

Chapter 503

How Deep a Hole

Jason went down into the waterfall cave beneath his cloud house. The natural stone was hidden behind walls, floor and ceiling made from cloud stuff, leaving only the cave mouth with the water rushing past. Sunshine sparkled through it like a spray of diamonds, dancing into the room. The space was otherwise lit by soft, ambient light coming from the cloud-stuff.

The room was mostly empty, aside from boards formed out of cloud-stuff on the walls. Jason could write or draw on them with only a thought, and they were already full of sophisticated magical diagrams and formulas. While his understanding of astral forces was instinctive and powerful, his knowledge of astral magic theory lagged behind. It had made great leaps, especially over the last year, but it was still not at the level required to finalise his special project.

“I need Clive,” he muttered as he glanced across his work. Then he put it out of his mind and a crystal recording projector rose from the middle of the floor. Jason took out a recording crystal and set it in place before stepping back. He sat, a cloud chair emerging from the floor to meet him.

Jason started the projector with a mental command. The projection showed Dawn in the cloud house in Venice, at a point where Jason was in the first transformation zone. Jason had only seen her one time since, shortly before the transformation zone’s collapse that had been the only time he saw her true form instead of a weakened avatar.

“Jason,” the projected Dawn said. “My dimensional vessel has detected the approach of a similar vessel, belonging to my counterpart within the Builder’s people. This is a man I know and, based on my knowledge of him and you, I have some idea of how that is going to go. I’m not sure how far you will end up pushing him, but like so many beings of great power, that power has made him prideful.”

Dawn paused as Emi came into the room.

“Dawn, do you want to come play El Grande?”

“I’m a little busy.”

“Okay.”

Dawn turned back to the recording crystal she was speaking into.

“This man I suspect you are about to meet is going to make a mistake. I could probably stop him, but the concessions we can get from him if I don’t are worth more than

preventing him from acting, even if the cost is high. I'll explain the terms I will extract from him now, since we likely won't have long to talk the next time we meet."

Jason listened again as Dawn explained the terms about the Builder not attacking Jason with overwhelming numbers or high-rankers. That he would not send anyone at all unless Jason interfered in their affairs first.

"I did remember right," Jason murmured to himself.

"Since I won't have a lot of time to explain when I see you, I'm going to leave this recording with Farrah. She'll give it to you before you travel once more to the other world. I have no doubt that you'll succeed in saving your world and returning."

The recording ended and Jason got up, returning the crystal to his inventory.

Like most major organisations in Vitesse, the Adventure Society branch was located in one of the city's iconic garden towers; massive spires draped in greenery. In a meeting room that opened onto a balcony that let in the fresh air, Clive was sitting opposite a high-ranking Magic Society official. Various functionaries were standing behind the official, while Clive was flanked by his team.

"Mr Standish, you are one of the most talented young astral magic specialists we have."

"You don't have me," Clive said. "I left the Magic Society. Definitively."

"It's time to come home. You can accomplish more in research than you ever could as an adventurer."

"I beg to differ," Humphrey said. "Clive was the mastermind behind both finding the Purity enclave and the attack that disrupted their grand summoning."

"And how did he find them?" the official shot back. "By tracing them through a network of dimensional gates that he discovered while cloistered in research at the Magic Society."

"That's an awfully nice way of saying locked up," Sophie said.

"Mistakes were made," the official acknowledged. "We apologise for your previous treatment, Mr Standish."

"Oh, we know how sorry you are," Neil said. "You think we haven't been paying attention?"

"We have been following the career of the woman that exploited Clive," Humphrey said. "Her next promotion got delayed. By months. She got it eventually."

"You Magic Society guys really know how to bring down the hammer," Neil said.

“Mr Standish, this mass-arrival of outworlders represents an unprecedented chance to study astral forces, which is more critical now than ever. We still don’t know if the messengers that were summoned represent an isolated event or part of a widespread program.”

“You wouldn’t even know to ask if Clive wasn’t an adventurer,” Belinda said.

“And that’s the way I’m staying,” Clive added. “Not only did the Magic Society treat me with flagrant indecency but your response in the aftermath was to hush it all up.”

“Whatever unfortunate matters are in the past,” the official said, “we need to look to the future. You are more valuable researching the Builder and Purity’s methods than getting killed fighting some irrelevant monster.”

“I don’t know how to be more explicit,” Clive said. “I’m not returning to the Magic Society. Not ever.”

