

Chapter 496

Unyielding Faith

What had once been an idyllic, mist-shrouded valley was now a bombed-out wasteland of craters, broken buildings and broken bodies. The mist had faded away, the air now filled with an ozone tingle of lingering magic and the iron taste of blood. Little more than a few buildings, lucky to have even one wall left standing, was all that remained of the village. Adventure Society and Magic Society personnel swarmed what was left like ants on a corpse.

The Adventure Society staff were mostly hauling away the dead, piled onto wagons that floated over ground too rough for wheels. The Magic Society investigators were conducting magical analysis even as the dead were being carted off around them.

While the adventurers who had participated in the battle had casualties, they had managed to avoid all but a few fatalities. The Purity loyalist had more fallen amongst their number but most of the dead were the angel-like beings that had come through the sky portals. Torn apart and dropped out of the sky, large portions of their bodies had been annihilated, leaving only macabre remnants behind.

“They call themselves messengers,” Clive explained as he and the rest of the group picked their way through the carnage. “They’re too inherently magical to use essence magic and they aren’t native to our world.”

“Your sister can summon one, right, Humphrey?” Belinda asked.

Humphrey’s sister, Henrietta, was a summoning specialist, with an array of summoning abilities and familiars. It was an unusual specialty that made her something of a one-woman team.

“That isn’t a true messenger,” Clive said. “Messengers are living things from physical reality. A summoning ability essentially creates a controlled monster. It might have the shape and the power, but it’s not the real thing.”

“Is that what happened here?” Neil asked. “Some kind of mass summoning?”

“No,” Clive said. “If the messengers here were just summoned fakes, the dead ones would be going up in rainbow smoke by now. Those rings were portals bringing the messengers from somewhere. Even with the kind of magic that dam had gathered up, it shouldn’t be possible.”

“Jason came here,” Sophie pointed out. “Twice.”

“These are not ordinary times,” Ken said.

“Exactly,” Clive agreed. “This monster surge is unlike anything we’ve ever seen. It is a time where the impossible had become possible, at least for a while. Every surge weakens the dimensional wall between our universe and the deep astral, but this time it’s been shredded. It will take a while to repair itself. Until it does, we’ve got the worst monster surge in recorded history to deal with, plus whatever manages to invade through the gaps. First the Builder and now these messengers.”

“Which leads to the question of their intent,” Ken said. “The Builder’s purpose is clear: the plunder our astral spaces. What do these new beings want?”

“All the ones that survived flew away,” Humphrey said. “We’ll find out when some of them are captured.”

“We already know what they want,” Gary said. “They were called here by Purity extremists. They’re going to declare everyone and everything they don’t like to be unclean and try to wipe it off the face of the planet.”

“There has always been a question as to why Purity chose to take a part in this affair,” Ken said. “Pitting itself against the entire world, with only something it should detest as an ally. Perhaps we finally caught a glimpse of their ultimate objective.”

“Even if as many of those messengers came through those rings as the valley teams reported,” Humphrey said, “that’s not enough for the Purity church to take on a whole world full of adventurers and other churches.”

“You’re assuming this is the only place they’re doing it,” Clive said. “We forced their hand, here, and they opened the portals ahead of plan. What if there are places like this all over the world? What if they were waiting for the conflict with the Builder to reach full swing before swooping in with a global army of messengers?”

“Why would these messenger things participate?” Neil asked. “What’s in it for them?”

“And why are they called messengers?” Sophie asked. “What’s the message, and who is it from?”

“What I’m about to say is broadly generalising,” Clive said. “Very broadly, since we’re talking about a people spread across multiple realities. From what I understand, however, the messengers have a very rigid and uniform culture. They are also one of the few intelligent beings known for interdimensional travel. It’s the main reason they are so well known.”

“We get it,” Belinda said. “It’s not a research paper, Clive. You can just explain things without needing to qualify every detail.”

“Fine,” Clive said. “By and large, messenger culture has a single, unifying idea: that they are the highest form of life and that they represent the will of the living cosmos.”

"The cosmos is alive?" Humphrey asked.

"Not that I'm aware of," Clive said.

"Since when does something not being true stop people from believing in it?" Neil asked.

"Very true," Ken agreed. "Once people invest enough in an idea, true or false no longer matters. They have made it such an intrinsic part of their identity that any challenge to that idea's validity is viewed as an attack. Once it takes hold in an entire culture, that culture becomes very dangerous to its neighbours."

"That's the problem with the messengers," Clive said. "Their idea is that they are born perfect and that this makes them inherent rulers."

As they made their way through the valley, the remains of messengers were still being hauled away. Sophie watched a floating cart, piled high with bodies, driven past them by an Adventure Society official.

"So much for that," she said.

"Has Purity decided that these things should be in charge and started to bring them in?" Neil asked.

"That's for the Adventure Society to find out," Clive said. "It's out of our hands, now. There's no way they leave this in the hands of a silver-rank team."

"It won't be a team," Humphrey said. "I imagine they'll either set up a new department, like the Builder response units, or roll it in with the Builder response and bump their resource and staff allocation."

"You said that they can travel between dimensions," Belinda said to Clive. "Wouldn't that make them showing up here a lot less impossible than you said? And what do they need portals for, then?"

"It's not that they can travel between dimensions inherently," Clive said. "One of the things that makes them unique is that their bodies and souls aren't separate the way they are for almost every other physical being. Nor are they beings of pure astral energy, like disembodied souls or ordinary astral entities. They're something in between, neither fully physical nor fully spiritual in nature. They are gestalt beings, body and soul fused together. Only through death do their souls become completely spiritual."

"Sure," Neil said. "What does that actually mean?"

"It means," Clive said, "that they can endure dimensional forces far beyond what we can. More even than a celestine, like Sophie, with her inherent astral affinity. Dimensional travel is hard. Even if you can punch through the dimensional membrane and escape

physical reality, that puts you outside it. No physical reality means your body stops existing, leaving your soul to drift off to wherever souls go when we die."

"That's what happened to Jason, right?" Humphrey asked. "Except for the soul floating away part."

"Yes," Clive said. "Outworlders are plucked out of their worlds and sent down a channel of magic to another one. Their bodies stop existing, exactly like I said, but their souls form a new one to inhabit when they arrive. It's very similar to the process of a monster manifestation. Of course, all essence users go through the same process of forming a body out of magic as they rank up; we just do it more gradually. Jason being an outworlder simply gave him a head start."

"You're saying that we're all monsters?" Sophie asked.

"There are some differences, but it's a matter of details and specifics," Clive clarified. "We're more similar to summoned familiars."

"What does any of this have to do with dimensional travel?" Belinda asked. "Is it that these messengers don't get turned into dimensional breakfast spread the moment they head out into the astral?"

"It's not quite that simple," Clive said. "They are far more resilient to dimensional forces, but even they can't just roam around the astral without being annihilated. For beings like us, we would require some manner of dimensional vessel. Essentially, a small astral space that can fly around with a pocket of reality for us to live in."

"Wasn't the Order of the Reaper's astral space some kind of broken dimensional vessel, like what you're describing?" Sophie asked.

"Yes," Clive explained. "So, it doesn't even have to be that small. These messengers, though, can use much harsher means of dimensional travel. Something close to the randomly forming magical streams that carry outworlders between worlds, although it would need to be more regulated and more stable. Methods like that would destroy any of us, but the messengers can endure it because of their gestalt nature. Of course, creating the kind of dimensional stream is beyond any astral magic we have here. Or had here, before the Builder showed up."

"But these messengers have it, and they've given it to the church of Purity," Ken said.

"So it would seem," Clive said. "Even with the right knowledge, it would require an almost unconscionable amount of power and resources to accomplish. Even the dam wasn't enough and they had to sacrifice gods know how many people. Even then, it's not a means of dimensional travel that we could use. Only the messengers can survive that kind of journey."

"And these messengers traverse worlds to imposing their own ideology and order?"

