

## Chapter 101

### Fantasy World Goodness

Jason and Clive made their way to the northern side of the Adventure Society campus, which occupied much of the western side of the Island's north shore. They passed a grey, stone tower that Jason now recognised as the prison tower. The Society was only allowed to hold prisoners taken as part of a contract, while others went to the courthouse gaol. It had briefly held the man who attacked him at the lumber mill, Jerrick, before he was stripped of his Society membership and sent packing.

Getting closer to the north shore, they skirted around the memorial grounds where they had attended a solemn service three weeks earlier. They both gave sober glances to the mausoleum as they went past. The memorial grounds occupied a good chunk of the shoreline, while the private dock took up most of the rest.

"Isn't this a bad place for a dock?" Jason asked. "It'd be very exposed to the elements."

"It's rarely used," Clive said. "Usually by prestigious visiting adventurers, who get dropped off before the ship moves on to the ports. Sometimes vessels with important cargo for the Adventure Society or Magic Society."

The Adventure Society's private dock had few buildings nestled into garden grounds where the plant life was chosen for its resilience to salty sea winds. Clive pointed them out explaining their purpose to Jason. The largest was a service building, right up against the dock. The smallest was a processing building for ships' crews. The middle-sized building was nicer than the others; an arrival and departure lounge with space for lavish functions.

As they went inside there was no elaborate function set out, but the small crowd looked like all the prestige Greenstone could muster, at least while so many luminaries were absent on the expedition.

As Clive's gaze wandered over the assemblage, he became increasingly startled. He recognised the directors and deputy directors of both the Magic Society and the Adventure Society. There was the Duke of Greenstone and his brother, Beaufort Mercer.

"It's Cassandra's Dad," Jason said.

"You've met him, then?"

"There was a brief, stilted encounter. Reserved respect isn't really my strongest play."

"You might want to consider what that says about you," Clive said.

Along with nobility, there were representatives of the various temples. That including Gabrielle Pellin, who had been helping Clive with his investigation into the underground

complex. She was standing with one of her church's more high-ranking members. Given how many of the city's elite were off on the expedition, it was an absurdly high-class gathering. Jason led Clive away from the group gathered near the doors. The lounge was spacious with glass, dockside frontage, so they easily found some isolated seats that still afforded them a view of the ocean.

"Jason, what is this?" Clive whispered as they sat down. "That's my boss and my boss' boss. The Duke, a bunch of silver rankers..."

A few curious glances were thrown their way. Jason sensed, as much as saw the look Elspeth Arella gave him, with the weight of her silver-rank aura behind it. It wasn't a suppressive force but made itself unmistakably felt.

"Let's just keep our distance," Jason said. "I'm not sure I can be around that much wealth inequality without going on a socialist rant."

Jason looked out over the water.

"I always meant ask what the tides are like with two moons," Jason said.

"What?" Clive asked, still distracted by the crowd, then turned around to Jason with a confused frown. "What do tides have to do with the moons?"

"The moon has a huge effect on the tides," Jason said. "I can only imagine it's bigger with two. What is it you think causes tidal action?"

"It's not really my field," Clive said, "but the prevailing theory is that is a function of ambient magic. We just can't test it because we would have to monitor the whole planet's magical field for an extended period. Or a good-size chunk of the planet, at least."

"No, that's all wrong, mate. What you're dealing with is... Gabrielle?"

"I'm dealing with Gabrielle?" Clive asked, then noticed Jason looking past him. Gabrielle had left the group and was approaching them as swiftly as her formal robes would allow.

"Jason," she insistently hissed, wanting to be forceful without being loud. "You can't tell people that."

"I can't tell people what?"

"About that thing you were about to tell him about. Hello, by the way, Clive."

"Acolyte Pellin," Clive greeted her.

"I can't tell people about gravity?" Jason asked.

"No, you can't. Some things people have to figure out for themselves."

"This is your boss telling you this, then," Jason said.

"Yes," Gabrielle said. "She said you can't just go around telling people about fundamental aspects of physical reality. Especially not someone like Clive."

“Fundamental aspects of physical reality?” Clive asked. “Wait, why not someone like me?”

Gabrielle gave Clive a friendlier look than the forceful one she had been giving Jason.

“Because you’ll run around telling everyone,” Gabrielle told him. “My Lady quite likes you, by the way.”

