

Chapter 511

I Don't Think You're Angry

"I still say we should have fished whatever that thing was out of that fire lake," one of the guild team members said.

"We weren't there to kill monsters," said Korinne, the team leader. "We were there to stop the Builder cult from prying the astral space off the side of our world and blasting this whole region apart in the process."

The expedition had just emerged from the astral space and the expedition leader, Jeni, was setting up a device that would seal the astral space aperture. She had roped Jason, who was an astral magic specialist, into helping.

"If the Builder sends more people, this will only slow them down, not stop them," Jason assessed.

"We can't permanently assign a protective detail with everything else going on," Jeni explained. "We don't have the people. There are scout patrols that check on the astral space apertures, but this is the first line of defence. As you said, it will slow them down if they come back, plus send out a signal if it gets interfered with. It will buy us time to formulate a response."

They finished up and the expedition got ready to move out. The prisoners had been implanted with rune-covered spiked rods, buried in the flesh of their arms, legs and torso. The rods had a similar suppressive effect on star seeds as Jason's abilities, preventing self-detonation.

"They gave me the rods, but we weren't anticipating prisoners," Jeni said, looking at them. "Normally it's hard to catch them before they self detonate, so you only get prisoners when you plan the operation around it."

Four of the five prisoners were sitting on the ground in a cluster, fearful eyes locked on Jason. The last was still unconscious from what Jason had done to him.

"Want me to transport them?" Jason asked.

"If you have something that will work," Jeni said.

"Shade, what have you got?"

Darkness spilled out of Jason's shadow and took the form of a giant black beetle, the size of a bread van. Along its sides were thin, vertical gaps in the chitinous exterior, revealing the insect's interior to be mostly hollow. The hard, interior shell made for a secure space with room for half-a-dozen people at a squeeze. The top and bottom halves

of almost the entire carapace opened up like a set of enormous jaws, make a gap through which the prisoners could be shoved.

“Tartarian beetle,” Jeni said, moving around the beetle as she looked it over. “They capture prey and carry it around with them, keeping it alive for days before eating it. Never seen a black one before.”

“That does not look comfortable,” Jason said. “Will it do?”

“I can live with not comfortable. Is it going to eat them?”

“I don’t know. Shade, are you going to eat them?”

“Mr Asano, I shall refrain from dignifying that with a response.”

Jason and Jeni loaded the prisoners into the maw of the beetle, which was oddly like pushing them into the back of a van. Jason reflected that it was a mundane feeling for such a bizarre experience as shoving a bunch of people into a giant insect. While they were doing that, the rest of the group continued to talk amongst themselves, with the self-confident guild team being the loudest.

“It wasn’t much of a force,” team scout Rosa said. “They didn’t even have a gold ranker.”

“This is a minor astral space, which is why it’s in a cave in the middle of the jungle,” said the team leader, Korinne. “If there was anything worth harvesting out of it, there’d be a village here and we wouldn’t have to make our own road. If it wouldn’t be so destructive, they’d probably let the Builder have the damn thing. It’s probably not worth much more to him than to us.”

“You think that was really the Builder talking through those creepy people?” Rosa asked.

“I don’t see why not,” Korinne told her. “Gods show up in worship squares every day, and he’s some kind of weird god, right?”

“No way that was the real thing. Probably some local cult leader using a weird power to speak through his troops. He just claimed to be the Builder to impress us. That deal he offered was a steaming pile.”

“I don’t know. You felt that aura, right? That was divine.”

“It wasn’t divine,” Orin said, which drew the group’s attention. As with most people who spoke rarely, people listened when he did.

“They were silver and bronze-rank auras,” Orin said. “The power didn’t change. They just had something inside them that made them feel like that. Asano has it too, but nowhere near as much.”

“You got a good look at Asano’s aura?” Korinne asked.

The others had only sensed Jason's aura unleashed in the midst of battle when there had been many other auras overlapping. He also hadn't pushed it out with the oppressive strength he was capable of, blending it in so that he could leave the fight unnoticed.

"He showed it to me so I'd know to not make trouble," Orin said.

"You think that's how he makes those things fight each other? He's got some Builder in him?"

"It wasn't Builder in him," Orin said. "Not alien like those people. It was gods. I've seen it before. When gods touch your soul, they leave a mark."

The group all looked to Asano, shoving people into a giant insect.

"Who is that guy?" Korrine said, voicing the question they were all thinking.

The two princesses, meanwhile, were talking within a privacy screen as they stood side by side. Zara's eyes were on Jason while Vesper was watching the guild team.

"This couldn't have gone better," she said, rubbing her hands together. "The Builder showing up in person? Kind of, at least. I'm not clear on how Asano got those things fighting one another or got into that astral space, which means no one else is, either. Plus, that new, dark side to him? Yes, please."

"I don't think this is as good an outcome as you seem to think," Zara told her.

"This has gone beyond my most optimistic expectations for this expedition. Now you just have to get him to talk to you before we get back. Just make sure people see you and that you use a privacy screen. Keep it mysterious; we want people wondering."

"Aunt Vesper, it's clear that he's not in a good place right now."

"It's good for me."

"Aunt Vesper," Zara admonished.

"Just look at the way the expedition is grouped. The guild members over there, us here, unaffiliated off to the side. Asano should be with them, but he's not. He's with the gold-ranker, talking like an equal. Even if people don't think about it, they notice it. It places him within a hierarchy of importance in their minds without them even realising."

"I think Asano might be volatile."

"Volatile is working out."

"Aunt Vesper..."

"Fine. It's not like I was serious about having him murdered."

"About having him *what*?"

"Look, if you want to listen to him talk about his feelings or whatever, that's your business. Just do it behind a privacy screen, as I said. Remember why we're here."

"I know why I'm here," Zara said. "I'm still not sure why you are."

"I needed to keep an eye on things."

"Liara said it was because Trenchant Moore teased you."

"Liara has a big mouth."

As the group pulled out their various means of transport, Jason looked at the pathway the expedition had opened up through the jungle. It was a trail of destruction leading off into the distance.

"I assume that was you," he said to Jeni.

"One of my expedition subordinates went off against orders to provoke the enemy, so I didn't want to tarry."

Jason winced.

"Sorry about that. I'm kind of working through some stuff."

"You'll forgive me if I try to avoid working with you again. Whether it's grim murder mode or whatever cheerful front you're putting up now, you're neither honest nor stable."

"That seems a little harsh."

"Harsh? Do you think killing a lot of enemies by yourself gets you anything? I could let the guild team loose like a dog in a butcher shop and they'd tear through anything you found here. All you mean to me are questions you won't answer, orders you won't follow and running off alone to mess up the group's plans. Do you think my assessment of your performance on this contract will be anything but scathing? I was specifically asked to assess you for potential promotion to two stars, but I'll be arguing against it in the strongest possible terms."

Jason nodded.

"That's fair," he said. "Star rating is based on judgement, and even I don't trust mine right now."

Jeni gave him a concerned look.

"I don't know what you have going on Asano, but go to the church of the Healer. Get some help."

An ice cloud appeared at Jeni's feet and she headed off. Jason took another look at the path of destruction, which was quite thorough.

"I reckon a regular skimmer could manage that. What do you think, Shade?"

"I could manage a small airship, rather than the group needing to rendezvous with one."

"I think we've shown quite enough of the rabbits in our hat for one day," Jason said. "Let's stick with a skimmer."

Shade took the form of a skimmer, parked next to the giant beetle, while Jason walked over to the princesses. The rest of the expedition pretended they weren't watching. Vesper was on her Sapphire heidel, while Zara was standing on what looked like a miniature hurricane.

"Give you a ride, Princess?" Jason asked Zara. "It's past time you and I had a little talk."

