra life force would allow Jason's body to completely resist injury until the extra life force was consumed or drained away over time. For the moment, though, it was unnecessary. The monsters had failed to injure Jason at all.

Healers often awakened perception powers that let them sense life force, as did assassins and others with powers not unlike Jason's. As for his excess mana, anyone with sharp enough magic senses would notice the massive excess Jason currently possessed. Shade's ability to mask against various forms of detection would yet again prove invaluable.

Jason reflected, far from the first time, how precious his familiars were. Their companionship as they nestled within his soul even more so than their powers. Jason had spent some of his darkest days alone but for the three lovable death machines he carried inside him.

Jason sensed the last monster die out, its magic transformed into spirit coins and a monster core, deposited into Jason's storage space. Jason vanished, leaving behind a shadow cloak drifting in the sky that soon dissipated into nothing.



## Chapter 484

### That Doesn't Make the Pebble Important

The Geller residence was high in one of the famous garden towers of Vitesse. During monster surges, the residence welcomed many guests, from the team members of family members to various allies. Humphrey Geller's team, along with Gary, were no exception and were housed in a small suite, befitting their status as silver-rankers. The bronze-rankers were in what amounted to dormitories on the lower floors.

The suite was not large for a half-dozen people, at least by the normal kind of luxury that silver-rankers were used to. The residence was crowded, even with its expansive size, but no one complained. The Gellers didn't make friends with adventurers unwilling to rough it and the breakfast buffet being communal wasn't that rough.

The suite seemed even smaller since Clive had filled it with blackboard stands, currently covered in complex notes and diagrams. He had been working on them non-stop, Belinda resuming her old role as assistant. Her originally patchwork understanding of magical theory had been thoroughly shored-up since becoming an adventurer and the pair sounded like they were speaking another language to the rest of the team.

Even those with basic training in ritual magic, like Humphrey, Neil and Gary, were unable to follow the discussion the pair were having as they scribbled away on blackboards. The rest of the team prepared for the upcoming mission by going over maps and notes about the dam and what they knew of its defences.

Humphrey was growing increasingly anxious at the close quarters. His problem wasn't being stuck with his friends but the inability to snatch a private moment. He didn't like airing his private, personal business in front of people, even if they kept sticking their heads in. That being said, he knew that circumstances wouldn't be changing any time soon.

Humphrey stood up from the couch he was sitting on, putting down the notebook he was reviewing of his own observations made while scouting out the target site. He looked at Sophie, sitting at a table and going over sketches of the dam while absently sharing a sandwich with the puppy sitting in her lap. Humphrey walked over to her.

"Can we take a walk?" he asked quietly.

The rest of the team pretended not to be listening in. Sophie looked up, her eyes flicking to Belinda, who gave her an urging nod.

"Alright," she said. She sat the remains of her sandwich on the table and got up. Puppy Stash pounced at the sandwich, bouncing off the magical bubble that suddenly appeared around it.

"Boo!" the puppy jeered at the laughing Neil, who had used one of his shield powers on the snack. Sophie and Humphrey left the room as Stash turned into a brightly kaleidoscopic tropical bird, flapping across the room to attack Neil.

The halls of the Geller residence were busy and there was no shortage of people looking to greet Humphrey. He walked next to Sophie, neither of them talking to the other.

"Roof garden?" she suggested finally breaking the silence as they searched for a private spot.

"It's been reserved for gold-rankers," he said.

In the end, they found a balcony that was just as crowded as everywhere else and jumped off. They both had flight permits from when they had been operating out of Vitesse with Clive. Humphrey called out his dragon wings while Sophie floated on the wind and they glided down to a nearby public park. They were not hard to find in the City of Flowers. Contrary to the Geller residence, the park was mostly empty; monster surges weren't a popular time for family fun days.

The pair found a park bench and sat next to each other in awkward silence. This was their first time truly alone since learning of Jason's resurrection.

"You wanted to say something?" Sophie finally asked.

Humphrey nodded.