“You burned that bridge,” Sophie told the official. “Then you took the ashes, put them in a big trough and got a bunch of your Magic Society friends to whiz in it. Then you used the resulting paste to write ‘we gave Clive the hard shaft’ in letters so big that you need to fly to read them.”

Everyone turned to Sophie.

“What she said,” Belinda agreed, throwing an arm around Sophie’s shoulder.

The increasingly disgruntled official was about to speak when he noticed something approaching through the air, directly towards the balcony. It was an elf standing on the back of a giant, white-feathered duck, gliding through the sky. As it reached the balcony, the duck transformed into motes of light that sank into the elf’s hair, turning it from a sandy blond to stark white.

Ken dropped lightly onto the balcony and strode into the room.

“Well?” Humphrey asked.

“It is done.”

Grins crossed the faces of Humphrey and his team.

“What’s done?” the official asked.

“I daresay you shall learn soon enough,” Ken said. “Soon indeed, if the man I hear running down the hall outside is one of yours.”

True to Ken’s word, the meeting room door burst open to admit a harried-looking man in Magic Society robes. He moved up to the official and activated a privacy screen. The team then watched the anxious man rapidly speak, unable to hear his words but seeing the official’s explosive but equally silent reaction. The man shot up from his chair and turned to glare daggers at Humphrey. He didn’t bother to address the team before

storming out of the privacy screen, the startling functionaries trailing like ducklings. They heard him yelling as they moved down the hallway.

“What are Geller Pirates?”

Warehouse District Three was one of the least lucrative on the island of Livaros. Being the furthest from both the sea and sky docks, it was the closest thing to a criminal district on the very security-conscious island of adventurers. One of the warehouses looked like any other from the outside, although the interior was entirely different, having been converted into an opulent home. Along with the plush furniture and smooth marble, it was further enhanced with magical infrastructure offering a formidable balance of protection and discretion. Only the most powerful senses would notice any difference between the building and the identical-looking ones around it.

Havi Estos was the owner of the building, although it would take an adept bureaucrat to trace it back to him. Pallimustus had nothing on Earth in terms of complex legalities and internecine paperwork, which made those with the knowledge and inclination to use them especially dangerous. Havi was a celestine man of striking appearance. His large physique and onyx-black skin were set off by his hair and eyes of matching gold. He looked well into middle age, despite the anti-aging effects of his silver rank. His aura was free of cores; the legacy of a long-finished adventuring career.

Contrary to his arresting appearance, he was not a man who liked to draw attention. Even so, he did his part during the monster surge, making sure that his activity quota was met. On returning from a contract, he was given a package that had been delivered to one of his public offices. It was from a friend from the old days, Mordant Kerr, who was now living somewhere in the western reaches of the Storm Kingdom.

Inside his office, Havi watched the recording crystal included in the package while reading the letter, his eyes moving back and forth from one to the other. The projection gave a bird’s eye view of a river canyon where a shadowy figure fought monsters swarming over the ground like ants. He watched the projection to the end, his expression unchanging.

“Affliction skirmisher,” he muttered to himself. “Haven’t seen one of those in a long time.”

He called his assistant, Jono, into the room. Jono was also his great-nephew, although Havi tried not to hold it against him.

“Yes, boss?”

“I need you to give Warnock a name.”

“Boss, she wasn’t happy after last time. She’s going to want extra.”

“So pay her extra.”

“Yes, boss. What’s the name?”

“Jason Asano.”

The capital city of the nation of Estercost was Cyrion, home to the Adventure Society’s continental council. It was closer than Vitesse to the site of the operation that turned into a debacle of magical explosions, summoned messengers and unexpected outworlders. Since the operation had been launched out of Vitesse, that branch of the Adventure Society had been undertaking the initial management. In the aftermath, they were handing off control of the site to the Cyrion branch.

Operations were shifting to Cyrion for two reasons, of which one was simple geography. It had taken place in their backyard and they were better located to handle what was looking like an ongoing operation. The other reason was that the continental council was taking an interest as it turned out to be much more critical than originally thought.

What was initially thought to be a sweep-up operation on low and mid-rank Purity loyalists was revealed to be a grand summoning. Only made possible by the weakened dimensional protection the world suffered during the monster surge, it didn’t take a lot of imagination to consider that it might only be the beginning. If there were more it would have to take place during the monster surge, and after the Adventure Society’s operation forced an early launch, any other locations were likely pressing to do the same. Aggressive investigations were already being set into motion.