"She'd love to," Vesper said, setting off on her construct creature steed.

The small storm at Zara's feet dissipated and she followed Jason to the skimmer. It was a heavy skimmer with comfortable seating for four, much like he had used for most of his delivery contract. He opened the side door and got in the back, Zara doing the same to sit next to him. Jason pulled the privacy screen pin from his inventory and pinned it to his chest before tapping it to activate.

The expedition was taking off, following Jeni The skimmer moved forward smoothly on its own as Jason and Zara sat in silence, unsure of what to say.

"When you came stumbling into my tent, those years ago," Zara said finally, "I never imagined we'd end up here."

Jason turned to look at her. Even at iron-rank, she'd been as stunningly beautiful as anyone he'd ever seen. It had driven him to flirt with her at the time, but that inclination was dead.

"I was going to haul off on you," he said. "I was going to tell you all about why I'm running around so angry."

"I don't think you're angry, Mr Asano. I don't see rage when I look at you. I see a tiredness that will take more than rest to recover from."

Jason looked away from the princess.

"You're very different," he said wearily.

"You too. I am sorry for getting you involved in my mess."

"There's no changing it now. All we can do is move forward".

"You must hate me."

"I don't hate you, Princess. I understand knowing that you'll have to shake the tree if you want anything to fall out. I've made those choices, willing to pay the price, only for the people around me to do the paying."

Zara nodded.

"Learn faster than I did, Princess. Shade, stop the skimmer."

The skimmer slowed to a halt.

“You have something that you need to do,” Jason said, then tapped his pin to drop the privacy shield. She got out of the skimmer and turned to look at him.

“This isn’t three years ago, Asano,” she said coldly, “and this isn’t some provincial backwater on the far side of the globe. I have responsibilities as a member of the Rimaros family and I won’t let you get in the way of that.”

Her travel cloud appeared at her feet and she took off after the still-moving expedition.

“Let’s get going, Shade.”

Chapter 512

Staying with Friends

Autumn Leal was tired. In the course of what she had thought was an ordinary delivery run, she was ambushed by a team of Purity loyalists. Outnumbered and outmatched, she had thought she was done for until the guild team she hadn't known were trailing her in stealth appeared. They captured and took away the loyalists that survived the resulting ambush, leaving Autumn to complete her supply contract.

She didn't like being bait, but she did like coming home alive, so she called the whole thing even, completed her deliveries and returned to the airship for the trip back. The airship was diverted slightly to pick up an expedition of adventurers operating in the wilderness, who proved to be an unusual bunch. There was a guild team, some unaffiliated adventurers and prisoners who turned out to be some of the Builder cultists that people had been talking about for so long. The magic rods sticking out of their flesh seemed to be triggering strange aura reaction, making them seem alien and bizarre.

More unusual still, at least to her, was the member of the group she recognised. The final trio of the expedition's membership was made up of Jason Asano, along with two women with the iconic blue hair of the Rimaros family. They were talking inside a privacy screen when Jason spotted her and left the screen to approach her across the deck.

"G'day," he said to her, his words accompanied by a smile that looked at weary as she felt. "Another delivery contract?"

"Yes," she said warily, nodding in the direction of the blue-haired women. "Are they...?"

"Yeah."

The skyship Jason was riding in was an unusual design. It looked like an ordinary ship suspended from three hot air balloons by huge brass chains, except that the balloons were massive, pale blue crystals. Looking for some solitude, Jason slipped over the side and under the ship, conjuring his cloak to keep him aloft. A shadow arm emerged from his back to grip the keel of the ship, forming a tether that pulled Jason along as he watched the landscape pass below.

"Look at this," he said happily. "This is how it's meant to be. Magic and wonders."

Shade emerged from Jason's shadowy cloak to float alongside Jason.

“Loath as I am to interrupt your moment of peace, Mr Asano, Miss Hurin has requested to speak with you. Again. She is becoming increasingly concerned at my repeated refusals. I normally wouldn’t bring it up, but it is Miss Hurin.”

“Quite right,” Jason said.

As much as he was enjoying drifting through the air, he owed Farrah too much to leave her hanging any longer. He’d already brushed her off too many times during his recent emo rampage. He closed his eyes, felt for the connection to Shade and expanded his senses. He saw through the body Shade had left in the cloud house, where Farrah was pacing back and forth in agitation.

“I’m fine,” Jason said through the familiar.

“Fine nothing,” she said, wheeling on Shade. “I’d reach through Shade and choke you if I could. What were you thinking, running off in that frame of mind?”

“It wasn’t the best choice,” Jason acknowledged. “At least that’s on-brand for me.”

“You think cracking jokes will make me forget that you’re one self-impressed aristocrat away from murdering someone that will get you in real trouble?”

“It’s alright, Farrah. Shade pulled me back from the precipice.”

“The precipice of what?”

“Maybe we can talk about this when I’m not hanging from the underside of a skyship.”

“Why are you doing that?”

“Why isn’t everyone? It’s awesome. I just... I needed something fun, Farrah. Something simple and joyous. It’s easy to forget that’s a thing, you know?”

In the cloud house, Farrah dropped into a chair as if the rage propping her up had just run out, leaving only tiredness and concern.

“Jason, I don’t like you being out there alone. Not when you’re running the ragged edge.”

“I’m not alone. And these Rimaros people aren’t so bad, as it turns out. I mean, the royal family dragging me into their mess was a dick move, but they did think I wasn’t around to get hurt. They might have their own agendas, but they seem pretty decent. It’s a little sad that came as a surprise.”

“Are you at least on the way back?”

“Yeah, but I’m not going to portal.”

Farrah nodded.

“You don’t break up the expedition until the contract is done,” she said. “During the monster surge, that means when everyone is home safe.”

The airship descended through the skies of Rimaros. As it headed for the sky dock towers on the island of Livaros, they entered a rapidly increasing level of air traffic. One vehicle stood out, both for its design and the fact that it was heading for the royal sky island and not Livaros.

“Is that a flying cottage?” Zara asked.

A rustic garden cottage, complete with garden, was moving through the air within a shimmering orb. Jason took his eyes from the orb to peer at Vesper’s feet. Vesper noticed his gaze.

“What are you looking at?” she asked.

“I was just wondering if you had ruby slippers.”

“Why?”

“Do you?”

“No.”

Jason pointed up at the cottage.

“You should be careful it doesn’t fall on you anyway. I’ve seen that happen before.”

“You’ve seen that vessel before?” Zara asked.

“Not in person, but there’s a famous story about something similar where I come from. If I recall correctly, isn’t the main road connecting the towns on Arnote made of yellow bricks?”

“What in the world are you talking about?” Vesper asked.

Soramir and Liara were waiting on a landing platform on top of the royal palace. Trenchant Moore was standing silently behind them.

“Do not speak unless addressed directly,” Soramir instructed Liara. “She’s not known for being tolerant of mortals. When I bow, you don’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re a Rimaros. Never bow unless you know exactly why you’re doing it. You can bow, Commander Moore.”

“As you will it, Ancestral Majesty.”

Soramir's behaviour gave Liara far more effective warning than his words. For her entire life he had been a legend; an unseen figure representing the pinnacle of power and authority. He had been far more approachable in his sensibilities than she had expected on finally meeting him, but still radiated power that placed him second in her mind only to the gods. To see him almost nervous was an unsettling revelation.

The cottage orb paused at the invisible magic barrier, where even the most prestigious visitors went through rigorous checks. The diamond-rank Zila Rimaros oversaw the checks, going into the cottage for a time before emerging and flying off. The vehicle moved through the magical barrier and floated down to settle on the platform, the orb vanishing to leave a cottage garden incongruously sitting on the roof of the royal palace. The door opened and a woman emerged.

