

Chapter 471

Don't Say You Weren't Warned

Jason stepped out of the assessment officer's office to find a stern-looking man and woman waiting for him. They each had a rigidly controlled silver-rank aura.

"So," he said. "Are you two generic security or are you part of this anti-Builder unit?"

"We are part of the Builder cult response team. Come with us, please."

"Absolutely," Jason said. "Take me to your leader."

The pair escorted Jason through the vast administration complex, down through multiple basement sublevels that grew increasingly grim and they went. As they went, Jason could feel a large dead zone below them where his senses stopped cold. Even more than the aura-blocking office walls of the assessor, this was a sealed environment.

He was brought down to the same level as the dead zone, which began at a wall with a large metal door. It was thick and heavy, reaching from floor to ceiling and covered in intricate ritual markings. Perhaps Farrah could have made sense of them but they were far beyond Jason's ritual expertise. Looking at the door, he got the sense of a magical bank vault.

There were two guards outside the door. One was standing to the left of it, with the other inside a secure booth to its right. Both of Jason's escorts had to place their hands up against the glass of the booth, where a previously unseen ritual circle lit up with a green glow.

After seeing the glow, the guard in the booth nodded at Jason's escorts. The guard by the door spoke into some kind of communications device and placed a crystal into a slot in the wall beside the door. The guard in the booth did the same on the other side and the cumbersome metal door slowly descended into the floor. Jason's escorts let him into the wide and high corridor of plain brick behind it.

"Not exactly a cheerful work environment," Jason observed. "You should get some potted plants in. Ones that don't need a lot of sun, obviously."

"Introducing outside materials is a potential point of compromise," the female escort told him.

"That sounds like a super fun workplace."

After passing into the corridor, Jason entered the dead zone. His senses extended through the place but now everything outside it had been cut off. His perception was still politely withdrawn but the subterranean complex wasn't especially large, so he could

sense everything within the limited area. There were two gold-rankers and fourteen silver-rankers, including his escorts.

Most notable were nine people with Builder star seeds inside them, each of which had their auras strongly suppressed. They were in poor condition and all separated, suggesting they were probably prisoners. Jason hoped that was the case, rather than the Builder having infiltrated the anti-Builder taskforce.

There were also people in a similarly poor state who were converted. Rather than a star seed, they had been implanted with clockwork core, modifying them into bizarre amalgams of metal and flesh. These weren't the damaged and repurposed clockwork cores of Earth's superheroes, either.

Fully intact cores turned people into something between victim and minion of the Builder. Jason had seen the results when he and his team fought the Builder in the past when the cult had converted their allies amongst the clergy of Purity. This replaced essence powers with less-potent physical transformations but raised their rank, trading long-term growth for immediate power and obedience.

Jason's escorts led him down several corridors of dark grey brick and through multiple steel doors before stopping in a large room. It looked like a dungeon set up as an office, complete with a heavy wooden desk and a man chained to the wall.

There were no chairs on the visitor side of the desk. Instead, there was only a large ritual circle, permanently set into the floor in brass and multicolour crystal. Jason recognised the ritual, realising it was at least one of the means by which they were testing people for Builder connections.

Chained to the wall, the restrained man's body had metal rods jammed into the torso, arms and legs, the rods covered in glowing runes from which small amounts of mist was rising. Jason got the impression of something being drained from the man and he could feel the rods suppressing the star seed inside him.

The other occupant of the room looked up from his desk as Jason and his escorts entered. He was a gold-ranker that looked no older than his early twenties but only the most oblivious person would mistake him for being Jason's age. There was an air about gold rankers that even normal rankers with no true aura senses picked up on, even if they mistook it for some kind of charisma.

"Thank you. Stay by the door please," he told the escorts in a clipped, military voice. They nodded respectfully and closed the thick metal door before taking positions on either side of it. The gold-ranker then went back to going through the paperwork on his desk and scribbling notes in a book. He hadn't so much as looked at Jason.

Jason shrugged his shoulders and moved over to the man chained to the wall, stepping around the ritual circle set into the floor. The prisoner was hanging limply, eyes open but not seeing. He wasn't dead but in some kind of catatonic state.

"Your décor is a bit garish," Jason said. "I was talking about some potted plants with your employees but that's clearly not the ambience you're going for."