The Magic Society had taken charge of the outworlders, more than a hundred of them in total. They were being transported to Cyrion via airship when several other airships moved into formation around them. A single woman with dark olive skin, black hair and a gold-rank aura leapt onto the surrounded airship alone.

A less than satisfied Magic Society official listened to her explain that the Geller family would be providing the accommodation to the outworlders at their fortified estate outside Cyrion. The official did not like the idea.

“While you may be disinclined to go along with this,” Danielle told him, “if you refuse to cooperate, I am going to have to insist. You aren’t going to make me insist, are you?”

Trenchant Moore was reading through the Adventure Society file of Jason Asano that he hadn’t been given before meeting the man in order to assess him without bias.

Vesper Rimaros was already in the meeting room with him and they were joined by Liara and her team members, Ledev and Jana. Trenchant stood up as Liara entered and she waved him back to his seat. Ledev and Jana politely greeted the other princess.

Rimaros high society thrived on hierarchy. While Vesper and Liara were close friends in private, in public their behaviour was dictated by station. This was restricted to the Rimaros high society, as foreign adventurers and those risen from humble beginnings were hardly expected to understand the sophisticated etiquette protocols.

This inevitably did not stop some from looking down on those not raised in that world. This especially plagued those in the middle rungs who saw people that should be below them not sharing their deference to those above.

When a group was entirely made up of Rimaros locals, things could get complex, even in a simple meeting. The hierarchy of the room was determined by rank and the roles individuals were serving in during any given interaction. As gold rankers, Trenchant, Jana and Ledev stood above the silver-rank Vesper in the social hierarchy but she was also a princess. Liara was a gold-rank princess and nominally held eminence, but Vesper was from a higher branch of the royal family. Trenchant was an explicit servant of the royal family, being a member of the royal guard. He was not on duty, however, and was acting in his capacity as a gold-rank adventurer. Further, he was the oldest and most experienced adventurer in the room.

There was a familiar awkwardness as the people in the room took seats according to their relative positions. Even the fact that most people in the meeting didn't know its purpose affected their standing. Outside of a formal setting, most people defaulted to a respectful politeness of vague equality when the specific protocols were murky.

"If I may ask, your highnesses," Ledev said to Vesper, "why are we here?"

"I need an assessment of Jason Asano's capabilities as an adventurer," Vesper said. "In short, I need to know how far he can be pushed as an adventurer."

"This boy again," Ledev complained, earning him a glare from his sister. He immediately looked contrite.

"I apologise, your highness," he said to Vesper. "I simply fail to see why one silver rank adventurer warrants this much attention. Just look at the people in this room. We represent a powerful, prestigious and valuable force in dangerous and important times. What makes him worth having us gather like this? He's not even in a guild."

"The man himself doesn't matter," Vesper said. "If someone else was in his position, we would be looking at them instead. In fairness to Asano, he never asked or attempted to be in the position he finds himself."

“Quite the opposite, in fact,” Liara said. “While many young adventurers might relish the attention of high-rankers and royalty, he is aggravated by it. He’s had to deal with enough powerful people in the past that the sheen has most certainly worn away. Constantly dealing with those who significantly outmatch you would engender a sense of powerlessness.”

“He certainly isn’t intimidated by gold-rankers,” Trenchant said. “I’m not often spoken to like I’m someone’s flunky. The fact that he immediately saw why I was there and clearly knew more than I only made it worse.”

“He’s arrogant,” Ledev said.

“You said it yourself, Ledev,” Jana told her brother. “Look at the people in this room. If meetings like this were being held about me, I’d be arrogant too.”

“Why are we having this meeting?” Trenchant asked.

“I need an assessment of Asano’s abilities as an adventurer,” Vesper said. “We need to know how far we can push him.”

“Why?” Trenchant asked. “You said he is in some position without actually explaining what that position was.”

“It’s complicated,” Vesper said. “And political.”

“And it’s only made worse because Asano is a valuable asset against the Builder, unrelated to anything else,” Liara added. “His experiences against the Builder and his cult have left him with some unique capabilities.”

“Suffice to say,” Vesper said, “that a very annoying man is at the crux of certain events. Who he is doesn’t matter, only whether he makes a mess or helps us clear it up. What we need right now is to highlight Asano’s capability with some contracts that will get him noticed. Which means knowing how deep a hole we can throw him in with a reasonable expectation of his climbing back out.”