She was a celestine with ruby hair and alabaster skin; a fiery contrast to the cool, sapphire blue of the three Rimaros royals. She wore a white summer dress with embellishments of yellow and orange. The dress swayed gently as she made her way down the path to stand before the trio, greeting them with a slight nod. Soramir responded with a bow as Trenchant Moore behind him echoed the gesture.

“First Sister, we are honoured by your visit,” Soramir said in greeting.

“I have passed the position of First Sister along,” Dawn said.

“My apologies, Hierophant.”

“I see that you are not unschooled in the disposition of the wider cosmos.”

“Yes, Hierophant. I have spent some time travelling beyond my world. I have only returned in these times of trouble. I must thank you for accepting my request and visiting us. I am in your debt, both for bringing your knowledge and grace to our kingdom and for accepting my request to bring certain people with you.”

“Actually, Lord Rimaros, there was a problem with your request.”

Liara felt Soramir go tense next to her.

“Problem, Hierophant?”

A slight smile teased the corner of Dawn’s lips.

“The list of names you wished me to bring along was incomplete. A failure of communication, perhaps. I took it upon myself to add the appropriate names and bring them with me.”

Soramir relaxed.

“Thank you for correcting my oversight, Hierophant. I am in your debt over again. We have prepared accommodations for you, or will you perhaps be staying with friends?”

“Your accommodations will no doubt be sufficient to my needs,” Dawn said.

“Then please come with me. My descendent, Liara, and the highly capable Commander Moore will see to the disposition of the people you have brought with you.”

Dawn turned to look at the cottage and eleven people emerged, looking around. A half-dozen were silver rank, along with four bronze-rankers and one gold. Most were human but there was a leonid, an elf and a celestine amongst them. There were also two

outworlders, both bronze-rank. One had clearly been a human originally, and while the other one was as well, in poor lighting he could be confused for a leonid or even a life-like golem. She had never seen a human standing next to a leonid without being dwarfed before.

Soramir's attention was drawn to the sword the leonid was carrying loosely by the scabbard. The scabbard was suppressing the aura within, but his powerful senses saw through it. The aura was identical to that of Jason Asano, to the point of Soramir almost felt like Asano was standing in front of him. Part of that was the sword had a profound soul bond to its owner, and part was the nature of Asano himself. Soramir knew what a gestalt being was and that this nature was responsible for Asano's aura feeling almost tangible. His soul was not separate from his physical being, giving a substantive feeling to the projection of that soul, his aura.

Dawn followed Soramir's gaze and reached out to touch the pommel of the weapon. It disappeared from his senses as completely as if it had been teleported away. Soramir recognised that it was not any kind of essence ability that hid it but pure aura manipulation. He wondered if Dawn had been responsible for Jason's aura control, which was as formidable for his rank as his aura's strength. He was not fool enough to ask the question, however.

Once the people had walked off the cottage garden and onto the large landing pad, the cottage floated into the air. The globe once more appeared around it as the cottage rapidly shrank. Once it was small enough to fly into Dawn's hand, she set it at the point where her dress cinched at the waist, the globe hanging like an ornament despite not being attached to anything.

Soramir led Dawn away, leaving the gaggle of people to Liara and Trenchant. Trenchant moved up to stand beside Liara as one of the group stepped forward. To the surprise of Liara and Trenchant, it was not the gold-ranker, who stayed at the back, but one of the silvers. He was a large human with broad shoulders, olive complexion and dark hair. He bowed to a carefully measured depth to each of the gold-rankers, demonstrating his etiquette training.

"My name is Humphrey Geller, of Greenstone."

"Liara Rimaros. This is Commander Trenchant Moore of the royal guard."

"Greetings, your highness. Commander. On behalf of my companions, I thank you for your hospitality."

"That's a princess? This day's turning out pretty sweet."

"Taika! You're making Humphrey look bad."

“Sorry, Neil. Sorry Princess, bro. It’s nice to meet you all.”

The man-mountain’s voice was friendly and surprisingly high-pitched. The celestine and another silver rank woman snorted out laughter while Humphrey took on a long-suffering expression.

“Lindy!”

“Clive, he called her Princess bro. How are you not laughing?”

“Time and place, Belinda,” Clive said.

“Sophie’s laughing too,” Belinda pointed out.

“I don’t think Clive’s stupid enough to tell her off,” Gary said. “She’s too scary.”

“That’s sweet of you to say, Gary,” Sophie told him, putting a hand on his forearm.

“I apologise for my companions, your highness,” Humphrey said. “They’re working adventurers and spent little time in high society.”

"At least we won't need to double-check who they are," Trenchant said. "They're very obviously the companions of Jason Asano."

The auras of the group had been a mix of curiosity, wonder, eagerness, trepidation and nervousness. As soon as Jason Asano’s name passed Trenchant’s lips, that changed. Six auras locked onto Trenchant like snipers. The others reacted, but the six that were now raptor-focused on Trenchant were suddenly so sharp and alert that Liara felt her hackles rise. Even though she outranked them all and the attention wasn’t directed at her, it was pointed enough that she was impressed at Trenchant’s lack of reaction.

Of the visitors, only the unreadable gold ranker at the back maintained her equanimity at the mention of Asano. She stepped forward to defuse the situation.

“We are all acquaintances of Mr Asano,” she said, with a short bow. “Arabelle Remore, of Vitesse. While we don’t wish to be rude, we have travelled far to meet friends long thought lost to us. We do not wish to dismiss your hospitality but we would like to see Jason Asano and Farrah Hurin at the earliest opportunity. My son should be with them.”

“Jason Asano is currently on a contract,” Liara said. “It was moved up unexpectedly due to Builder activity, so he is expected back shortly. As far as I know, Miss Hurin and Mr Remore should be at their shared residence on Arnote, one of the main islands of Rimaros.”

“If you will follow me,” Trenchant Moore said, “I will take you there directly.”

Chapter 513

Meanwhile, Two Weeks Ago in Vitesse...

Jason was disembarking from the airship that had just returned his expedition to Rimaros. He was moving with the group across the open-sided walkway stretching from the docking cradle to the port tower when he froze on the spot.

“Mr Asano?” asked the expedition leader, Jeni Kavaloa.

“We’re done, right?” Jason asked. “Expedition over?”

“The contract is complete, Mr Asano. I’ll be handing in the report but you can get a copy of...”

She stopped bothering when Jason leapt from the side of the walkway without another word. She shook her head.

“You’re not meant to do that.”

Unbeknownst to Jason, at the moment he had been leaving the airship, his friends had been leaving the royal sky island’s magic barrier under the escort of Trenchant Moore. As they left the island’s magical defences, which easily blocked his silver-rank powers, their presence was brought to his attention.

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- Contact [Humphrey Geller] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Sophie Wexler] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Belinda Callahan] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Gareth Xandier] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [William Hurin] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Amelia Hurin] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Arabelle Remore] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Travis Noble] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Taika Williams] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Neil Davone] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Clive Standish] has entered communication range.
-

As he dropped through the air, Jason conjured his cloak to help him swerve around the walkways connected to ships docked further down the tower.

“Where are they?” Jason asked. “I can’t map their location without spreading my aura over the whole damn city, and I’d get into all sorts of trouble for projecting like that. Should I do it anyway?”

“Perhaps before doing anything drastic,” Shade suggested, “you could try asking them where they are.”

Jason landed at ground level, getting disapproving frowns from the people around him at the base of the busy docking tower.

“Asking them. That makes sense. I can do that because it’s a thing I can do.”

“I recommend you pause and take a breath, Mr Asano.”

“I don’t need to breathe, Shade.”