"You find it confronting?" the man asked without looking up.

"I've been worse. But you already know that."

Jason tapped one of the rods with his finger.

"The ability to suppress star seeds without them self-detonating was something they were still working on when I was last in the world. It's come along."

"You've seen them detonate before."

"I have. But you know that too."

The man finally looked up, although Jason didn't turn to face him, still looking at the catatonic prisoner.

"Then why don't you tell me something I don't know, Mr Asano?"

"Because I'm not going to start satisfying your curiosity when you haven't even told me your name."

"Most people show gold-rankers more respect."

"When all I've received is suspicion and rudeness? I'm here so you can determine if I'm a Builder puppet. I haven't been proven one yet."

"If you had, Mr Asano, I think you've seen that your treatment would go beyond rudeness. Stand in front of the desk."

Jason turned around.

"You mean walk willingly into your ritual circle, thereby making myself subject to its effects?"

"Yes."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"I didn't say please because I wasn't asking, Mr Asano."

"I'm just saying that if you want me in a soul projection ritual, you might want to use a smaller one."

"You're familiar with soul projection rituals."

"It's not the first time I've been suspected of being on team Builder. I'm getting sick of telling you things you already know. But that's fine. Just don't say you weren't warned."

Jason stepped into the middle of the room.

The gold-ranker raised his hand and chanted a few meaningless syllables. The ritual activated and Jason felt his aura unleash itself, not just at full strength but fed power and amplified by the ritual. The gold ranker's eyes went wide as the air turned thick as syrup and the glow stone in the ceiling dimmed. Murky darkness filled the room and figures began appearing within it.

The figures were floating dark cloaks, speckled with stars. Inside the cloaks were what looked like portals to places filled with sunshine and blue sky. Around the cloaks were other things, blacker than night. They darted about, quick, and sinister.

The two guards by the door had pressed themselves into the corners of the room, their faces stricken with fear. The man chained to the wall roused from his stupor, eyes clearing as he started thrashing in his chains and screaming a word over and over.

“REJECTOR! REJECTOR! REJECTOR!”

The gold-ranker cancelled the ritual and Jason drew his aura back in as he casually adjusted his floral shirt. The prisoner continued screaming until the gold ranker marched over, grabbed his face and slammed it into the wall, knocking him unconscious. The gold-ranker then went to the closest guard, huddled in the corner. He yanked her to her feet and then did the same for the other.

The door burst open, revealing a gold-rank woman.

“Keel,” the newcomer said. “What are you doing in here? Whatever that illusion was, it sent the prisoners berserk. The ones with cores all had seizures and the ones with seeds woke up and won't stop screaming.”

The original gold-ranker, Keel, turned to Jason who had a plate in one hand and a fork in the other.

“What?” Jason asked. “I just remembered I had leftover strudel.”

Jason was taken into a small, secure room with metal benches set into the stonewalls. Inside, Farrah was already sitting down.

“Sure thing, Farrah,” she said to Jason. “I'm going to lay low and not make a fuss. Nice and quiet, that'll be me.”

“I told the guy to use a less powerful projection ritual,” Jason said. “Have you found these people to be great listeners?”

“The lady I saw was nice,” she said. “Is that strudel?”

“I just remembered that I had some leftover. Splitsies?”

“Definitely.”

Jason sat down next to her and produced another fork. She grabbed it and he held the plate between them so she could dig in.

“They thought you might be a Builder puppet too?” Jason asked as she groaned happily around a forkful of fruit pastry. She nodded.

“I wonder how long this is going to take?” he wondered. “They’ll probably just leave us sitting here for a while and watch us.”

Farrah threw Jason a curious glance and Jason pointed at a brick in the wall that looked like any other.

The two gold-rankers, Keel and Liara, were watching Jason and Farrah through a seeing stone as Jason pointed it out.

“That man is trouble,” Keel said.

“Yes, but I don’t think he’s a servant of the Builder. Just the opposite, if anything. You felt that aura, just like I did. Its very nature rejected the star seeds and the clockwork cores. You were right about Asano. Whatever he’s been through did something to him. Something that we can use.”

“Perhaps. He’s still only silver-rank and won’t be able to help against the larger threats.”