Ken asked.

"I don't think they came to increase their between-meal snack options," Neil muttered.

"You're right, Ken," Clive said. "Also, as Gary suggested, they'll fit Purity's ideals far better than the Builder. Having them come in and take over may well be the god's true goal."

"That's bad, right?" Neil asked. "That sounds bad."

"It doesn't change anything," Sophie said. "There's a bunch of pricks coming to our world and we need to punch them a whole lot."

"We may be getting ahead of ourselves," Humphrey said. "For all we know, the messengers here are the only ones, and a large portion of them were killed before they could escape. This might be a negligible threat."

"Humphrey," Gary said. "I don't know if you've been paying attention for the last few years, but if you bet on things not getting worse, it won't be your money you lose. It'll be your head."

The group made their way out of the destroyed village and through a woodland path where more wagons of dead were being taken out. These, unlike the ones they'd seen previously, were covered with tarps. The dripping blood gave it away; the smell of death was too pervasive to pinpoint a specific source.

They arrived in a large forest clearing. One of the main ritual sites used to create the portal rings, the ground had been covered in massive ritual circles. It was also covered in blood. Like everywhere else, the original state only remained where not cratered with damage from the ritual being sent awry by Clive and Belinda's sabotage. It seemed to have been less heavily affected, though, and was crawling with Magic Society investigators. It looked like the bodies had already all been removed from this area, to facilitate the investigation. The last of them had been those they had seen being taken away along the forest path.

"Does it seem to anyone else like there's a surprising amount of blood on the ground?" Humphrey asked.

"There was a battle," Ken said.

"And people have a lot of blood in them," Neil said. He was a healer and knew this better than most.

"Yep," Sophie agreed. "You'd be surprised at how much there is once you take it all out."

The rest of the group all turned to look at her.

“What?” she asked.

“Over here,” someone called out to them. Miles Cotezee was weaving his way through the craters and the investigators poking around at any trace of ritual circle left behind. He signalled them with a reserved wave as he approached.

“Any word on what the power source here in the valley was yet?” Clive asked immediately.

“Yeah,” Miles said gravely. It was a change from his general air of tiredness at the bureaucratic lot that was his life as an Adventure Society official.

“You know how this place was where all the Purity loyalists brought their families?” Miles asked. “We thought it was to keep the most zealous worshippers safe, but it turns out these evil bastards were just stocking firewood.”

Clive went pale.

“What?” Humphrey asked.

“Ritual sacrifice,” Clive said darkly. “Everyone has magic in their bodies. Even normals. Like the blood Sophie was talking about, there’s a surprising amount once you take all of it out. I’ve never seen it done myself but it’s one of the worse ways to go. What’s left after is...”

They all turned to look back the way they came, where they’d seen the covered wagons.

“We need to burn what’s left of this filth religion to the ground,” Miles snarled. “There were kids on those wagons. What used to be kids. I’m never going to unsee that.”

“Can these people get any more foul?” Sophie asked. “I thought I’d met some detestable gutter scum in my life but this is something else. How many people are we talking about?”

“Too many,” Miles said. “With what’s left of them and the general destruction, we’ll never have solid numbers.”

“They sacrificed their own families?”

“From what we’ve been able to tell,” Miles said, “most of them went willingly. The parents, anyway. That’s the kind of faith we’re dealing with. It looks like not all of them were willing to lay down for the cause, though. A lot of these people didn’t go quietly, so it wasn’t all unyielding faith.”

“Most of Purity’s worshippers turned aside from the god as the truth came out,” Ken said. “I knew that only the most zealous orders remained with the church, but I had no idea the ramifications would be this.”

“They’re not a religion anymore,” Neil said. “I’m part of a church and I won’t let them say that they’re the same as me. They’re just some kind of death cult, now.”

“That’s an opinion being mirrored by anyone who had to see this mess,” Miles said. “That’s not what I called you in here for, though. This is way bigger than any of us, now.”

“Our goal hasn’t changed,” Humphrey said. “We want our team member back.”

“Funny you should say that,” Miles said. “Come with me.”

He led them away from the main area and onto a forest path out of the clearing.

“We’ve set up in another clearing that wasn’t full of dead... where we’re processing the people who arrived at the bottom of the craters.”

“Any idea who they are?” Humphrey asked.

“Or where they came from?” Clive added.

“Yes, and yes,” Miles said. “The who is outworlders. A hundred and nineteen outworlders, all arrived at the same time. As for the where they’re from, that’s what you’re here for.”

“Why us?” Humphrey asked.

“Because when we told them they’d been brought to another world, they all asked about Jason Asano.”

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Something He Could Never Get Back

What looked like a refugee camp with rows of tents had been set up in a forest clearing. Adventure Society and Magic Society officials were managing a group of people variously panicked, nervous or demanding. Miles led Humphrey, Gary and the others around the outside of the camp towards the largest tent.

The outworlders were easy to pick out by their auras. Species was a relatively subtle aspect of a person's aura but being surrounded by outworlders made it stand out. All of the outworlders looked human and were either bronze or silver rank, aside from a small handful of normals. Most of them carried a heavy taint of monster core use in their auras, including all of the silver-rankers. The bronze-rankers with auras not saturated in cores also showed more evidence of proper training with their aura control.

The largest tent in the camp was the administrative centre and the group was about to enter when someone called out from within the camp.

"Hey, Clive! I slept with your wife, bro!"

The group turned to where an Adventure Society functionary was telling a huge man to be quiet. They weren't sure at first, as the voice was oddly high-pitched for a man who matched Gary for size. Very unlike Gary, he was hairless and had chocolate skin. Clive looked at the crowd between them and the man, then at Miles and chanted a spell.

"Exchange your fates."

Miles and the big man swapped places, depositing Miles in the middle of the camp and the man in front of them. Like all the suddenly-arrived outworlders, he'd been given clothes, but he was too big for anything but Leonid outfits. Unlike Gary, who had permanently adopted the colourful fashion of Greenstone, most Leonids went with revealing outfits of leather straps, which the big man was now stuck wearing. He looked like he'd been dragged away from either a very good or very bad time, depending on his personal proclivities.

"Seriously?" Miles called out, now in the middle of the camp. "Come on, guys."

The big man was nonplussed at the teleport but recovered quickly.

"G'day," he said. "You're Jason's team yeah? Plus Gary the sexy lion-man and some rando."

"You know us?" Humphrey asked.

“Sure do. You’re Humphrey. And you’re Sophie, the tough one. Belinda, the smart one and Neil. I thought you were meant to be fat, bro, but you seem pretty ripped. What do you lift? Oh, and Clive. Sorry about your wife, bro.”

“I don’t have a wife!”

“It didn’t work out? Makes sense. If she keeps cheating, that’s not a healthy relationship. Best to make a clean break.”

“You know all of us,” Gary said. “Who are you?”

“I don’t know this guy,” Taika said, holding a hand out for Ken to shake. “I’m Taika Williams.”

“Kenneth, son of Brian,” Ken introduced himself.

“You’ve seen the crystal recordings Jason was always making,” Humphrey said.

“Sure did. I don’t normally like watching people’s holiday videos but they were pretty sweet.”

“How did you get here?” Sophie asked. “Was it the same way Jason got back?”

“He did get back then?” Taika asked. “These people won’t tell us anything.”

At that point, Miles shoved his way back out of the clustered people, staring daggers.

“Really, Clive?” he asked.

“You seem pretty shirty, bro. Are you Clive’s wife?”

“Who is this guy?” Miles asked.

“I’m Taika. G’day, bloke. Where’s Jason?”

“He arrived on the other side of the planet,” Clive said. “We’ve been working to earn a trip to go to where he is. Travel is restricted right now.”

“I suspect he’ll be brought to us, after this,” Miles said. “It’s an enormous mess and the higher-ups are going to want answers. Why do all these people keep asking about him?”