“Perhaps you should do it anyway.”

Unaware of Jason's proximity, his team and the others with them were moving down through a column of water in a boat shrouded by a force bubble. For the earthlings, Taika and Travis, the iconic local feature was a wonder. Even for those used to other great cities, like Vitesse, it was an impressive feat of magical engineering.

Sophie felt Humphrey go stiff at her side and he started talking to himself.

“Where are you?” he said.

The others noticed Humphrey acting strangely and listened to what was clearly one side of a conversation. It was something they all recognised but hadn’t seen in some time.

“With a man named Trenchant Moore,” Humphrey said. “Yes, Trenchant Moore. What? I don’t know.”

Humphrey turned to look Trenchant up and down.

“I guess he is,” Humphrey continued. “I suppose he has very piercing eyes. I don’t see why that... he’s taking us to Arnote. I think we’re switching to a larger boat on the big island.”

Humphrey turned to look at Trenchant again.

“Where are we transferring to the other boat?” he asked him.

“Essen Port,” Trenchant said. “A private terminal for a ferry called the *Blue Burden*.”

Humphrey repeated the details.

"How am I supposed to know that? Yes, it does kind of sound like the ferry is unhappy about carrying people about. What? No, it’s probably not a sentient boat. Even it is some kind of animated construct, I don’t think it will have feelings... what’s a danger boat? Tick, as in the parasite?"

Jason’s team were laughing at the very familiar expression on Humphrey’s face, and the very confused one on Trenchant’s.

"Look, are you going to meet us at the ferry terminal or not? Okay, thank you."

Humphrey slumped his shoulders, looking exhausted.

“And Jason... it’s good to hear your voice, Jason. That’s nice of you to say, but please don’t call me Hump.”

The only portal destination near the port was restricted to reduced port traffic congestion and Jason didn't have a permit. Nor did he have a permit for personal flight in the city. As for ground navigation via mount or vehicle, it would be slower than he wanted through the bustling streets.

Instead, Jason turned to his old techniques for travelling quickly on foot. Compared to the delta where he first developed them, the city was easier terrain, and Jason's abilities were so much stronger than when he was an iron-rank. His reflexes, perception and straight-line speed were all improved, as was his control over his abilities.

The techniques were a holistic combination of movement skills taken from the Order of the Reaper, precisely-toggled weight reduction and jumping through shadows in rapid sequence. It allowed him to navigate obstacles and go largely unnoticed as he raced through the city, a flickering shadow passing through market stalls and alleyways as he followed his map ability in the direction of the port.

Essen was one of the primary ports for traffic between Livaros and Arnote. It was where Jason and Farrah had been reunited with Rufus, and now where they would reunite with the rest of their friends. Jason found the ferry terminal, but the port authority guards would not permit him entry. What they would do was point out the dock where boats coming from the royal sky island usually moored.

Having been contacted by Jason while he was on the move, Rufus and Farrah were ready when Jason opened up a portal to the cloud house for them to come through. While the nearby terminal guards were watching him closely, he was opening a portal to somewhere else and not portalling in blindly, so it was permitted. Farrah was less forgiving than the guards as she marched out of the portal, into Jason space and started jabbing a finger at his face.

"What were you thinking, going off like that?"

She snatched him into a hug.

"If Shade wasn't with you, how stupid a thing would you have done?"

"It was pretty bad," Jason said.

She let him go, hands on his shoulders as she gave his face an interrogating look.

"What are we going to do with you?" she asked. "I wish Rufus' mother was here."

"She's on that boat," Jason said, pointing out at the water behind her.

"Mother came too?" Rufus asked.

Jason, Rufus and Farrah watched as the boat approached. It wasn't much more than an outsized skiff and they could see familiar faces on the deck. Gary's grin was so wide it threatened to split the top of his head right off as we waved. A falcon came darting over

the water from the boat, shooting at Jason like an arrow. Right before impact, it turned into a hairy dog the size of a tiger, bowling him over and crushing him under its weight.

“YAY!” the dog cheered with a child’s voice.

“Stash,” Jason croaked. “You got big.”

“I can get bigger. Want to see?”

“Nope.”

“Stash,” Humphrey admonished as he landed on the dock. “Get off him.”

The dragon wings that had carried Humphrey over the water in pursuit of his enthusiastic familiar vanished as he alighted on the dock.

Stash transformed into a small bird that started flapping around in the air over Jason as Humphrey helped him to his feet. Jason didn’t let go of his hand, pulling the big man into a hug.

“Good to see you, brother.”

“Good to see you alive,” Humphrey said. “We should have known that if anyone was going to treat the laws of life and death as rough guidelines it would be you.”

A portal appeared on the dock, a rainbow circle, edged in floating runes. Gary barrelled out of it and caught Farrah in a huge hug. The big man picked the small woman up entirely, spinning around in his joy.

“You realise that if I didn’t have a strength power,” she told him, laughing as he spun her around, “you’d have just crushed me to death.”

Sophie, Belinda and Clive followed Gary through the portal at a more sedate pace before it ran out of energy and closed. Jason approached them with a grin. He could sense the nervousness in Humphrey and especially Sophie, and the interplay between their auras. He chuckled to himself as he moved up to greet Clive.

There were handshakes and hugs all around as friends once thought gone forever came back together. Jason basked in their welcoming auras, without making a single eighties reference they didn’t understand. The boat arrived at the dock, allowing the rest of the group to disembark. Trenchant Moore brought up the rear, Jason noting how the man’s gaze went straight to Farrah. He couldn’t read the man’s aura and was left wondering why, but had far more important things to attend to.

Neil and Jason faced each other as Neil came off the gangplank.

“I see someone finally taught you how to dress,” Jason said.

“This coming from a guy wearing that,” Neil said, gesturing at Jason’s floral shirt and shorts. “I see you’ve been enjoying your time in the tropics. Meanwhile, two weeks ago in

Vitesse, we were working our butts off to get you back when a pile of your trouble gets dumped right on our heads.”

The hostile expression of the two men cracked and they laughed, shaking hands warmly. Jason then looked to his side.

“Speaking of trouble, what are you doing here, Travis?”

“That’s kind of a long story, Mr Asano.”

“You were sucked into a magic thing and fell out here?” Jason guessed.

“I guess it’s not that long,” Travis conceded.

“And how many times do I have to tell you to call me Jason?”

“Sorry, Mr Asano.”

Jason chuckled as he turned to Taika, sharing a grin with the big Māori.

“I got you here after all,” Jason said.

“It’s pretty crazy, bro. I’m kind of freaking out.”

“You and me both,” Jason said, throwing a look to Arabelle and exchanging a nod of greeting.

“I think we should stop obstructing the dock and make our way onto the ferry,” Trenchant suggested.

“When’s it scheduled to leave?” Jason asked.

“It belongs to the royal family,” Trenchant said. “I’m under direction from Princess Liara to bring them to your abode on Arnote.”

“Your boss was dragging his feet,” Jason said. “What changed?”

Trenchant’s gaze flicked briefly back to Farrah before returning to Jason.

“You have loyal friends, Mr Asano.”

Argy was overseeing the loading of a crate of the argy fruit for which he was nicknamed when something unusual appeared in front of him.

➤ You have received a voice chat request from [Jason Asano]. Accept Y/N?

“Uh... okay?”

“Argy,” Jason’s voice came directly into Argy’s head. “I’ve got friends in town and I’m looking to chuck a barbie. Help a bloke out with sourcing some food?”

“No problems, fella,” Argy said.

“Thanks, mate. I’ll have Shade swing by with some funding. It’s going to be an intimate affair, so maybe don’t invite the entire town this time? Try and keep it below a third?”