"This isn't easy," he said. "So many things could go wrong if I mess this up."

"You don't have to—"

"No!" he almost yelled, cutting her off. He then deflated like a balloon. "I just... for a long time, it was you, me and Clive, and Clive, well, you know."

"He'll probably marry a research paper on the benefits of a stable domestic life."

Humphrey laughed.

"Something like that. What I'm saying is that for a lot of the last couple of years, it's really been you and me."

"That's changing," Sophie said. "In a big way."

"And I'm glad the team is coming back together," Humphrey said. "A lot of teams don't survive losing a member and we haven't worked together since Jason died. His being back is the best thing I could ask for."

"But?"

“Everything is a mess right now. The team coming together and Jason coming back while a monster surge and an invasion is going on? Things aren’t going to calm down once we find Jason, either.”

“He’s not exactly the calm things down type,” Sophie agreed. “It’s bad enough when it’s just him, but now there’s Dawn and you just know he’ll be up to his neck in the Builder invasion.”

“Exactly,” Humphrey said. “I don’t see a lot of time for just you and me in all this.”

Sophie’s face fell.

“You’re saying…”

“That I’m not willing to give that up,” Humphrey said, determination shining through the nervousness on his face. “I’m not ready for there not to be any time for just you and me. I’m not giving it up. Not for the monster surge, not for the team and not… not for Jason. The only person who can make me give it up on you and me is you. So, if you don’t want—”

Sophie cut him off with a kiss, gently cupping his face in her hand. She felt him go tense, then his whole body relaxed as he slipped his large arm around her.

\*\*\*

On a skyship flying high over the Sea of Storms, a crew member was fetching supplies from one of the lower decks. After the aura blast they all felt, the captain ordered the ship made ready for a monster attack. The gold-rank adventurer had assured the captain it was fine but she took no chances and ordered her crew to make ready.

The crewman spotted movement in a dark corner. Shifting the crate he was holding to one arm, he rested a hand on the hilt of his knife and peered into the shadows. A man in a bright pink shirt, shorts and sandals emerged, holding a sandwich.

“G’day, cobber.”

The crewman relaxed.

“You’re one of the adventurers,” he said.

“That’s me. Dashing heroics at reasonable prices. Well, semi-reasonable. Can I give you a hand?”

“If you want to carry one of these crates, I won’t say no.”

“No worries, mate.”

It wasn’t hard with Jason’s silver-rank strength and he followed the crewman to the top deck with a crate tucked under his arm as he ate his sandwich. The adventurers were all at the ready, aside from Trenchant Moore. The gold-ranker didn’t seem to have moved

from where he stood when Jason had left the ship, standing at the stern with his hands clasped behind his back.

The rest of the adventurers were lining the sides of the ship, their auras agitated and fearful. Jason helped the crewman with the crate, which contained mana storage batteries for the ship's deck turrets. Normally the turrets were retracted into the ship but the captain had the ship on alert. After dropping off the crate, he moved over to the closest adventurer.

"Everyone seems a bit excitable," Jason said. "What's going on?"

"Did you not feel that blast of aura?"

"Oh, that, yeah. Almost dropped my sandwich. Still, it's just some adventurer, right?"

"How was that an adventurer? Only silver-rank, but that strong? And the way it felt; merciless, tyrannical."

"That's a little harsh," Jason muttered. "I don't think it was that bad. Slightly domineering, maybe."

"Slightly? That was the aura of something without pity or compassion, as if it were tired of the things it met still being alive."

"Now you're definitely exaggerating."

"It felt like a hand grabbing you and just squeezing until you ooze out between its fingers."

"This is starting to get hurtful."

"What?"

"Nothing."

Jason wandered over to where Autumn was standing next to her frog, currently ballooned up to be taller than Autumn herself. She felt Jason's aura approach and turned around.

"Jason! They said you went over the side."

"Dropped my lunch," he said, waving the sandwich in his hand. "Got it back, then took a look around the boat. It's my first airship, so I'm pretty excited."