“He’s super famous, bro. The guy who went to another universe and got magic powers. So you tell us we’re all in another universe and he’s the first thing that comes to mind.”

“Then the rest of these people have only heard of him?” Humphrey asked.

“I only know a few of them myself, so I can’t say,” Taika said. “I’m happy to tell you all about it, but I want to trade that for some pants. I look like a commemorative chocolate of Sean Connery in Zardoz. There’s a reason they didn’t make those.”

Having completed his final delivery without further incident, Jason was done with his journey through the Storm Kingdom’s western reaches. The last fortress town was very

happy to receive their supplies and the handoff was blessedly free of complications. The fortress town had tight quarters, was densely packed and had a thick smell of animals, so he quickly left.

Outside the gates, Liara and her offsideers, Jana and Ledev Costi were still around. They had been following him using specialised personal flight platforms that looked like speeder bikes from *Return of the Jedi*. Having watched them follow him through the jungle for the last hour, he was almost surprised that no Ewoks emerged. The bikes were specialised for stealth, Jason's magical senses not detecting anything from them. Like the gold-rankers riding them, they were able to hide even from Jason's powerful perception.

Less stealthy was a simple floater platform containing the chained-up and power-suppressed Purity loyalists.

Jason tried to open a portal to the teleport square of the Adventure Society campus in Rimaros but it failed to become active. The archway appeared but remained empty instead of forming a dark portal.

"Oh, come on," he groaned. It was a potential scenario that he'd been warned about, where any time one of the islands was under attack, the defences would be activated, preventing dimensional travel. This meant a diamond-rank monster or large pack of golds was close to the city, or perhaps there was even a Builder attack.

"What is it?" Liara asked.

"The Livaros defences seem to be up," he said.

"The monster surge is in full swing, now," she said. "Rimaros was about due an attack."

Jason flicked a hand at the portal and it filled with darkness.

"Look's like Arnote is fine," he said. "At least I get to go home and rest before going in to report."

Jason walked through and the archway vanished back into the ground.

"Why do you give him so much leeway?" asked Ledev.

"Because strange forces circle that man," Liara said. "Powerful people – and powerful things – have gone up against him and suffered for it."

"He would have been taken out by three silver-rankers if we hadn't stepped in," Ledev said. "How is that guy dangerous? I mean, for his rank he's rock solid but that's not the puddle he's splashing around in."

“We’re the only reason he was in that situation,” Jana said. “It doesn’t feel right, setting someone up like that. It wasn’t like this when we were going after necromancers. I miss knowing that we’re on the right side.”

“It was just a test,” Liara said. “We were always going to step in. He knew that himself.”

“Because he figured it out. We didn’t tell him that. Do you think it felt like a test to him?”

“No,” Liara said. “No, I don’t.”

Jason rested for a couple of days on Arnote, only stepping out to handle a couple of monster manifestations that occurred on or around the island. One he handled with the gold-ranker who lived nearby, cleaning up the small stuff while the gold-ranker went for the main monster.

The other encounter was out to sea. What originally seemed like a series of sea serpents turned out to be one monster with tentacles that each ended in an eel-like head, all stemming from a main body that was a ball of flesh submerged deep in the water. Jason was able to field test his specially-purchased underwater adaptation gear as he prevented the monster from attacking a boat. Normally boats didn’t sail during a monster surge but the specific circumstances around the current surge meant that additional risks were being taken.

When Jason returned to Livaros, the defences having been lifted, the streets were filled with chatter about the diamond-rank monster that attacked. Coming up from the south, it was a smoke dragon that could switch between solid and amorphous states. The population of Livaros had enjoyed a front-row seat to the battle between the monster and Zila Rimaros from behind the islands powerful dome barrier.

Jason had been disappointed not to have seen the diamond rank monster, as well as the combat ability of a diamond-rank adventurer. The locals were more than happy to discuss what they saw, although Jason already saw signs of people’s stories starting to change in the retelling.

In the course of the battle, the dome had been heavily rocked by the collateral force from the battle and the defences were now in a stage of maintenance. Normally disguised nodes all over the city were being worked on by artificer technicians. Asking around, Jason learned that they were from the Irios family.

A noble house of the highest order, the Irios family was respected both for their adventurers and their mastery of artifice, the creation of magical items. They designed and

maintained the most important defences in the city, from Livaros, where the Adventure Society was located, to the royal family's sky island. The Irios family were deeply involved in both the Magic Society and the Artificer's Association, with a huge amount of influence in the city.

It made perfect sense that the royal family would want to maintain good relations with the Irios family. Unfortunately, a planned political marriage to the Hurricane Princess had been cancelled after the Princess met some man while away from the city and went into a formal mourning period after hearing of his death. This had created tension between the Rimaros and Irios families at a time when unity was especially important.

Jason engaged one group of artificers in conversation as they took a break from work, offering them a round of sandwiches and drinks. The appreciative magical technicians were happy to speak on the topic of the family they were proud of and the work they did for it. In addition to the islands of Rimaros, the Irios family designed and built the defences for many of the fortress towns. According to the family members at least, this led the Irios family to be known as the shield of the Storm Kingdom.

Jason was getting some sense of the magnitude of political brown stuff into which he had been dumped. During the most dangerous monster surge ever, relations between the royal family and the people who maintained the kingdom's defences affected not just the nobility but everyone in the nation. He had been positioned as the reason that those relations were now uneasy.

As he roamed the streets of Livaros somewhat aimlessly, Jason considered the latest turd dropped on him from a very great height, courtesy of the never-ending conveyer belt in the sky. It felt like he was in an endless loop where someone powerful used him for one thing or another, he got angry, made a little speech and nothing ever changed.

Every desperate move he'd made in an attempt to overturn the board and take back some agency came with heavy consequences. He was under no illusion that anything other than luck and extreme circumstantial oddities were responsible for his continuing to be alive. Sometimes a bold move had paid off, while other times it was an inability to keep his mouth shut as the frustration inside him boiled over.

Jason's last resurrection before the decade or longer it would take to reach gold rank had been spent for nothing. All he had to do was keep his mouth shut and not antagonise the diamond-ranker. But he couldn't let it go. Shako, in that moment, had been the representative of all the forces bearing down on him and if he'd just rolled over instead of biting back, Jason would have lost something he could never get back. He really would have become a puppet for whoever grabbed his strings and tried to make him dance.

He had no idea what to do about it. As much as it aggravated him to be once again played with by the latest edition of the people looking to control him, he was more conscious than ever of what would happen if he lashed out blindly. The problems between the houses of Rimaros and Irios affected people who lacked even the agency Jason managed to claim for himself.

The vast majority of the Storm Kingdom's citizens could do nothing but hope the people running things didn't get them killed. If Jason became petulant and caused trouble, they would be the ones paying the price, not the kings and aristocrats. He needed to be patient and harden up, whether that was fair or not. He had responsibilities and there were plenty worse off than him. He was rich and powerful and it was time to stop being a Thadwick.

As for what that meant specifically, he had no idea. He had to be quiet; to listen more than he spoke and to learn more than he revealed. It was a far cry from his strong suit, but if he wanted things to go better than they had in the past, he needed to be better himself.

With a renewed sense of direction, even if it was only in attitude, Jason set out for the Adventure Society campus.

Chapter 498

Dignified Young Adventurer

While still a bustle of activity, the Adventure Society campus wasn't the shoulder-to-shoulder throng it had been in the opening days of the surge. The queues no longer reached outside the jobs hall building and Jason could go straight in. He went up past the floors for the lower-rankers, noting that they weren't especially full. The iron and bronze-rankers were treated more like soldiers during a monster surge, formed into large units and deployed accordingly. When monsters appropriate to their rank did appear, they tended to arrive in extreme numbers and the Adventurer Society responded in kind.