“I’ll do what I can,” Argy said, “but you know how people get to talking. You going to need drinks?”

“I think we might, yeah.”

Trenchant Moore escorted the group all the way to the cloud house before departing. He left quickly, finding something disconcerting yet unplaceable about the cloud construct, which was wholly impenetrable to his senses. Inside, an impromptu party started as the group started drinking and telling stories about all that had happened in their time apart.

Food and barbecues started to arrive and they moved outside as Jason started organising things. He was starting to get good at managing large-scale entertainment events, at least his particular brand of them.

After the celebratory gathering, the group split off for more intimate reunions over the course of the evening. Farrah and her parents, Rufus and his mother. Rufus, Gary and Farrah, reunited for the first time since the disastrous expedition that claimed the lives of many adventurers alongside her. Clive was chomping at the bit to ask Jason about every single aspect of every single thing that happened in his time away.

“Clive,” Jason said with a laugh as he set out tubs of marinade on the table. “We’ll have plenty of time to get to that. Just put in these meat strips, like I showed you. I’ll have to magic them up a bit since I can’t leave them in as long as I’d like.”

Jason took the time to speak with everyone at some point during the night’s revelry. Farrah’s parents were effusive in their gratitude for bringing their daughter home to them. Jason teased Clive mercilessly with hints of the astral magic he’d been involved with and traded good-natured barbs with Neil. Taika and Travis assured Jason that his family were safe and sound, although Jason had them save the full story for later.

It was late in the evening when Jason found himself on a balcony on the cloud house, overlooking his friends and neighbours as they enjoyed a night of not worrying about the monster surge. Not everyone had that chance. He’d seen for himself the conditions of people boxed into fortress towns like cattle, to the point of having the cattle penned right alongside them. The local equivalent of the cow was an awkward-looking, hexapedal lizard, which Jason found significantly less adorable, but equally delicious.

Jason felt the need to remind himself that for all the things piled on him, he had the power, money and resources to do something about it. For all his struggles, the world was

full of powerless people who would have traded places with him in an instant, given the chance. Now that he had his family back around him, it was time to stop worrying about his own problems so much and start thinking about the people who needed help more than he did.

"Which is easier said than done," he murmured to himself.

Belinda came out of the house and joined him in leaning against the rail.

"Brooding and talking to yourself," she said. "I think Sophie might have dodged an arrow with you."

"Yeah," Jason said. "She probably did. So, her and Humphrey."

"Yep. Sorry you gave up your chance?"

"No. She was looking for something in me she'll actually find in him. Plus, he's reliable. I think we both know I'm bit of a flake. She's a smart woman, Humphrey's mother."

"What's she got to do with anything?"

"You have to have realised he's a mum's boy by now. If she doesn't approve, it doesn't matter if Humphrey wants it. If she does approve, I think it still doesn't matter if he wants it."

"So, no hard feelings about Soph?"

"I had someone, while I was away. She helped me a lot. Helped me find Farrah. All I brought her in return was death. If I ever just become some adventurer instead of the eye of a giant crap-storm, maybe I'll look for someone new. I wouldn't inflict me on anyone at the moment. I'm kind of a mess right now."

"Except us."

"No, you're stuck with me," Jason said. "I'm not letting you all get away from me again."

Chapter 514

Hegemon's Will

As Belinda left Jason on the balcony of the cloud house, Humphrey came out to take her place, leaning against the railing next to Jason. Jason flashed him a smile before turning his gaze back out over the lagoon, shimmering with the light of twin moons.

"We've come a long way from that waiting room in Greenstone where we met," Humphrey said. "But I suppose you'd already been further to get that far."

"That was quite a week for me. I didn't even give notice at work. Also, cannibals."

"Jason what you did..."

"Bad thing I did or good thing I did? You'll have to narrow it down. I'm very heroic, but also kind of a disaster."

"You're not a disaster, Jason."

"I did set off the monster surge."

"Your friend Dawn told us you would. We made Clive promise not to pester you about it until at least the second day."

Jason snorted a laugh

"He must have had spasms after meeting Dawn."

"I didn't take him long to overcome the glow of diamond-rank and start interrogating her, no. She was surprisingly patient with him."

"She spent a year running around with me, so she's had the practice."

"We all want to hear about it. That recording crystal you sent left us with a lot of questions and not a lot of answers."

"You won't be able to get rid of me now," Jason said. "We'll have plenty of time for that."

"Good. Jason, by that thing you did, I meant taking the Builder's vessel with you off that tower. Did you know you would come back from that?"

"Didn't have a clue. How heroic was that? You should tell people about it all the time, by which I mean attractive women. Just maybe not princesses, even though, you know... damn. Have you seen the princesses they have here? I bet you've seen more princesses than me, but these ones seem frustratingly gorgeous."

Humphrey shook his head, having quickly built up his Jason tolerance again.

"Jason, what you did—"

"Is exactly what you would have done, so shut your handsome mouth right there, cobber. I know what I did, so stick to telling the ladies, yeah? Now that you're off the market, I might actually get a look in."

Humphrey went stiff.

"Belinda told you."

"Mate, I didn't need her to tell me. You and Sophie may not have been holding hands, but your auras were. The old senses are a lot sharper than they were back when we last met."

"It's new."

"No it's not," Jason said. "Let me guess: You two were circling each other for a while, but your dead, rakishly-charming friend was hanging over you like a ghost. Then hey, he's suddenly alive and you realise you don't want her getting confused because she used to have a thing for him, which finally got you to sack up."

"That's... not inaccurate."

Jason laughed.

"Who pushed you? Lindy or your mum?"

"Lindy," Humphrey grumbled.

Jason laughed again.

"Mate, you don't have to worry about me. Sophie was always looking for you; she just didn't know it. She thought I was a good guy because I'm the one that helped her first."

Jason slapped Humphrey on the back.

"But you're the good guy, Humphrey. The way she grew up, she needs that. And so do I. I've found that I tend to lose my way, left to my own devices. I need someone to keep me on the straight and narrow."

"You are a good man, Jason."

Jason gave him a sad smile.

"Over the next little while, you're going to hear about the things I've done. I made allies, intending from the start to betray and kill them – which I did. Yesterday I almost tore a man's soul out of his body because I was angry and I could. Shade pulled me back from that one."

Humphrey stood up straight, turning to face Jason.

"Jason, are you okay?"

Jason also pushed himself off the railing, giving Humphrey another sad smile.

"No, Humphrey. I'm not. But I will be, now that you're here."

Jason sensed Sophie wandering alone, along the trail leading down the cliff face to the main village. He masked his presence until he drew close, struck by her startling figure. With her delicate grace and the moonlight shining off her silver hair, she was a moon fairy in the night.

"You're too quiet," she said, turning around to face him.

"I've had to be," he said.

"Things go poorly for men who sneak up on me."

"Things have been going poorly for a while."

"Our team could use a stealth guy. If you're nice, we might let you back in."

"I probably won't be nice."

"I'm guessing we'll let you in anyway. Humphrey's a soft touch."

A smile teased at the corners of his lips.

"Is that so?"

She shook her head.

"I knew he'd tell you straight away."

"He didn't have to; I could see it right away. It's sweet."

"Are you making fun of me?"

"No," he said, giving her an honest smile instead of his trademark half-smirk. "I know sincerity isn't one of my many things, but I'm glad for you. At this point, I'll take happiness where I can find it."

He turned to look out over the lagoon and she moved to stand beside him.

"You're not doing so well, are you?" she asked.

"You know what it's like when the bad feels like it's never going to end."

"I do. But it does. I found the team, and now you have too."

Jason nodded.

She gave him a hesitant side glance.

"I... wasn't sure how I'd feel when I saw you," she said.