She looked at him suspiciously.

"You're alright then?"

"Surprisingly," he said. "I'm usually in some kind of trouble."

His eyes flickered to Trenchant standing impassively at the rear of the ship.

"Make that always."

Someone called out, having spotted the trails of rainbow smoke below and behind the ship. Trenchant looked put upon as the adventurers, Autumn included, swamped the stern. He wandered over to Jason who was leaning on the ship's railing, letting the air wash over

him. Trenchant stood next to him, also looking out. He tapped a brooch on his chest and Jason felt a subtle magic surround them.

"Privacy magic?" he asked.

"You lack subtlety, Mr Asano."

"It's a personal failing, I'll admit. In my defence, this was my first chance to cut loose since getting back."

"You've been to our kingdom before?"

"I've been to your world before. First time visiting the Sea of Storms."

Trenchant turned to look at Jason, about to ask more when they both felt attention on them from the stern of the ship. The more ambitious adventurers had been paying close attention to Trenchant and the distraction of the rainbow smoke only lasted so long before they spotted him with Jason once again. Trenchant tapped his brooch, dissolving the screen shielding their words from eavesdropping.

"Do try to keep a hold of your sandwich next time, Mr Asano."

"I'll do my best."

\*\*\*

Fascinated by the flying ship, Jason started befriending the crew, assisted by some barbecued meat. It was leftover from his barbecue, kept hot and fresh in his inventory. He was listening to a sailor explain the operation of the skyship's weapons on the gun deck when the first mate called the crewman away.

"Thanks," Jason said as the crewman departed. Then he stood with a sad smile on his face.

"I'm worried that if you keep staring at the back of my head like that, you'll burn a hole in it," Jason said. "The problem with magic is that's a valid concern."

He turned around to where Autumn was leaning against a bulkhead, Neil the frog perched on her shoulder.

"You're not one of us, are you?" she asked.

"Us?"

"There's only a handful of adventurers on this ship and we're all ordinary except for the Siege Sword. And for you."

"The Siege Sword?"

"Trenchant Moore."

"You've heard of him, then."

"He's a famous adventurer. Which leaves me wondering what he's doing watching over a bunch of no-name people on a nothing run."

"It's not a nothing run," Jason said. "People need what we're bringing them. Desperately, from what I'm told."

"Sure," Autumn said. "That doesn't make it important to the royal family, though. Which makes me wonder what such a powerful member of the Sapphire Crown is doing here."

"Is that a guild?"

"It's the guild the royal guard belong to. Are you going to play ignorant about every little thing?"

"I'm not local. Really, really not local. I come by my ignorance honestly."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't owe you answers, Autumn."

"But I don't think you want me looking for them anywhere else, do you? That's why you're pretending to be some no-name adventurer."

"I'm not pretending to be on a mission. I'm on one. And don't go looking for answers elsewhere. It would be an annoyance to me but a danger to you."

"Is that a threat?"

"No," Jason said, his voice weary. "It's a warning."

"Why should I believe anything you've said to me. You've been lying since we met."

Jason slumped against the wall, looking tired. It wasn't from the fight.

"You asked me what I am," he told her. "I'm an outworlder. Heard of them?"

"No."

"It means I don't come from Pallimustus."

"What does that even mean?"

"That I'm from a place so far away that just coming here changes you forever."

"Is that why Moore is on this boat? Because you're from some strange place?"

"I doubt it. My kind may be rare but we aren't unique. I've heard there are astral magic specialists who like to study us but fresh astral magic has been easy to come by, lately. I doubt I'm worth the effort."

"Then why is he here?"

"I don't know. I'd never even heard of him until I met him. While standing next to you."

"But he's here for you."

"Probably."

"Is he protecting you?"

"Testing me, I think. I doubt he even knows why. I think the person who sent him is deciding whether or not to kill me."

“Why would someone want to kill you?”

“People always come up with something. In this case, it’ll be political expediency.”