Normally, vast numbers would be dealt with by area-attack specialists rather than sending small armies of adventurers. With activity picking up heavily, though, that wasn't always possible. The Adventure Society was responding to threats as best as they were able, while also waiting for the other shoe to drop from whatever the Builder was planning.

The office for handing in completed contracts was separate from where they were assigned and had a different feel. The adventurers there were all fresh back from the fight, the tension of heading out into the monster surge relieved for at least the current moment. Unless something went wrong, they were happy and joking around with one another.

Monster surge contracts didn't offer direct payment the way normal ones did. Instead, every contract completed would help them tally up on the rewards list. This incentivised adventurers to stay busy since extra effort would reap considerable benefits. For many, though, the most coveted prize wasn't handed out by the Adventure Society. It was widely known that the guilds used monster surges to scout out diamonds in the rough. For most ordinary adventurers, there could be no greater reward than gaining the attention of a guild and being offered even a chance at membership.

The guilds managed their own affairs, largely separated from the Adventure Society's organisational structure. The society handed the guilds large activity quotas and left them to manage them on their own, with only some liaison officers as go-betweens. This was a test for the guilds to prove they deserved the privileges they enjoyed.

This system alleviated the pressure on the Adventure Society, which could then focus on managing all the non-guild adventurers. This meant that the bulk of the people in the jobs hall were non-guild, but it was common knowledge that Adventure Society officials would make recommendations to guilds they had connections with.

The resulting atmosphere was quite boisterous, a combination of joy at having come back from a contract with success and a need to play themselves up on the off chance of

getting noticed. Jason made his way up to the third floor, where silver-rank contracts were managed, and quietly joined a very loud line.

“You handing in the contract for your team?” the adventurer in front of him asked. It was a runic, the people with dark blue skin marked with glowing runes that looked like magic tattoos but were an inherent trait.

“I got caught away from my team when the surge hit,” Jason said. “They’ve got me doing delivery runs.”

“That’s rough. Running solo; no chance to make a big impression on the guilds.”

“I’m just looking to make it through the surge, get out of town and back to my team. They’re a long way from here.”

“That’s a good attitude. It’ll keep you alive. A lot of people take big risks during a surge, trying to make a name for themselves.”

“But not you?”

He flashed Jason a grin.

“Oh, definitely me.”

Jason laughed.

“Good luck, then.”

There were multiple desks keeping things moving along and Jason soon found himself in front of one of them. He handed over the contract documentation, with acknowledgement of materials picked up and received at the various supply depots, fertility church facilities and fortress towns. The Adventure Society functionary checked Jason’s documentation and looked over his report.

“You spotted a gold-rank monster and it didn’t come after you?”

“I’m not sure if it was oblivious or docile; I ran for it rather than sticking around to check.”

“Wise.”

“I detoured to the closest society branch, reported it and got back to my contract.”

“Very wise. You portalled a fort commander to meet with another?”

“I was asked to spare some supplies for a fort that didn’t get a scheduled delivery. I didn’t have the authority to hand over my supplies but I was able to facilitate a meeting so they could organise it amongst themselves. It was less than an hour of my time and there are notes from both fort commanders at the end of the report.”

The official flicked through the pages and took a glance at the notes before turning back to the report.

“Good choice. You showed sound judgement in realising that it wasn't your call to make while still finding a way to help without compromising your contract. I'm going to mark you down for a reward bonus. It won't be much, but keep doing good work and it'll add up.”

“Thank you.”

“Lastly, under combat activity, your report reads...”

He looked down to quote the report directly.

“...several combat encounters, schedule unaffected.”

“That's right. I hit all my deadlines with comfortable margins. It was all signed off by the fort logistics officers.”

“You didn't feel these combat encounters warranted more detail?”

“I was told that there wouldn't be additional rewards for monster kills during supply runs. It makes sense since you don't want delays from people trying to prove they deserve more than delivery contracts. As such, I didn't think it mattered if I ran into a monster or two or got ambushed from stealth one time. The deliveries were made in full and on schedule.”

“That's an accurate assessment, although do try and avoid combat while on delivery contracts. Wagering the welfare of entire towns to clear out a monster is a poor risk/reward dynamic. We're losing too many people on supply runs as it is because we're stretched far too thin. I know many adventurers consider it an unimportant task but there are people out there counting on us.”

“I agree.”

“Your contract is complete, adventurer Asano, and meets your weekly action quota requirements. I would strongly recommend you continue to accept contracts, however. You will find that exceeding minimum requirements is the key to success when it comes time for reward allocation.”

“I would not go taking any fresh contracts just yet, Mr Asano,” a voice spoke from across the room. It was quiet but carried on a wave of gold rank aura that filled the room with a hush. All eyes turned to the doorway to see a gold-rank celestine with the signature sapphire hair of the royal family. The silver-rankers parted like the Red Sea as Liara Rimaros marched up to Jason.

“Princess,” Jason greeted. “Are you staking a claim on my time?”

“I am.”

“That's convenient for me, at least.”

He took out another piece of paper and handed it to her. She took it and glanced over the contents.

“An invoice?”

“As you know, I used up a lot of consumables in our little joint operation. I was going to file this with the Builder response unit, but since you’re here.”

Liara gave him a flat look, then slapped the invoice down on the desk in front of the Adventure Society official.

“See that Mr Asano is reimbursed as part of his weekly reward allocation.”

“Of course, ma’am.”

The official addressed Liara in her role as a higher-ranked officer in the society, as opposed to as a princess. This reinforced to the room full of silver-rank onlookers that she wasn’t just throwing her weight around as a gold-ranker or a princess. She gave the official a slight nod of approval.

“Come with me, Mr Asano. It’s time to debrief you after... our joint operation.”

Under the eyes of the other silver rankers, Lira strode out, Jason trundling after like a duckling. She led him downstairs, out of the jobs hall complex and across the campus grounds. Once they were out of the building, she enacted a small privacy screen.

“Those are quite common it seems,” Jason said. “Makes sense, when everyone has superhuman hearing.”

“Joint operation?” Liara asked.

“Don’t even try and tell me that doesn’t play into what you’re doing. Coming to get me personally, in front of all those people? You’re deliberately raising my profile. You’ve decided what to do about the political situation with Zara.”

“That is Princess Vesper’s area, while I deal with you from an operations standpoint. You have met Vesper, yes?”

“Is that Zara’s aunt? The one who went to Greenstone with her?”

“Yes.”

“We met briefly. I don’t think she liked me.”

“She didn’t. This little display was her idea. To raise your profile, as you say. This was my idea.”

Liara took a small piece of card from a dimensional pouch and handed it to Jason, who read it and stopped walking.

“Mr Asano?”

“Thank you for this,” he said. His expression had no trace of the usual snark.

“Genuinely, this is very considerate.”

Her expression softened.

“We did treat you poorly, Mr Asano. I don’t regret doing so as we now have some important prisoners, but you deserve compensation for the liberties we have taken.”

“I appreciate that. And I do want to contribute to the fight against the Builder.”

“I’ve seen your unabridged records, Mr Asano. I believe you.”

They resumed walking.

“So, what now?” Jason asked.

“Have you heard about the dimensional cities?”

“Just rumours. Flying cities full of Builder armies.”

“They don’t all fly. Somewhere in the Great Western Ocean, there is a city floating in the depths. His ancestral majesty has been monitoring it personally as there are multiple diamond-rank auras within.”

“You’re talking about Soramir.”

“Yes.”

“Nice to know I’m not the only one he’s keeping tabs on. The diamond-rank auras are why no one has launched a massive invasion on this underwater city?”

“Precisely. Thus far, it hasn’t gone past an aura clash. We believe the city had already deployed several expeditions before it was discovered and we are still attempting to track their activity. From what we’ve found, we believe they may be doing what they failed to do several years ago.”

“They’re going after the astral spaces?”

“Yes. Prior to your departure from our world, the Builder cult claimed a number of such spaces. The results were disastrous for the surrounding landscape and anyone living on it. In most cases, however, their efforts were defeated. You and your companion both died making sure that was the case.”