"And?"

"I was kind of a mess back when we knew each other."

"I'm kind of a mess now."

"I've known him longer than I ever knew you. Been with him every day. Helping people isn't a responsibility to him. He cares about people, genuinely. People he's never met. I never had that in my life, and I want it."

"So you should. I know I do. I'm probably not going to sleep with him, though."

She snorted a laugh.

“You’re still kind of a prick.”

“Yeah,” Jason said with a chuckle. “I kind of am. So, we’ve established I’m a garbage fire; how are you doing.”

“I’m good,” she said. “Great, really. And I wouldn’t be if you hadn’t put me on this path. I won’t forget that.”

“You may recall that I messed things up pretty badly.”

“You helped me when no one else would have even thought about it. Not even Humphrey, which is why he values you so much. I’m not sure if I ever properly thanked you. I’ll always owe you for that.”

“You’ll never owe me for that. Friends don’t count favours.”

“You say that, but your favours are kind of insane. Humphrey was angry at himself for a long time that he wasn’t the one to take the Builder off that tower.”

“Couldn’t he barely stand?”

“You think he takes that into consideration?”

Jason laughed, shaking his head.

“Of course he doesn’t. You know that you two will have obnoxiously good-looking babies.”

She blanched.

“It’s more than a little early to be talking about that.”

“So you say, but are you willing to bet Danielle Geller doesn’t have a timeline sketched out in a notebook somewhere?”

“Oh gods, his mother. She’s like you, except she keeps her ears open instead of her mouth, which is terrifying.”

“She’s probably already making plans for a brood of adorable chocolate babies with silver hair.”

Sophie let out a groan.

Late in the evening, after the barbecue was done, Jason was scrubbing grill plates in the yard. He smiled as someone let him sense her aura.

“It’s starting to feel like I can summon diamond-rankers by cleaning barbecues,” he said, handing the plate to Shade as he turned around. “Thank you for bringing them here.”

Dawn was standing in front of Jason, although her aura was completely invisible to him. She was in her true celestine form, with ruby eyes and matching hair that glimmered like gemstones in the moonlight. It seemed that all celestines looked good under the moon.

"I still don't want to overplay your importance," she told him. "Soramir Rimaros gave me a pretence to bring them here, but I suspect that was the idea when you let my name slip. He certainly does."

"I just wanted the option running around in his head. Not sure what gave him the push to bring you in already."

"No one told you? Farrah marched into the royal palace and gave him a talking to."

"Seriously? Good for her."

"That's the behaviour you want to encourage? Of course, you being a bad influence shouldn't surprise me. I know that from experience."

Jason pointed an accusing finger.

"I knew it! I knew you took the recording crystals with all my songs by Kenny Rogers and the First Edition."

"It was easy enough for you to make more. I was leaving the universe."

"You could have mentioned that in the recording you left me. I almost didn't realise they were missing in time to re-record them before we left as well."

"You wanted me to add a bit about Kenny Rogers to the message where I told you the rules a great astral being has to abide by when trying to kill you?"

"You need to get your priorities in order. I don't care about the Builder; that guy sucks. Kenny Rogers is an icon, and his stuff with First Edition before he went solo? That's the good stuff."

They both looked up at the balcony where Jason's house guests were all watching him argue with the diamond ranker about something they'd never heard of.

"Well, this is ridiculous," Neil said, turning to go back inside. "That didn't take long."

As Neil left, shaking his head, Farrah gave Dawn a casual wave.

"I thought everyone was asleep," Jason mumbled into Gary's chest. "What happened to the guy who wasn't a hugger?"

"I realised that you can't fight destiny," Gary said, letting Jason go.

"That's definitely not true," Jason said. "It's kind of my whole thing."

"Well," Gary said, "Maybe this will help with that."

He took a sword from a dimensional bag and held it out for Jason. The hilt was black with a bone handle and white embellishments. The scabbard was simple black lacquer with a dark metal tip and very minor patterning of white and dark red.

"I had some help with it. The scabbard is new but we incorporated it into the item. Magically, it's a part of the sword."

Jason took a hold of the sword by the scabbard.

- You have acquired the complete [Regalia of the Dark Hegemon]. All set effect bonuses to items within the set are restored.
 - Set Bonus (Item: [Amulet of the Dark Guardian]): For each instance of an affliction applied to an enemy, gain an instance of [Hegemon's Authority].
 - [Hegemon's Authority] (boon, holy, unholy, stacking): All allies within your aura have increased resistance to aura suppression. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Consume instances of this boon to enhance your aura suppression strength.
 - Set Bonus (Item: [Cloud Flask]): Shrouds the wearer in mist. Mist can be controlled through aura manipulation to condense into small cloud constructs. Cloud constructs created in this manner only maintain integrity against attacks lower than the rank of this item; attacks of its rank and above are minimally impeded. Shroud can be withdrawn into the flask.
 - Set Bonus (Item: [Hegemon's Will]): Enemies struck with this weapon are subjected to a mild mana drain effect and are inflicted with [Hegemon's Tribute].
 - [Hegemon's Tribute] (affliction, magic): Anyone affected by Hegemon's tribute is subject to a mild, ongoing mana drain effect by the wielder of [Hegemon's Will] so long as they remain within the wielder's aura. If this affliction is cleansed or the subject dies, a final burst of mana is drained.
-

Because he was holding the scabbard, it was the first item Jason was able to observe.

Item: [Hegemon's Dominion] (silver rank [growth], legendary)

The scabbard to Hegemon's Will, Hegemon's Dominion is the embodiment of hegemonic control, representing the hegemon's mastery of his domain (container, scabbard).

- This item is bound to [Jason Asano] and cannot be used by anyone else. This bond allows the weapon to share the wielder's ability to ignore rank disparity. This item is magically bound to [Hegemon's Will]; they are treated as the same item for all magical effects.
- Effect: Instances of afflictions affecting the wielder are periodically moved to this item, removing their effects from the wielder. This is not a cleansing effect. The rate of transfer is affected by the relative rank of the effects to the wielder. Suppressing the originator of the effect's aura increases the rate of transfer; the wielder being aura suppressed reduces the rate of transfer. If [Hegemon's Will] is sheathed, all afflictions are transferred to the weapon and affect the next enemy struck. Any

effects resisted or subject to immunity are negated and cannot be passed to an alternate target.

➤ Current rank: Silver.

Looking over the growth conditions, the weapon's growth was no longer capped by rank. The materials required for an upgrade, however, were all materials Jason had never heard of and were presumably gold-rank.

"It's going to be fairly rough to upgrade," Gary admitted. "It was a strange crafting process, to be honest. It's almost like the sword knew how it wanted to be reforged."

"That makes sense," Jason said. "Based on a fight I lost recently, this ability on the scabbard is exactly what I needed."

Jason looked up at Gary.

"You're amazing," he said, then grabbed the hilt.

Item: [Hegemon's Will] (silver rank [growth], legendary)

A precious gift, imbued with the soul of its owner and reforged with a renewed sense of purpose. The aid of a grandmaster craftsman in the reforging process has produced a flawless result (weapon, sword).