“Really?” Clive asked. “She knows who I am?”

“She knows who everyone is, Clive,” Jason said. “She knows everything except what a private conversation is, apparently.”

“Jason,” Gabrielle said. “She says the people of this world have to learn important things for themselves, instead of from some dimension-hopping loon.”

“Did she tell you to say that?” Jason asked.

“She was very explicit. She said that if you keep your mouth shut for once, she’ll give you a gift.”

“Bribery?” Jason said, thinking it over. “Yeah, alright.”

Gabrielle nodded and turned back for the group, some of whom had been looking on with curiosity. Many of them had the perception of a silver-ranked spirit attribute and could have easily eavesdropped.

“Gravity?” Clive asked.

“Did you not just hear me get bribed not to tell you?” Jason said. “She’d know immediately.”

A look of contemplation crossed Jason’s face.

“She knows when you’ve been naughty,” he mused. “She brings gifts, apparently.”

Halfway back to the group, Gabrielle wheeled around and stormed back to Jason, waving a finger in his face.

“I don’t know what a flirty Santa Claus is,” she scolded, “but my goddess definitely isn’t one.”

“Does she have a big temple to the north where elves make toys?”

“What?” Clive and Gabrielle asked.

“Look,” Jason said, pointing out to sea. “I think it’s kicking off.”

Their eyes followed where Jason’s hand was pointing until they spotted what looked like a mass of cloud on the horizon.

“What is that?” Clive asked. “It’s magical, but I can’t make anything out at this distance.”

“You don’t know?” Gabrielle asked. “Why are you here?”

“Jason wouldn’t tell me.”

“I thought it would be a fun surprise,” Jason said defensively.

“What are you up to?” Clive asked Jason warily.

“Actually, it should be kind of a fun surprise,” Gabrielle conceded.

They watched as the mass of cloud moved closer.

“It’s a ship,” Clive said excitedly. “It’s a ship made of clouds.”

The cloud ship, sailing through the water, was not as close as it first seemed. Its enormous size made it seem that way, growing bigger and bigger in their vision as it approached. It was proportioned like an ocean liner, crafted from fluffy white clouds. Sunset shades of blue and orange delineated the dimensions of the ship that floated over the water at a goodly speed, in spite of no visible propulsion.

“That’s some proper, fantasy world goodness, right there,” Jason said.

By the time it pulled into place at the dock, it was clear how overwhelmingly humongous the vessel was. Over three hundred metres long, sixty metres wide and high, even the silver-rankers were agog at the sheer magnitude of it.

The ship drew to a gentle stop in the dock and a walkway of cloud started emerging from the side. When it connected to the shore, a hole appeared in the side of the ship to reveal Emir Bahadir. Seeing him in daylight, he looked the same as when Jason had met him in the dark. Sleek clothes, midnight skin and dark hair woven with colourful beads. Jason had been uncertain in their previous encounter, where he could seemingly evade his ability to see through darkness.

He walked across the platform to the shore, meeting Elspeth Arella who came out to greet him. She led him inside to be met by the assembled welcoming party, but Clive was uninterested. He had stood up out of his chair, his eyes roaming the side of the ship. His vision power allowed him to see at least some of the otherwise-invisible magic.

“This is amazing,” he said.

Gabrielle had remained with them to watch the ship appear and suddenly remembered she should be with the larger group. She was about to hurry away when Bahadir vanished from where he was standing to appear in front of them in a single step.

“Mr Asano,” Emir greeted.

“Mr Bahadir,” Jason said, standing up to shake hands.

“This is Gabrielle Pellin,” Jason introduced. “You’ll know Danielle Geller, I presume. Gabrielle is currently attached to her son, Humphrey. She does have accomplishments outside what man she’s hanging around, but she called me a dimension-hopping loon, so I won’t bother with them.”

“A delight to meet you,” Emir said. Gabrielle’s eyes shot daggers at Jason, before turning back to Emir with a smile.

“A pleasure,” she said, shaking his hand. “I’m an acolyte with the church of knowledge.”

“He knows that from your robes,” Jason said. “You might as well have worn a white sack and painted ‘church of knowledge’ on it.”

“You will pay for this, Jason,” she said.

“Facing up to consequences is the making of a man,” Jason said, gesturing to Clive, still looking out the window. “This is Clive. He’s the deputy something-something at the local Magic Society, and more interested in your boat than meeting a gold-ranker, it appears.”