“And now you think they’re making a second run?”

“It is the prevailing assumption, but nothing is being ruled out yet. For the moment, known astral spaces are being monitored. We anticipate that open conflict will soon begin.”

“Just let me know. I’ve picked up some new tricks while I was away that the Builder’s little minions aren’t going to like.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Jason looked around at where Liara was leading him.

“This isn’t the direction of the Builder response unit’s offices.”

“No. Tomorrow is the Builder. Today is politics.”

“Zara.”

“For the moment, we’re positioning you as a valuable asset to the Builder response unit. It has the advantage of being true. That’s why you’ll be seen meeting with me, even when you’re meeting with Vesper. Or Zara.”

“I’ve been wondering when that was going to happen.”

“She’s been told that you’re back. She is sorry that she used you.”

“Everybody’s sorry. Never seems to stop them though, does it?”

Liara and Jason passed through a maze of corridors in the Adventure Society’s main administration building. Every hallway was busy except the last, which was completely devoid of people. She led him into a nondescript meeting room, closed the door behind him and then tapped a crystal on the wall. A privacy screen encapsulated the entire room.

The other occupant of the room was Vesper Rimaros, who stood from her chair and came around the table where she and Jason assessed one another. She was largely unchanged from their previous meeting, three years earlier. She had the same gracefully restrained aura, brimming with confidence. It was no longer overwhelming to Jason, now he matched her silver rank, but he respected the level of control she demonstrated. She had the signature caramel skin and shimmering blue hair of the Rimaros family, but hair was longer than Jason remembered. It was now a gemstone waterfall, cascading down over her shoulders.

Compared to the practical hairstyles Jason was used to seeing from adventurers, it was quite striking. Knowing there was a good chance that Soramir was watching his aura, he tried to push aside his concern that he was developing a celestine fetish.

Jason had changed much more, with his strange eyes, facial scars and features smoothed into the handsomeness typical of silver-rankers. His outfit, however, was identical to what he had worn at Emir’s barbecue: bright floral shirt, shorts and sandals.

“Why are you dressed like a fool?” Vesper asked by way of greeting.

“I came by it honestly. I am a fool.”

“Not anymore,” she said while moving back to the table and sitting down. “Now you are a mysterious and – this part is important – dignified young adventurer. You’ve been away from our world, thought dead, conducting enigmatic affairs related to the Builder invasion and now you’re back to play a critical role. Is that understood?”

“I can sell that,” Jason said, taking a seat across the table. Liara sat next to Vesper.

“Can you?” Vesper asked.

“Aside from the dignity part, it’s pretty much true, so yeah.”

“I think you might be overestimating your actual value,” Vesper said.

“I’d be interested in hearing about those affairs related to the Builder invasion,” Liara said.

“I bet you would,” Jason said. “Vesper, if you’re looking to turn me into a respectable young man of society, you’re trying to validate Zara’s claim. You aren’t looking for me to actually marry her, right? I agreed to help you but that’s further than I’m willing to go.”

“We’re going to pass it off as a one-sided infatuation on her part,” Vesper said. “The foolish act of a foolish girl. It doesn’t matter if it’s true, just that it’s at least vaguely plausible enough that people can save face. Which means you need to play the mysterious stranger from another world and stop wearing shorts and absurd, flowery shirts.”

“I have been meaning to update my wardrobe,” Jason said. “I’ll miss the shirts but I’ve already been recommended a tailor.”

“You can’t just use anyone,” Vesper said. “Who are you going to?”

“Sensual Attire for the Sensual Gentleman.”

“Alejandro Albericci,” Vesper said. “Alright, that’s acceptable, but I’m going to be sending him some instructions.”

“I’m sure we can find an acceptable stylistic compromise,” Jason told her. “You still haven’t told me what all this is in aid of, though. We need to have a conversation about Zara.”

Chapter 499

I Can Do Sleazy

“Why are you willing to toss Zara’s reputation into the fire?” Jason asked. “How does that help you with the Irios family?”

Vesper looked unhappy but Liara, sitting next to her, nudged her shoulder.

“You might as well tell him,” she said. “He’ll be more trouble than you think if you try to lead him around by the nose, believe me. You think Zara is bad? He’s worse. When he decides he’s not going along with your plan, he *commits*.”

“You didn’t tell her about us running into each other out west?” Jason asked.

“This isn’t about fighting some rogue priests in the middle of nowhere,” Vesper said. “This is the heart of the nation, with a lot of eyes on us. The marital affairs of some nobility might not mean anything to you, but lives are in the balance.”

The amused smile dropped from Jason’s face.

“I’m aware of the stakes, Princess. I understand how critical the Irios family is during a monster surge and the ramifications of them falling out with the royal family. I know that in politics, reputation is both sword and shield. All I want is a look at the snake pit before you ask me to jump in.”

“We’re not looking for any initiative from you,” Vesper said. “Telling you any more than what you need to understand is just inviting trouble.”

Jason resisted the urge to get up and leave. He closed his eyes and calmed his mind before opening them again.

“I get it,” he said. “You’ve been saddled with managing a situation and I’m floating in the middle like a turd you’re not allowed to fish out of the punch bowl.”

“Charming.”

“You need to control the variables and I’m a factor out of your control, so you want to put me in a box as much as you can. But that’s not going to work, Princess. I’ve been in a lot of boxes and I just can’t seem to stop poking holes in them.”

“You agreed to help us with this.”

“I agreed to participate, not to serve. I do recognise the importance of what’s happening here and I’m looking to help, not make things harder for you. But I’m not just wandering blindly into whatever situation you want, either.”

“So, what do you want?” Vesper asked.

“To know what I’m walking into. It’s a reasonable request and I think you know that, or they’d have assigned someone smarter to this. I realise that you’re under a lot of pressure

to get this right and I know that my general demeanour doesn't always inspire confidence. How about we both take a step back? You take off your princess hat, I'll take off my clown shoes and maybe we can figure out how to move forward without stabbing one another."

Vesper sat back in her chair, giving Jason an assessing look.

"Alright," she said. "This situation is complicated enough without us being at odds."

"Which brings me back to my question," Jason said. "What does burning Zara's reputation get you? You want me to come in and play the dashing man of mystery that captured her heart, but all that does is make her look like a naïve girl. Your goal is to strengthen ties with the Irios family, but just saying she's an idiot doesn't help that much, even if I am the most swashbuckling purveyor of derring-do ever to swan in from another universe."

"You want to play at this level, Mr Asano? If you mean what you say about wanting to help more than hurt, I need to know you aren't going to blunder around causing more problems than you solve."

"What kind of assurances are you looking for?" Jason asked.

"I need to know you're not an idiot, to start with."

"You want me to take a test?"

"Why not?" Vesper asked. "You've been given some insight into our political situation, and you claim to know what's at stake. Instead of me telling you about Zara, why don't you tell me?"

"You want me to guess?"

"If you have to guess, Mr Asano, then you aren't playing the game; the game is playing you."

"Fair enough, Princess. I'll play."

He leaned back in his chair, contemplating what he knew. Zara acted on her own because her family would never go along with her choice of plan. That meant the motivation was hers. Just avoiding the concept of an arranged marriage wasn't the answer; her whole culture and the way she was raised would make it normal to her. If it had been some chunky old guy that was one thing but it was a handsome and accomplished young scion. He knew that much from asking around.

"Mr Asano?"

"Give me a moment to think this through. I'm pretty, not smart."

The boy could be a Thadwick, but Zara was the king's eldest daughter. If they had to marry someone to a Thadwick it would be a loose cousin or something. In fact, any problems Zara had with her potential match would be something the family could handle. It

could be that she found someone else, someone inappropriate, but the only viable play there would have been to run off together. It wouldn't take long for her illicit lover to be found and disappeared, which is why she picked someone already dead for her desperate plan. Jason couldn't think of a single good reason for Zara to have done what she did with the political training he was certain she had, which meant...