“If you warrant Trenchant Moore following you around, why are you running around pretending to be unimportant?”

“If a prince stumbles on a pebble, that doesn’t make the pebble important.”

“You said that someone sent the Siege Sword on this mission.”

“You’re better off not knowing.”

“There aren’t many people who can send him anywhere. Is this something to do with princesses?”

“Don’t go putting stock in the things I’ve told you now. I’ve been lying since we met, remember?”

“I think you’re right. I am better off not knowing.”

He nodded.

“You’re wiser than I ever was. If you can’t afford trouble, you shouldn’t borrow it. If you don’t trust anything else I have to say, trust me on that.”

“I’m not looking for trouble. Just the opposite. I don’t want to be caught under the feet of giants.”

“I’m not a giant, Autumn.”

“No?”

“No,” Jason said. “I’m the one caught underfoot.”

## Chapter 485

### They Don't Send Their Best People

On an island off the coast of Vitesse, there was an Adventure Society way station where various magical vehicles were stored. In Greenstone, with its weak ambient magic, only people with the right power could operate magical vehicles. In high-magic zones, magic vehicles were available to all, but the most powerful still required the appropriate power.

Gary and Jason's team were in an open marshalling area, waiting for a pair of high-powered ground skimmers to be delivered. Clive and Belinda both possessed appropriate powers to pilot them. With them was an Adventure Society supervisor, Miles Cotezee, and their temporary team leader, Kenneth, son of Brian. The pair were discussing the mission with Clive and Humphrey.

"How many of the people from the briefings were found to be infiltrators?" Kenneth asked Miles.

"No one in the briefing teams turned out to be Purity or Builder agents," Miles said. "Their families and lovers were a different story and we dug out nine people working for one or the other. As planned, the speed and magnitude of the attack was too critical for them not to report immediately and they took risks that let us catch them out."

"That's not to say we got all of them," Clive said.

"I know," Miles agreed. "But we plugged a few holes and we have some people to interrogate. Hopefully, we'll learn something about their methods that will help us root out more infiltrators."

Gary and Neil were discussing their own matters of import.

"And it's a string on the end of a stick?" Neil asked.

"Kind of," Gary said. "It's not actual string, and it's usually a specially designed stick. It has a spool to hold all the special string. It needs to be quite long."

"Specially designed how?" Neil asked.

"Uh, it's a bit wobbly."

"Oh, it's a wobbly stick."

"There's also a hook on the end of the string. You put something on it that the fish will want to eat."

"This sounds like a lot of trouble. Fish aren't that hard to kill."

"It's not about killing fish."

"It's not?"



“Sometimes you let the fish go.”

“You let it go?”

“Only sometimes.”

“Isn’t catching it the entire point of the exercise?”

“Exactly. You can keep the fish if you want to eat it but, as you said, the purpose of the activity is the catching. If you let it go, it can make more fish or someone else can catch it again later.”

“This entire process sounds utterly pointless.”

Sophie and Belinda were having their own conversation, under a privacy screen provided by one of Belinda’s magic items.

“So, you didn’t...?” Belinda asked.

“We don’t have a lot of private space right now. Where would we?”

“As I recall, you’ve been quite adventurous on that front in the past.”

“I don’t think Humphrey is quite ready for all that quite yet.”

“I don’t know,” Belinda said. “You get the pants off some of those rigid, straight-laced guys and you find they’re into some crazy stuff.”

“Humphrey is not rigid.”

“Oh, come on, Soph. He’s a placard of rules some god brought to life to fight evil.”

“You be nice,” Sophie admonished. “Look, I have no objection to it. It’s been a loong time, but where would we go? It won’t be in the suite with a bunch of adventurers waiting outside the door with silver-rank perception.”

“You can do it anywhere you like. Have you seen the two of you? We could charge tickets.”

Sophie slapped her friend on the arm.

“Fine,” Belinda said. “Just record it so we can make some money selling it after.”