- This item is bound to [Jason Asano] and cannot be used by anyone else. This bond allows the weapon to share the wielder's ability to ignore rank disparity.
- Effect: You may invoke all effects of a conjured weapon into this blade for the normal mana cost of conjuring the weapon. Only one weapon's effects may be invoked at a time.
- Effect: While invoking a conjured weapon, you may inflict additional damage for an ongoing mana cost. Damage type is based on the invoked weapon and mana cost is based on the nature of the damage. Amount of damage is based on aura strength of the wielder. Damage is increased to the degree to which the enemy attacked has their aura suppressed and decreased by the degree to which the wielder has their aura suppressed.
- Available Invocation: [Ruin, the Blade of Tribulation].
- Ongoing Mana Cost: Low.
- Damage type: Corrosive. Inflicts [Corrosion].
- Available Invocation: [Penitent, the Blade of Sacrifice].
- Ongoing Mana Cost: Moderate.
- Damage type: Disruptive-Force.
- Effect: The wielder may cleanse all holy afflictions inflicted by the abilities and soul-bound items of the wielder from an enemy touched by [Hegemon's Will]. For each

affliction cleansed, the enemy suffers an instance of [Hegemon's Mercy] and the wielder gains an instance of [Benevolent Hegemon].

- Effect (Regalia of the Hegemon): Enemies struck with this weapon are subjected to a mild mana drain effect and are inflicted with [Hegemon's Tribute] and the wielder gains an instance of [Benevolent Hegemon].
- [Corrosion] (affliction, damage-over-time, elemental, stacking): Inflicts corrosive damage, which has increased effectiveness against inorganic substances. Additional instances have increased effect.
- [Hegemon's Mercy] (affliction, holy, stacking): The victim of this effect is subjected to a powerful suppressive force affecting all magical abilities. This affects essence abilities, innate abilities and item abilities. Abilities derived from external transcendent sources are affected more strongly. This affliction drops off rapidly when not within the area of the wielder of [Hegemon's Will]'s aura. Additional instances have increased effect.
- [Benevolent Hegemon] (boon, holy, stacking): The effect strength of allied auras overlapping your aura is increased. This does not affect suppressive strength or resistance to aura suppression. Additional instances have increased effect.
- [Hegemon's Tribute] (affliction, magic): Anyone affected by [Hegemon's Tribute] is subject to a mild, ongoing mana drain effect by the wielder of [Hegemon's Will] so long as they remain within the wielder's aura. If this affliction is cleansed or the subject dies, a final burst of mana is drained.

Jason drew the sword, running his gaze up and down the black blade with stark white sigils in awe. The white sigils on the blade started glowing life-force red.

-
- You have invoked the effects of [Ruin, Blade of Tribulation]. All properties of that weapon have been imbued into [Hegemon's Will]. Necrotic damage will be inflicted in addition to physical damage.

The sigils then turned from red to a rich blue.

-
- You have stopped invoking the effects of [Ruin, Blade of Tribulation].
 - You have invoked the effects of [Penitent, the Blade of Sacrifice]. All properties of that weapon have been imbued into [Hegemon's Will]. Disruptive-force damage will be inflicted in addition to physical damage.

"Gary," Jason said reverently. "It's like finding a part of myself I didn't know was missing."

"You brought Farrah back to us," Gary said. "That part I knew was missing."

Chapter 515

A Story About a Magic Trowel

Jason and Farrah sat on the balcony of his cloud house in the morning sun. As Taika and Travis came from inside, chairs made of cloud stuff rose from the floor.

“It’s time for the long version of how you two arrived here,” Jason told them as they sat.

“No worries, bro. It started with that big standing-stone thing you two made on the footy field in that abandoned town. No one was stupid enough to go near it while you were still around, although I’m pretty sure every country with a satellite was pointing it your way. There were also people on the ground watching you from kilometres away.”

“We were aware of them,” Farrah said.

“Things changed when you left,” Travis said, picking up the explanation. “You went through one of Jason’s archways and then what we’re pretty sure was a dig dimensional rift opened up. It looked like a portal, except that it covered the whole area of your standing stones, with only the outermost ones containing it.”

“It was stable?” Jason asked.

“Once it popped up, it was solid as a rock, bro.”

“And all the factions got curious,” Jason said.

“They were hesitant at first,” Travis said. “Once they were pretty sure you weren’t coming back out, though, they all swarmed the place like they used to do with Transformation zones.”

“The yanks were first,” Taika said. “They started throwing stuff in to see what happened. Even threw in some people.”

“They didn’t come back out,” Travis added.

“You wouldn’t catch me volunteering for that, bro.”

“And so you shouldn’t,” Farrah said. “If they didn’t go through at the same time as the rest of you, I doubt they survived. Unless they got caught up in whatever brought you here safely, those people are dead. Only someone like Jason could normally survive that passage, and even he had a limited window of viability.”

“Until I complete the bridge,” Jason said, “anything that tries to travel it will get dumped into the deep astral. Farrah and I got here riding the initial backwash from cutting off the magic pipeline to our world and riding that wave back as it triggered the monster surge here.”

“Then how did we survive?” Travis asked.

“We’ll get to that later,” Jason said. “You were talking about the Americans and their early testing?”

“Nothing anyone put in there came back,” Taika said, “so they stopped chucking stuff in and settled in to study it.”

“Earth doesn’t have any astral magic specialists,” Farrah said. “The grasp of magic theory there is quite limited and focused on magitech. They wouldn’t learn much from the rift.”

“Don’t underestimate the scientific method,” Travis said. “It might take years, even decades of careful study, but the potential gains from having access to it could accelerate our understanding of dimensional magic far beyond what it would otherwise reach. I don’t think they were wrong to study it. Knowledge for its own sake is a noble endeavour.”

“I know a goddess who will love you,” Jason said.

“A goddess?” Travis said.

“Oh yeah,” Taika said. “They turn up in person here, right?”

“Yep,” Jason said. “In fact, I’ll take Travis to the temple of Knowledge today. We need to know if she’s going to be wary of you introducing knowledge from our world. She was sketchy about me doing it, but I think now that was mostly an excuse for her to do other things. Plus, you actually know things instead of having just heard of them.”

“You’re talking like there’s no way of going home,” Taika said. “You did. Can’t we?”

“Not interested,” Travis said. “My family cut me off after I helped you steal that nuke and well... I never had a lot of friends.”

“There won’t be another chance to go back for a long time,” Jason said. “I am going to open a path, but it will be years before it’s ready to use. I’m sorry, Taika. I know you didn’t want to leave your family.”

“My mum will probably think I’m dead,” the big man said sadly. “Can’t Dawn take us back? She can move between universes, right?”

“Earth is too fragile for a dimensional vessel to enter without causing damage,” Farrah said. “The Dawn you met on Earth was just a projection, like a living phone call from another dimension.”

“It’s just one little flying cottage,” Taika said. “That won’t break a whole world, will it?”

“The tip of a needle is also very small,” Jason said. “It’s still very bad news for a balloon. Maybe – *maybe* – she can get word back to the families of the people who wound up here. We’ll have to ask her after we get a handle on who arrived here.”

“Which brings us back to the question of what happened to bring you all here,” Farrah said.

“With all the people poking around your big magic thing,” Taika said, “Jason’s grandmother decided to send some people from Clan Asano to check it out.”

“The clan doesn’t have a lot of people with strong magical theory knowledge,” Travis said. “Mostly Hiro and Emi, who were both taught by you, Farrah. Matriarch Yumi wouldn’t let either of them within a thousand kilometres of that place, though. Wouldn’t even let them go back to Australia and kept them in Jason’s cities. That left me, and Taika came along to help keep me safe.”

“I’m not up to facing some of those Network people,” Taika admitted, “but with you two gone, the clan’s silver-rankers were halved with just Akari and her old man left.”

“We weren’t getting too close to the rift or in anyone’s way,” Travis said. “We just wanted a general sense of what the factions were up to.”

“Didn’t matter,” Taika said. “One day, out of nowhere, the thing suddenly expands outwards. Sweeps over the camp. I know there were some gold-rakers I sensed moving out of the way, and I think the silvers that weren’t too close got away as well.”

“But we’re category two,” Travis said. “Taika is fast and maybe could have gotten away, because we were in the outer areas, but he was slowed down carrying me and didn’t get clear.”