Jason's eyes went wide.

"It wasn't her fault," he realised. "It was the boy the Irios family put up. She covered for him to take the heat because she's the Hurricane Princess and can make people eat this formal period of mourning nonsense, even if they don't like it. If he'd been the one to call things off, that would get the royal family coming down on the Irios family like a pallet of bricks. If the royal family side is in the wrong, though, that balances out the relative strength of the two families by giving House Irios some political capital. Thus, the state of tension."

Jason got up from his chair and started pacing as he thought it through out loud.

"But why do it like this?" Jason pondered. "It creates a huge mess when they could go to the families and fix everything behind closed doors?"

He paused, face lighting up with realisation.

"Oh, she did a me. She didn't think the people with the actual power would go along, so she made a plan that was loud and bold without thinking through the wider consequences. Announcing this mourning story was too public to just sweep under the rug. Am I right?"

"You are," Vesper said. "What else?"

Jason tapped his head thoughtfully as he resumed pacing.

"Zara makes this big play, the wedding is off and she's in the dog house. But I'm guessing she's daddy's favourite, and people go along as predicted, doing their best to clean up the mess. At least you have this formal mourning period where she has to play good daughter instead of whatever crazy stuff she'd normally get up to, if this debacle is anything to go by. It also gives you a couple of years to smooth things out with House Irios, but they're cranky and the monster surge is already overdue. They're responsible for the Storm Kingdom's defences, which is why you wanted them happy in the first place, and the timing gives them even more political capital. They start pressuring the royal family with this newfound influence because their proud scion getting cuckolded isn't great for the reputation of a proud noble house. How am I doing?"

"Go on," Vesper said.

“Now, we’re closing in on the end of this mourning period and you’ve probably got something lined up. Another marriage, maybe. A match that gives a nice bit of prestige to the Irios family and smooths things over. But then you get a couple of wrinkles. Zara’s deceased paramour rises from the dead and the monster surge finally begins. I have no doubt you considered killing me off, only to realise that I genuinely am a mysterious stranger from another world. There are events you don’t understand at play and you have no idea who is lurking behind the enigmatic silver-ranker who is oddly in the middle of cosmic events. And you have to be careful of whoever’s lurking behind me – wise choice, by the way.”

“I don’t suppose you’d like to share who or what that is?” Liara asked.

“I’m sure it’ll dawn on you eventually,” Jason said. “Anyway, things are going pear-shaped and with fresh eyes on this whole affair, something’s changed. Zara kept her mouth shut, I bet. I’m thinking it’s the Irios kid who cracked, or maybe someone around him, and now both families realise that Zara was taking the heat for the boy the whole time. Suddenly, all the attitude they’ve been throwing at the royal family is coming back to bite them. But you want to smooth things over. It’s the monster surge and helping the Irios family save face gets what you wanted in the first place; a harmonious relationship with an important noble house.”

Jason stopped, frowning as the cogs continued to turn before resuming both the postulation and the pacing.

“The problem is, this whole mess had played out very publicly and you can’t just air it all out. That would make both families look like fools who danced in the palm of a pair of teenagers. She was nineteen when I met her, right? So, you decide to lean into Zara’s original story and paint her as the naïve girl who fell for a stranger in a foreign land. Said stranger makes a shocking reappearance, giving Zara the chance to show that she’s more mature than when she was three years ago. She rebuffs the would-be Lothario, demonstrating that she’s learned from her mistakes and is ready to step up and handle more responsibility. The Irios family magnanimously decides to forgive the indiscretion, for which the royal family is appropriately grateful. All you need is someone who can plausibly sweep a young woman off her feet, is willing to play along and maybe accept one or two dents to his pride. All the better if he’s looking to skip town as soon as the monster surge is over so the whole thing can be left behind.”

Jason dropped back into his chair.

“How did I do?”

“You’re not completely an idiot, then,” Vesper said.

"I do my best, but the occasional bit of competence slips through."

"What you described is broadly accurate. We need to make you appear at least vaguely plausible as a man that could turn the head of an inexperienced girl."

"I'm not going to come out of this looking good, am I?" Jason asked. "My reputation never seems to go quite the way I want, and this might be a new low. But I can do sleazy for you."

"Don't go too over the top," Liara said. "We want to rehabilitate Zara's reputation, not stain it further."

"You want me to play a guy who creeps on teenagers. I think sleazy is unavoidable."

"I saw the two of you together," Vesper said. "You are a guy that creeps on teenagers."

"I was twenty-three and she was nineteen. It wasn't that bad."

She gave him a flat look.

"It wasn't!"

Vesper and Liara shared a glance.

"What about the Irios kid?" Jason asked, hurriedly changing the subject. "He's the start of all this mess, right? Why did he not want to go through with this marriage?"

"You tell me," Vesper said.

"Alright," Jason said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "How old is this kid? Zara's age?"

"A year younger."

"Okay. Sheltered rich boy. Probably not a total tool bag, if you were willing to have Zara marry him. She went to some extreme lengths to look out for him, too, so I'd say they knew each other pretty well. Childhood friends, put together years ago with this marriage in mind?"

Vesper nodded.

"Alright. He's young, horny, yet somehow not on board even though they're close and Zara's so gorgeous that it's kind of insulting to the rest of us. I mean, we have to walk around not being that good looking?"

"Mr Asano."

"Of course you don't think it's a big deal," Jason said, gesturing angrily at Vesper. "Look at you. It's like the god of sexiness made you just to piss people off."

"Perhaps try and stay on topic, Mr Asano?" Liara suggested.

"Yeah, I should have read the room," he said. "You're no better. There's clearly no point complaining to the Rimaros family about not being attractive enough. Which is kind of the point. I know the whole childhood friend thing. Mine looked downright homely

compared to Zara and that girl messed me up. Which tells me that this guy is gayer than a nautically-themed dance troupe called Hot Seamen.”

Vesper and Liara shared a wide-eyed glance.

“That shouldn’t be a problem, though,” Jason said. “They could just have him marry some bloke. The church of Fertility can let people pump out a kid without ever touching one another. They can grow the adorable little sprog in a jar. Most aristocrats do it that way, men or women, right?”

“You’re familiar with the Fertility church’s capabilities?”

“Took a tour, recently. I knew a conversation like this was coming, so I grabbed the chance to learn about how the aristocracy handle baby-making. Turns out that growing them in a vat is actually the norm and you can just staff your house with sexy gardeners or whatever without mum and dad ever talking to one another.”

“It’s not always like that,” Liara said.

“Yeah, but it’s an option, which makes me wonder what the Irios kid’s problem is. He’s a teenager, so a kind of terrible life choice is a safe bet. I’m guessing a boy. Probably too old and way too inappropriate. Musician?”

“Tattoo artist,” Vesper grumbled.

Jason burst out laughing.

“And they stuck you with cleaning up this mess?” he asked. “Oh, you poor woman.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I take it that guy is out of the picture, now?”

“Very,” Vesper said.

“You didn’t kill him, did you?”

“He’s on an airship somewhere over the Great Western ocean right now with a dimensional bag full of money and a very thorough understanding of what happens if he ever comes back to this hemisphere.”

“Fair enough,” Jason said. “I guess we’re ready to go, then. I’m not looking to make things hard for anyone, so I’ll change up the wardrobe and play mysterious outworlder for you. I assume you’ll want to parade me around a little, maybe make some noble girls swoon.”

“Mysterious brooding loner might be a better choice.”

“Sorry, but I’ve just had my silent brooding period; you missed the window. But I’ll see what I can do about dashing and charismatic.”

Vesper let out a resigned sigh.

"The good thing is that no one will expect perfect etiquette," she said. "You're not just a commoner from another country but a whole other world. Adventurers get a lot of leeway if they're competent, so we need to drum up a conspicuous achievement or two."