“Absolutely not!” Sophie said, then showed a wavering expression. “I mean, probably not. I’m definitely not going to show anyone.”

“Except me, right?”

“No!”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’m not showing anyone!”

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Late in the night, Jason was on the open deck of the skyship, looking up at the stars. There were crew on watch but the passengers were below deck, sleeping or socialising. His map ability showed that they were rapidly approaching his first destination and his time

aboard the ship was coming to an end. Trenchant Moore came onto the deck, his aura masked so as to not be bothered by eager adventurers. He moved to stand next to Jason at the bow of the ship, activating his privacy screen to contain their words.

“Your people have brought me trouble I neither asked for nor deserve,” Jason said. “I can’t even make a friend without being afraid to draw them into my mess. Which is really your mess. Or the mess of the people who sent you, anyway. Autumn was scared of me and she wasn’t wrong to be.”

“What was that you were saying to Miss Leal about princesses?”

“So, they didn’t even tell you why you’re here,” Jason said. “Was it to protect me or test me? Or a bit of both.”

Trenchant looked at Jason for a long moment before answering.

“The instruction was to let you kill yourself, if that’s what you ran off and did. I’m not here to shield you from your own mistakes.”

“Makes sense. Too bad you can’t shield me from everyone else’s, but I suppose they don’t care about that so much.”

“Would you have fought if we ran into the pirates?”

“There really are sky pirates floating around?”

“Yes.”

“And they’re out here preying on people who need help the most? That’s a fight I wouldn’t feel bad about. I’m not going to and get myself killed over it, though.”

“They wouldn’t be foolish enough to attack a fort town. They’ll be going for the transports.”

“Thus all the high-end protection on those ships back at port.”

“The Adventure Society will not abandon the people caught far from the cities. Neither will the royal family. The elite adventurers will be needed soon, so they’re being sent now before... things escalate.”

“I know all about the invasion,” Jason said. “No need to tease it out of me; your bosses already know. I’ve had some run-ins with the Builder before and I’m going to have some more before we’re done kicking his little peons back to where they came from.”

“Who are you, Jason Asano?”

“A person who’s tired of dealing with people more powerful than himself. I’m just a guy looking to be an ordinary adventurer of his own damn rank. I want to take some contracts, help some people. Dashing heroics and witty banter; maybe a monologuing villain or two. I have no political ambitions and I do not appreciate being dragged into someone else’s.”

“They don’t send someone like me after ordinary adventurers,” Trenchant said. “They send me after people who make trouble.”

“I don’t make trouble,” Jason said. “Trouble made me. You tell those people that sent you that this particular puppet likes to strangle the puppet master with his strings.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“You don’t have puppets? Oh, they’re probably magic and don’t have strings, bloody hell... Look, just tell Soramir Rimaros that I’m willing to dance to his tune as long as he doesn’t make a spectacle of it.”

Trenchant’s aura showed no reaction to the name that Jason could sense but he didn’t mask his body language quite as well.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “That’s the depth of the brown stuff into which you’ve been dropped. That thing you’re feeling right now, where you’re just realising the magnitude of what you’ve been dragged into? That’s where I live. You want to know who I am? That’s who I am. Go back and tell them that.”

Jason vaulted over the side and dropped into the darkness, vanishing from Trenchant’s senses.

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Clive and Belinda each took one of the provided skimmers into their storage spaces. Neil then used his Bolster power, which enhanced the next subsequently used ability, on Humphrey. Belinda copied the spell with her Mirror Magic power and used it on Clive. As a result of the boosts, Humphrey’s teleport and Clive’s portal power could transport four silver-rankers each over longer than normal distances. This allowed them to move the group, minus the Adventure Society official, to a spot a dozen kilometres from their destination.

They arrived in a clearing within the foothills of a heavily forested mountain range. Sophie and Kenneth moved swiftly to scout as Clive and Belinda pulled out the skimmers and triple-checked they were in working order. Neil, Gary and Humphrey went on alert, Neil and Gary’s frivolous attitudes vanishing as soon as they arrived in the field.