“The rift swept over us, and that’s where things get funny,” Taika said. “I don’t really remember stuff after that until I woke up in a crater. Except that I kind of do remember stuff. It’s weird.”

“Like you remember emotions, but not when or why you felt them,” Jason said.

“Yeah, that’s exactly it,” Taika said, pointing.

“That’s because your soul experienced things that your body didn’t,” Jason said. “It’s happened to me enough times that I’ve become familiar.”

“What happened to our bodies?” Travis asked.

“They were annihilated,” Jason said. “You died and came back; welcome to the resurrection club. I’m the president, but it’s largely a ceremonial position.”

Jason went on to explain the concept of outworlders to Travis and Taika. As he did, Clive wandered out from inside, he and Farrah helping clarify things as Jason’s explanation wandered into tangents and confusingly elaborate analogies based around action-adventure television.

“...and that show was going to be called *Viper*, but there was another show coming out called *Viper* that had a Dodge Viper in it, so the car company sued the non-car show and they changed the name to *Cobra*. And that’s kind of how a human turns onto an outworlder.”

“The first thing you need to do,” Clive said, “is ignore everything Jason just said because it was nonsense.”

“That’s good advice in general,” Farrah added.

“Hey…” Jason complained.

“I liked *Viper*,” Taika said.

“Of course you did,” Jason told him. “It was crap *Knight Rider* again.”

“I suppose you preferred *Cobra*,” Taika said. “It didn’t even have a science-fiction car.”

“It had Michael Dudikoff,” Jason said. “He was the *American Ninja*!”

“Bro, that movie sucked.”

“Will you both please stop?” Farrah said. “I hate to break it to you, boys, but all of that stuff was terrible. All of it.”

“Coming from someone who thinks *Beyond Thunderdome* was the best Mad Max movie.”

“It was! Aunty Entity is an iconic character.”

Clive and Travis watched the three arguing and Clive shuffled closer, his cloud chair shifting with him.

“Did this kind of thing happen a lot over there?”

“Yep,” Travis said. “For someone who claims to not like television, Farrah borrowed DVDs from Jason’s dad a lot.”

“What are DVDs?”

Eventually, the conversation got back on track. Clive postulated an early hypothesis of what had triggered the rift expansion on Earth.

“Random dimensional events connecting worlds are a normal, if extremely rare thing,” Clive said. “Because there is a link between your world and ours, though, that frequency is increased. Even so, the right conditions for such an event to move someone from your world to ours are extremely rare. Jason, you were brought here because such an event just so happened to coincide with Landemere Vane trying to summon a clockwork king to this world.”

“That’s what he was doing in that basement?” Jason asked. “No wonder it went wrong. He didn’t have the power to stage that kind of ritual.”

“He had support,” Clive said. “The more we learn, the more we understand just how much more advanced than ours the Builder’s astral magic is. After we came back from the astral space – where you died, Jason – the old Vane estate was completely excavated. We’d discovered the cult was living underground in the cave system there.”

“Weren’t we right on top of that at one point?” Jason asked.

“We were,” Clive said.

“I should have had Shade go scout it out when Henrietta didn’t want us to go down there. I’d just gotten him as a familiar and I wasn’t thinking about all the awesome ways he could help me yet.”

“I should have suggested it,” Shade said from Jason’s shadow. “As you said, it was the start of our relationship and I did not want to overstep. I was yet to learn that sometimes you need to be pushed, Mr Asano. And that sometimes, you need to be thrown.”

“It was for the best,” Clive said. “There was a small army of them. If we found them, they would have killed us and decamped before anyone came looking. We should count ourselves lucky they didn’t want to be revealed and come after us.”

“What did they find when they excavated the place?” Farrah asked.

“Powerful Builder magic tools. Broken, after the failed summoning attempt, but very powerful.”

“There was a ritual circle set into the floor,” Jason said. “I remember that.”

“We think that was a device to hide the real tools from Landemere’s family,” Clive said. “You may remember that while he was a Builder cultist, the rest of his family belonged to a blood cult called the Red Table.”

“Oh, we remember,” Farrah said.

“Are they related to a great astral being as well?” Jason asked.

“No,” Farrah said. “They’re just a group that likes to explore the kinds of blood and death magic that get you hunted down by the Adventure Society.”

“Anyway,” Clive continued, “the point is that Landemere’s summoning went wrong. Maybe because he was trying to go beyond his ability, or maybe it was impacted by the dimensional event. Whatever the case, the result was that the summoning ritual was like a beacon, yanking Jason’s soul to the Vane estate.”

“And you think this grand summoning event in Vitesse did the same thing,” Farrah surmised.

“Yes,” Clive said, “but on a much larger scale. Instead of a natural dimensional event, we have this bridge you and Jason established using the link between worlds.”

“The bridge isn’t complete,” Jason said.

“Which is why anything that followed it would get annihilated,” Clive said. “But you can’t annihilate a soul. I think that your bridge and the massive summoning event might have converged after our team disrupted the summoning. It caused the right conditions on

your world to expand the rift and draw people in, and the summoning was the beacon that pulled the loose souls into our world, turning them into outworlders. Essentially, the same thing that happened to you, Jason, but on a massive scale.”

“And now there’s a hundred and something outworlders from Earth,” Jason said, running a hand over his face. “Do we know anything about who they are?”

“They’re a mix of factions,” Taika said. “Everyone but the vampires, because they’re kill-on-sight now. The handful that came over to team let’s-not-have-a-blood-apocalypse have to be careful about showing themselves because of friendly fire. After you left, they made their move.”

“Great,” Jason said. “Vampire war.”

“They aren’t stupid enough to touch your domains,” Travis said. “The clan and the transformation zones refugees they took in are hunkered down and safe. The reason the silver-rankers didn’t come to Australia with us was that we keep them on standby for anyone who needs to leave the domains and we were going out for too long to have them tied up.”

“Domains?” Clive asked.

“I’ll explain later,” Jason said. “And no one talks about them outside of this building, is that clear?”

“Why not?” Travis asked.

“Because I’m fairly confident we can’t be overheard here,” Jason said, “but out there is different. I have more than enough trouble to be going on with and I’m not looking for any more.”

“That doesn’t sound like you,” Clive said.

“I learn slow and it usually needs to get beaten into me a few times,” Jason told him, “but I do learn.”

“That sounds more like you,” Clive said.

“Tell me about the outworlder group,” Jason said to Taika and Travis. “Anyone else I know?”

“I’m pretty sure, yeah,” Taika confirmed. “I don’t think they told anyone they know you, though, which is why Travis and I were picked out from the bunch. The others are all scared of you now they don’t have their organisations to back them. A lot of groups didn’t treat you so well when they had all the power and thought they could get away with it.”

“And now they aren’t the hegemon anymore,” Jason said, resting a hand on the pommel of his sword. “I’ve even got the hegemonic hegemon sword of hegemony.”

“The what?” Clive asked.

Jason invited the group to his party and brought up the description of his sword for them to see.

“Oh yeah, that’s the stuff,” Clive said happily as a system box appeared in front of him.

“I somehow feel dirty,” Jason said. “Just read it. Without licking it, for preference.”

“This seems good,” Clive said, glancing over the description. “It’s very heavily reliant on aura strength. I know your aura’s strong, but is it strong enough to sustain this kind of weapon?”

“I think he’ll be fine,” Farrah said.

“What’s a hegemony?” Taika asked as he peered at the item description. “It’s like every fourth word, bro. Is it something to do with hedges?”

“Hedges?” Jason asked.

“Yeah, bro. I remember you telling us a story about a magic trowel. Is this a gardening sword?”