"Thus, the escort from the jobs hall," Jason said. "You're looking to make me seem like an important asset to the Builder response unit."

"You are an important asset to the Builder response unit," Liara said.

"Which works out. Never lie when the truth can lie for you and don't do things for just one reason if you can get away with it. Since you're part of the Builder unit, you can manage my activities, bump up my reputation and be my public contact with the royal family, right?"

"Exactly," Liara said. "We can also make some judicious leaks from your record. We'll need your permission for that so the Adventure Society admin doesn't come down on us."

"I would have thought you'd just do it without asking their permission, let alone, mine."

"The Adventure Society doesn't answer to the royal family," Liara said. "Neither do you, for that matter."

"Yet, here I find myself."

"This business about coming back to life helps us with your reputation," Vesper said. "How did you come back from the dead? Actually, don't tell me. Or anyone else. It adds to the mystique. In terms of etiquette, I'm going to give you instruction. Self-made adventurers, especially foreign ones, are held to a different standard. If I'm going to get you into a princess-wooing state, though, you'll need some polish. You'll need to know how to eat a meal or participate in a social function without embarrassing yourself. You need to know how to dance."

"Oh, I can dance, but learning the local steps will be fun. I haven't been dancing in a while. Too busy being an interdimensional man of mystery. Are you going to show me the moves, Princess?"

"Yes," Vesper said. "We need to keep this as contained as possible. Your only public contact will be Liara, who will bring you to me at need. For now, we're going to do a bad job of hiding your value to the Builder response unit. We want people to find you, rather than introducing you ourselves."

They continued to discuss the details and specifics Jason needed to know. Jason was then sent off in search of a new wardrobe, leaving Liara and Vesper alone. Vesper leaned back wearily in her chair as Jason closed the door behind him.

"This is going to be a huge mess."

"It always was," Liara said. "What do you think of him?"

“He’s dangerous, and not in the good way.”

“He seemed to grasp the situation easily enough.”

“Which is exactly the problem. He’s the kind of person who thinks they see through everything. People like that inevitably have a great idea and go off-plan, getting blindsided by the thing they missed or had no way to see coming.”

“Maybe he should marry Zara,” Liara said with a laugh.

“Gods help us all. Do you think you can make people believe he’s some secretly amazing adventurer?”

“That’s the easy part,” Liara said. “Even his unabridged record is full of mysteries, and now we have Asano’s permission to put some of it out there. In social settings, he’ll largely be judged by his aura, which is the opposite of a problem. If anything, that’s what’ll sell this whole story.”

Liara stood up.

“I need to go. This political mess is consuming too much of my time as it is.”

“Drinks tonight?” Vesper asked. “I think we both deserve it.”

“Maybe. I probably won’t have time, but I’ll let you know.”

She went to the door and opened it, pausing before she left.

“What’s a Lothario?” she asked.

“I have no idea.”

Chapter 500

An Object Lesson in Foolish Risks

While Rimaros was considered a single city, the islands that comprised it were spread over hundreds of kilometres. With three main islands and many sky islands that were themselves often sizeable, it was a city of many flavours, with each island having its own feel.

The most populous island was the easternmost of the three main islands, Provo. As well as being the general trade hub of the city, it was home to the majority of the non-magical citizenry. Its infrastructure was all designed to support a large population with biological needs that essence users no longer shared.

Livaros was just the opposite. The island of adventurers was an adventurer city from the foundation up. It wasn't strictly unwelcoming to the non-magical, but most felt uncomfortable being a Clark Kent in a world of Supermen. The thoroughfares of the island were specifically designed to accommodate floater platforms, magical vehicles or simply riding around on familiars. Local transport wasn't expensive to rent for those earning adventurer money, but for normal people on normal wages, it was prohibitive.

Even with everything working against it, there was still a small population of normals living and working on Livaros. They were shop assistants, functionaries and other jobs that were essential, but not particularly valuable. There was one trait that every normal-ranker on Livaros shared; a collective knowledge passed between the non-magical like a secret language: The locations of the island's very, very small number of toilets.

"The adventuring districts of any major city are set up like this," Rufus explained as he and Jason rode void-black horses with glowing white manes and hooves, side by side through the city. "It's just that being divided by islands makes the delineation especially apparent, here."

Rufus was more well-travelled than Farrah, who did not share his wealthy upbringing. She was the result of generations of effort to obtain not just any essences but a powerful combination. Her family had also managed to afford a retired adventurer to give her the training she needed to hold her own in a competitive field. Farrah had fulfilled that ambition as her success, even as just a bronze-ranker, uplifted her entire family.

While Jason and Rufus were heading for a local tailor, Farrah was on the sky island that held the Magic Society campus, accessing the water link chambers. Liara had used her influence to schedule a call between Farrah and her parents, who hadn't seen her in more than three years and, until recently, believed her dead. While he knew the intent was

to keep him from getting too rebellious over being used, he at least appreciated the consideration with which the gesture was made.

Rufus continued his explanation, covering how those with backgrounds like Farrah's strove to make it in big, magical cities.

"The lure of a place like Livaros for normals is the higher wages. Many use that money to lift themselves up by saving for essences. Even if someone doesn't become an adventurer until they're thirty or older, once they get there new worlds open to them."

"But getting essences is just the start, right? You need training and monsters that aren't three ranks higher than you. Without a rich family cultivating their fights for them, won't these self-made adventurers just get themselves killed?"

"Definitely," Rufus said. "People come here and earn money because the wages are higher and the essences, on average, are cheaper. Once they have them, though, they tend to leave. With the high-rank monsters and well-trained elites in a place like Rimaros, they're better off starting over somewhere with less-potent magic. Lower-magic zones are much better suited to more borderline adventurers. Few places have the low magical density of Greenstone, but there are plenty lower than the Sea of Storms."

"You met Gary and Farrah in a place like that, right? Fighting zombies?"

"I did. It was a big operation, pulling in the locals and people from Vitesse. It wasn't a very high-ranking threat, just a widespread one, so lots of use from the academy were sent out for some valuable experience. Gary and Farrah were operating out of the same branch, knew each other in passing but never really met before. Things got a little wild, as they always do, and we ended up doing a lot of fighting together. Their talent stood out from the locals, especially Farrah, and I asked them to come with me back to Vitesse."

"So, the adventurers that stay in places like Vitesse and Rimaros are the good ones? The ones from families with the money and power to train their people properly?"

"There's more to it than that," Rufus said. "Most of these hardscrabble adventurers aren't a Gary or a Farrah. They're not looking to make something of themselves when they leave. They want to make something of their children. They might not be the best adventurers in the world but they can make enough to get their children a better set of essences and then send them to an academy or a training hall. Maybe not in Rimaros itself, but there are places in the Sea of Storms where the competition isn't so fierce. Not every academy is like the one my family..."

Rufus trailed off as Jason took out a glass of liquor and drank it in a gulp.

"Some days," Rufus said, "I wish you'd let the blood cult throw me in that pit."

Jason chuckled as he returned the empty glass to his inventory.

"I think I know what you're talking about," he said. "I visited a city in the western reaches during my delivery run. The adventurers there were a step up from Greenstone, but a step down from even the non-guild people here in Rimaros."

"That's the kind of place you'll find the less prestigious institutions, but that in no way makes them bad. Those instruction halls are where the majority of adventurers get trained and plenty of them have the potential to rise to the top."

"Those are the ones who've come to Rimaros, looking for that guild membership?"

"They are. The lack of training halls like we're talking about is the reason a place like Greenstone falls short. There, if you don't come from a prominent family, like Humphrey or Neil, then you're pretty much hoping that someone with more experience will mentor you. Danielle Geller established a training hall there, after the expedition disaster."

"I remember," Jason said. "She was just getting started before we went into the astral space. I even taught aura control there for a few weeks."