There were several reasons they were using a pair of skimmers instead of a single, larger vehicle. The skimmers were already pushing the size limit for objects that could be placed into magical storage and the approach to the dam was through a forest where large vehicles would be hard to navigate anyway.

The main issue was that they planned to split the group and approach the dam from both ends, working their way into the middle. Dividing the group was a danger but they needed to complete their objectives before the defenders had time to call in

reinforcements. If the Purity loyalists realised what the team was up to, even the attack on the valley would be a secondary priority.

The team regrouped around the skimmers, ready to set out. Kenneth took out his watch and checked the time.

“The decoy attack on the valley has been going on for the last hour,” he said. “While the hope is that this will have drawn away some of the dam’s defenders, there are no guarantees. None of the attack teams know they are making a feint but that does not mean the enemy will fail to grasp our intent.”

“Especially since the team supposed to be in charge of the attack didn’t turn up,” Belinda said.

“The teams didn’t learn about that until the last minute,” Humphrey said. “Even so, Belinda’s concern is valid.”

“It is,” Kenneth agreed. “There is a chance we may be facing even more defenders than anticipated. Even if everything went as planned and the people protecting the dam have been moved away, it won’t be all of them. At the very least, those who remain will be on alert.”

The team split up into two groups. Belinda and Clive were each necessary for a team, both to drive one of the skimmers and to provide ritual magic on site. Humphrey and Sophie went with Clive. The trio had worked together for the last couple of years and their teamwork was polished. Neil and Belinda had worked together extensively, but Gary and Kenneth were not team members. They didn’t have the rapport the team built up spending six months embedded in a monster-filled astral space or any experience working together since.

The two teams split up, the skimmers shooting off into the forest at different angles.

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The fortress town of Arcazitlan was hard to access, having been dug into the wall of a rocky gorge. This was why deliveries were made by adventurers rather than airships that could easily be crushed against a wall by the regular gusts sweeping the gorge. The inaccessibility was worth the extra trouble since the defensible position put less strain on the resources powering the fort’s defences.

While some monsters might seek easier prey than the hard to reach the fort, the same was not true of all. Arcazitlan was being attacked by bone feasters, emaciated humanoid monsters with dark purple flesh. Their bodies were narrow and withered; their bald heads had no eyes, nose or ears. All they had was a mouth that took up the entirety of what should have their face.

The monsters had the power to rapidly grow bone to create exoskeletal armour, razor-sharp weapons or even utility tools. Hand and foot spikes strong enough to dig into rock allowed the monsters to clamber the steep, rugged incline of the gorge.

No bigger than a person, the monsters weren't strong or tough by silver-rank monster standards. What they were was very fast and dishearteningly numerous, swarming up the wall of the gorge. To Jason, watching from atop the other side of the gorge, they looked like ants massing on the corpse of a dead animal.

He watched the fort's defences, which seemed to largely consist of force blasts that knocked away any monsters that reached the walls, slamming them into the opposite wall and then letting them drop to the ground below. Jason guessed it to be a relatively efficient defensive measure in terms of the energy consumed. The force wave itself wouldn't cost much and he also sensed the magic imbued into the opposite wall of the gorge. They weren't powerful effects; just enough to enhance impact a little and get through any resistance to non-magical damage.

This would be effective against many monsters. Large monsters would find their own weight became an enemy, while the wall impact could easily damage the relatively fragile wings of flying creatures.

The bone feasters were a dangerous foe for the fort, however. They were small, light and agile enough that their silver-rank fortitude could easily endure the fall. They also healed quickly, overcoming what damage they did suffer before climbing up again.

As Jason continued to watch, the defenders realised that their force wave defence wasn't going to eliminate the monsters. Runes on the fortress wall lit up and wind blades started shooting out, twisting in the air as they swerved out from the wall before turning in and slicing into the flesh of the monsters. A direct hit would kill one of them outright. Any impact, be it on a monster or the wall, caused the blades to explode in a ring of cutting force to lacerate the surrounding bone feasters.