“What?” Clive said, turning his gaze from the boat for the first time. “Oh, um, wait. A gold ranker?”

“Emir Bahadir,” Jason introduced, “meet Clive Standish.”

“I’ll see you get a tour,” Emir said, shaking a flummoxed Clive’s hand. “It won’t be a ship anymore, but I’m confident you’ll find it just as impressive.”

“It won’t be a boat?” Clive asked.

As they chatted, more people had come across the wide gangplank made of cloud.

“My staff,” Emir said. “The ship can be crewed by only a few people, as you will come to see, Clive, but I have various other needs. There seem to be some necessary social duties planned, so I will have to go back, but first...”

The people finished disembarking, around fifty of them.

“Come along,” Emir said and walked back outside, Jason and the others trailing behind.

As they swept past the nonplussed welcoming committee, Gabrielle glanced nervously at her high priest, who nodded the affirmation to continue. Outside, Emir’s staff were gathered haphazardly. They were a wild collection of races and ethnicities within those races. Their attire ranged from neat and subdued like Emir and Rufus preferred, to the wild and colourful clothing that Gary and the Greenstone locals preferred.

Emir walked over to a woman dressed in a similar style to himself, with a one-button jacket, neat slacks and practical dark shoes. Where Emir was dark-skinned, she was pale. Her dark brown hair dropped simply down to neck length in a cut that, like her clothes, was simple and stylish. She had a subdued, but not wholly restrained, silver-rank aura.

“This is Constance,” Emir introduced. “She is the single most indispensable person in my world. Constance, this is Jason, Gabrielle and Clive. They are always welcome.”

Constance nodded.

“Understood.”

Jason sensed something of a kindred spirit in Emir’s easy persona, which he knew had strengths and weaknesses. The professionalism he read in Constance gave him a sense that she was the one who kept the clocks running.

“Everyone’s off?” Emir asked Constance.

“They are,” She said.

"Alright then," Emir said, reaching into his jacket. From it, he pulled what looked to Jason like a round-bottomed chemistry flask, with Emir holding it by the neck. It was certainly too large to fit in a pocket.

“Is that a dimensional jacket?” Jason asked.

“It is,” Emir said.

“Stylish and practical,” Jason said. “I like it.”

“If you ever find your way to Vitesse,” Emir said, “I’ll introduce you to my tailor. He only takes new clients by referral.”

Emir shook the flask, then took out the crystal stopper. Four thin streams of mist emerged, gathering in the air to form four shapes that floated in place. Like the ship, they were made of clouds with sunset colours giving definition. One looked like a model of a sprawling estate house, the next like a bus or recreational vehicle with no wheels. The third was a sprawling palace, and the fourth was a small replica of the ship floating in front of them. That final image was glowing with an internal light.

Emir pushed his hand into the image of the palace, which started to glow as the light in the ship began fading. After a few moments, The cloud images streamed back into the bottle and Emir put it away.

The sheer magic power of the ship gave it a potent, gold-rank aura, and Jason felt that aura start undergoing a shift.

“I need to go back to my welcoming party,” Emir said, “but I think you might enjoy staying to watch. The transformation is something to see.”

Emir held out his elbow for Gabrielle.

“Care to join me, young lady?”

“Certainly,” she said, and they departed.

Left behind with Emir’s staff, they watched as the huge ship morphed into a palace of clouds, floating on the water. It took around ten minutes, which was, as promised, quite something to see. It was even more so to Clive, who could see some of the magic as it transformed.

"This is crazy," Clive said. "I can barely understand what's happening with these gold-rank processes, but just that little is amazing. Mostly I'm just seeing the structural changes, with the external security measures stopping me from looking deeper, but even that much is incredible."

"Security measures?" Jason asked.

"Oh yes," Clive said. "I would very much advise against trying to get in uninvited. It'd be harder to break into than..."

Jason looked at Clive after he trailed off. Clive was no longer focused on the transforming ship, instead taking up what Jason recognised as his thinking pose. His eyes were closed, his expression stern. His hands were held loosely in front of him, fingers wagging. Jason watched, waiting quietly until the fingers stopped moving and Clive opened his eyes, nodding.

"That adds up," he said absently to himself, then turned to Jason.

"I know what the thief is after."