"It's more developed now," Rufus said. "It doesn't offer the level of training that the Gellers give their people in-house, but it's open to all essence users. They're even deferring payment until people get Adventure Society membership and earn enough to pay back the tuition fees. I even arranged for the Remore Academy graduates coming to Greenstone to do some basic instruction there. A tricked I picked up growing up surrounded by teachers is that having students teach each other is a great tool to consolidate learning. I've found it complements the training annex programs very nicely. It's still early days, but I can see Greenstone's adventuring culture going through a qualitative shift over the next few decades."

"It sounds like you enjoy running a school."

"It's just a training annex."

"That you conceived of, developed, established and ran. You're allowed to be proud of yourself, Rufus; it won't make your hair grow back."

"Why would..."

Rufus stopped himself. In their time apart, he'd forgotten the dangers of asking questions about Jason's nonsense.

"If I'm being honest with myself," he said, "I've enjoyed establishing the training annex more than I've missed adventuring. Helping others to avoid my mistakes is a lot more fulfilling than the constant dread of making the next one."

Jason's aura senses were utterly transformed from what they had been when he knew Rufus in the past and now his friend was an open book to him. Jason always knew that his team getting captured at the time Jason first met them, and then Farrah's death

weighed heavily on him. Now he could feel it inside Rufus like a wound. Even Farrah's return hadn't erased it. He had a feeling that just like Gary had turned to his smithing, Rufus would turn to teaching rather than go back to the adventuring life. As for what that meant for Farrah, it remained to be seen.

"That's nothing to be ashamed of," Jason said. "Honestly, at this point, I think I'd rather be a tourist. All the fun parts of adventuring, but without stuff constantly trying to kill you and your friends. Sadly, that ship has sailed for me. I've got the Builder, then whatever comes next."

"Next?"

"All I've gotten from Dawn so far are ominous warnings. Whatever it is, I need to keep getting stronger, so it's the adventuring life for me. Honestly, I do like it when I'm not fighting and/or being used by great astral beings or gods or forest nymphs who live in a baby oil factory."

"What?"

"I've got to get lucky one of these days, right?"

Rufus shook his head.

"It's adventuring for me as well. The training annex is a pleasant distraction, but I chose to be an adventurer. If I step away from that, every person I could have helped and didn't is my responsibility. I've paid the price for my mistakes, so now I have to use the lessons I took from them."

"You're an idiot."

Rufus swivelled his head to look at Jason.

"Excuse me?"

"Rufus, are you a good teacher? Wait, don't answer that. You'll say some humble crap and I'm trying to make a point here. I know you're a good teacher because you taught me and I'm awesome. Even with my overwhelming natural talent, smouldering charisma and dashing good looks helping you along, that's still a pretty good result."

Rufus gave him a flat look.

"Now," Jason continued, flashing an impish grin. "Let's just say you go back to adventuring and save one person's life a week. On average. Now let's posit that instead, you go teaching young adventurers full time. How many of them can you help avoid the mistakes that you made? How many of them are going to go off and save one person's life every week? If you look at it that way, then going back to adventuring is equivalent to killing a whole bunch of innocent people because you failed to train the adventurers that

would have saved them. Are you going to kill a bunch of innocent people, Rufus? That's cold."

"Jason, I'm not Humphrey. I'm not going to accept some problem-riddled argument because you talked fast enough."

"Mate, it's about the point, not the details. I've saved a lot of lives, Rufus. Not mine, as much as I'd like, but other people's. I'm sure Farrah told you all about Earth when I wasn't around."

"She didn't think you'd want to tell it yourself."

"That's because she's smarter than us. My point, Rufus, is that every life I saved is a life that you saved. You taught me how. You and Farrah and Gary. So, when you tell me that going off and being a teacher is somehow abdicating responsibility, what I'm hearing is that everything you taught me, and everything I've done with it, isn't worth a damn. That you don't respect it."

"That's not what I'm saying."

"I hate to break it to you, cobber, but that's exactly what you're saying. You're also bizarrely claiming that being a teacher is somehow selfish. That's a pile of crap so huge that you could make a living selling Rufus-brand prime fertilizer. You think back to the people who taught you at this academy of yours. How many of them are shirking their responsibilities?"

They continued riding along the street on Shade's horse forms, Rufus falling into silent contemplation. He didn't share Jason's pathological need to get the last word.

In a water link chamber, Farrah was talking with two water clones of her parents. The magic was sufficiently developed that they were indistinguishable from her actual parents to the eye. Magical senses revealed their nature as projections, which hadn't stopped her from taking a half-step in the instinct to hug them when they appeared.

After a very emotional sort-of reunion, they were coming to the end of their time in the chamber. Liara had scheduled a generous block, but communication was at an absolute premium.

"We're trying to get you here, along with Gary and Jason's companions," Farrah told her parents. "It would be easier if we came to you, but Jason can't go anywhere without getting caught up in some huge mess."

"Yes, we met him and he's a very nice boy," Farrah's mother, Amelia, said. "A bit odd, but nice. If he brought you back to us, though, then he's family, now."

“At worst, we’ll make our way to you once the monster surge is over,” Farrah assured her.

“You just make sure and stay safe,” said her father, William. “No foolish risks. We want you coming back to us safe and sound.”

“Don’t worry,” Farrah said. “I have an object lesson in foolish risks running around with me. I leave that sort of thing to him, now.”

Jason and Rufus dropped lightly to the street as Shade's horse forms dissolved into Jason's shadow. They were outside a boutique store; a simple cream-coloured building with a light linen suit hanging on a dummy in the window, topped by a Panama hat. There was no other indication of the shop's name or signage of any kind.

“Oh yeah,” Jason said. “I’m getting one of those hats.”

Jason opened the door for Rufus, then followed him inside. The interior was surprisingly spacious, the small storefront obscuring the fact that internally it was quite large. The left and right walls were covered in racks of fabric samples that leaned heavily toward light fabrics and shades, appropriate to the climate. There were doors to the sides, large armchairs and the back wall was completely open to a courtyard with what looked like an outdoor bar-café.

There were tables shrouded by parasols where people were sitting and chatting as they ate or drank. There were young couples, a trio of old men playing cards. Everyone was exquisitely, if casually dressed. There were two people behind the bar, plus a cook in the kitchen behind it. The whole courtyard was filled with lush tropical plants.

Two celestine men were coming in from the courtyard. One was tall and handsome with sharp cheekbones and gunmetal hair and eyes. His aura placed him at the peak of bronze rank. The man with him Jason recognised as one of the Als, although this one looked younger than the other's he'd seen because of his silver rank. His aura was thick with monster cores, which was common in magical craftspeople. Most felt that chasing after monsters was a waste of time better spent dedicated to their profession.

Alejandro Albericci had sea-green eyes and identically coloured hair that spilled back off his head in waves. He wore a flatteringly-draped suit of white fabric, his cufflinks, shoes and pocket square all matched the colour of his hair.

“Thank you for coming in, Young Master Irios,” Alejandro was saying as the two men walked across the room.

“You were recommended to me. They said I should come in around now to catch you when you weren't busy.”

Jason smiled thinly. He'd received the same recommendation, which he now suspected came from the same source. He tapped a small pin on his shirt, a new purchase, and an invisible sound screen surrounded Jason and Rufus.

"Remind me to punch Vesper Rimaros in the boob," he said.

"No," Rufus said, reaching out to tap the pin on Jason's shirt and shut the screen off.

Jason and Rufus stepped aside as Alejandro led the young man to the door. Alejandro's gaze took in Jason at a glance, while the young man's eyes lingered a little longer on Rufus in passing.

"You will be contacted when your clothes are ready, Mr Irios," Alejandro said.

"Thank you, Mr Albericci."

"Please, call me Al."

As the young man Jason was certain to be named Kasper Irios closed the door, Alejandro turned to Jason and Rufus.

"You must be Jason Asano," he said. "I was instructed to offer you nothing but the best."

The door that had almost completely closed froze in place, the young man's hand still gripping the handle.