Unfortunately, the monsters adapted quickly. While they had been climbing the wall unadorned, they started shielding themselves in bone armour that slowed them down but protected their withered bodies. The blades still had a large impact but no longer killed the monsters outright, while the secondary effects were even more reduced. The monsters were slowed by the armour and the need to heal up at the bottom of the gorge before they resumed climbing. Even so, the attack continued.

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The commander of the fort, Mordant Kerr, stood on the battlement at the top, under an overhang of rock. In front of him was the magical wall plugging the gap between the

overhang and the battlement. It would be easier for a monster to dig through the rock than the protective wall if not for the fact that the stone around the fort had been magically reinforced.

Kerr's logistics officer, Luis, approached the commander.

"Sir, if we're going to use the scourging wind, it has to be soon. If we keep the blade runes running much longer, we won't have enough charge left in the mana accumulators to activate it."

"And if we do use it?"

Kerr was not a local, having come down from north of the Sea of Storms. That had been decades ago, yet his signature drawl was as strong as ever.

"It'll be everything we have, sir. Even the force wall won't last long. It'll be hand to hand with however many of them survive."

Kerr's eyes never left the figure standing on the other side of the gorge and the logistics officer followed his gaze.

"Is that another monster, sir?"

It was hard to see, a person-sized patch of darkness, speckled with points of light.

"No," Kerr said. "It's an adventurer. Most likely the one with our fresh supplies."

"If we use the wind, then, they can resupply us."

"They'll have fresh mana accumulators but they'll be empty," Kerr said. "Ours might be on the verge of burning out but they still have charge, which is what matters until these monsters are dealt with."

"Do you think he'll help us, sir? Is it even a he?"

"I can't rightly tell my own self," Kerr drawled. "Man or woman, though, they ain't likely to chip in. They'll be waitin' for us to clear the monsters out."

"The Adventure Society don't much care about us out here," Luis said. "They don't send their best people on delivery runs."

"Which is why they tell 'em to leave the defendin' to the defenders," Kerr said. "Can't see their aura to tell if they seem worth a damn. They always send stealthers on these missions."

"So, what do we do, sir? You need to decide about the scourging wind or time will choose for us."

"I think we'll have to risk using it," Kerr said. "Stop the blade runes and get the militia ready to..."

The commander trailed off as a shadowy figure descended from above the overhang. Then the adventurer across the gorge vanished, emerging from the figure, the light-

speckled shadow wrapped around it unfurling into wings of darkness and starlight. The adventurer hovered in the air, the slow undulating of the wings holding it aloft. The now-revealed adventurer was wearing a loose combat robe the colour of dried blood. Within a shadowy hood, two strange eyes met Kerr's gaze. Even right in front of him, Kerr couldn't sense any aura, which was why the monsters hadn't paid any attention yet.

"Stop the blades," the adventurer said. The voice was male, cold and unafraid of what was probably a hundred monsters clambering up the wall below him. "Just keep knocking them down and I'll handle the rest."

Kerr and Luis looked at the man, then shared a glance.

"He doesn't look like just a delivery man," Luis said.

"No, he does not," Kerr agreed. "I suspect, Luis, that you might owe the Adventure Society an apology in regard to the quality of personnel they dispatch in our direction."

Kerr met the adventurer's gaze again.

"Alright, stranger; we'll shut off the blades. Just don't get us all killed, you hear?"

The wings folded in, wrapping the adventurer in darkness and he dropped out of sight. Then they felt a powerful aura sweep out that made Kerr feel like a trespasser in his own fort.

"Sir, are you sure that wasn't a monster?"

"I don't care if it's the goddess of Pain's firstborn daughter. Anyone who kills monsters and carries supplies will get a warm welcome from me. And from you. That's an order."

"I thought Pain was a god, sir."

"Y'all think so here," Kerr said. "Where I come from, they know that Pain is a woman."