“I’ll take something that works against the medium threats,” Liara said. “And what was with that aura? Is he another fourfold?”

“No,” Keel said. “His aura is just that strong.”

“How? That strength was practically gold-rank. I’m not sure I even tracked everything floating around in it before you shut the ritual down. That was the touch of gods in there, right?”

“His contact with gods was in his record. It’s nothing we didn’t know. What about the woman?”

“Her aura is outworlder now, instead of human, but clean. She doesn’t have a personal crest, though, so we’ll need to do some more identity verification. We did get something on the power screen ritual. We found traces from a Builder blessing but it wasn’t like the ones we’ve seen from cultists. This was custom. The thing is, though, every racial gift she has was evolved through a blessing.”

“The Builder shouldn’t be able to bestow more than one blessing.”

“It didn’t. Each of those was from a different great astral being. They’re relatively common from the Reaper and the Celestial Book but the World-Phoenix, not so much. As for the Legion and the All-Devouring Eye? The last I heard, they didn’t hand out blessings.”

“Check that with the Magic Society.”

“Oh, I intend to. But whatever is going on with her, I don’t think she’s in the Builder’s camp. The other beings wouldn’t bless her like that if she was.”

“The Builder only blesses its own people.”

“Keel, I think we can safely say that Miss Hurin falls outside of normal circumstances. And she didn’t lie. Did Asano?”

“I don’t know. Couldn’t read his aura until it was projected and I didn’t stop to question him once it was.”

“Did you power screen Asano before the soul projection?”

“No. We know he has a Reaper blessing but after what his aura did to the prisoners I’m not going to bother. I’m convinced he’s clean. As you said, exactly the opposite of in the Builder’s camp.”

“Which means she probably is as well,” Liara said. “We should hold her until we’ve confirmed her identity, at least. I have more records coming from the Magic Society so it shouldn’t take long.”

“Agreed. That leaves the question of what to do with him.”

“I say we stick with your original intentions and make use of him. Both of them.”

“He won’t make for a reliable asset and we don’t know what the Builder is up to yet.”

“Let me run Asano,” Liara said. “We can leave him be for now. Eloise assigned him to solitary delivery missions, as directed. That will let him build up a network of local portal destinations and give any Builder cultists a chance to take a poke. The worst that can happen is we flush some of them out. Once we have a use for him, we step back in.”

“What was Eloise’s assessment?” Keel asked.

“He handled provocation well, but he was aware of what she was doing. He showed anger when she pushed but she thinks it was a show. With that aura of his, she couldn’t read him properly. He’s smart enough but he has impulse-control issues and trouble keeping his mouth closed. He has some connections but nothing local, as far as we can tell.”

“As far as you can tell?” Keel asked.

“The name, Jason Asano. I feel like I’ve heard it before but I can’t remember when.”

“You have the memory of a gold-ranker,” Keel said. “If you can’t remember, you’re either imagining it or it was of incidental importance.”

“I don’t know,” Liara said. “It’s been bothering me.”

“Go through his records if you like,” Keel said. “I’ll hand him over to you entirely. I have this feeling that I’d end up killing him.”

Chapter 472

Contribution

Late into the night, the space outside of the Adventure Society's central admin complex was still crowded with people. To Jason's delight, some enterprising local vendors had wheeled carts into the Adventure Society campus that magically expanded into food stalls, creating an impromptu food market. Since he and Rufus were still waiting for Farrah to emerge, they roamed around, sampling local delicacies.

The streets were lit up not just with plain street lights but different coloured glow stones that painted the primarily white stone buildings and tropical plants. The Adventure Society campus had plenty of wide boulevards and open spaces, which the people and the vendors gave a festival atmosphere.

"It's good that people are enjoying themselves," Rufus said. "If Dawn's warnings hold true, there are dark days for all of us ahead."

"Nope," Jason said. "I've had quite enough of dark days, thank you very much. If the Builder and his creepy steampunk cyborgs want to make things crappy for people, they need to go through me. I'm appointing myself the defender of cheerfulness, friendly barbecues and nice afternoon naps. You have to help, by the way."

"I'll do my best," Rufus said with a chuckle.

"They said Farrah should be out within an hour or two," Jason said. "They're waiting on more information from the Magic Society, though, and I have to imagine that delays are more likely than not with all these people swamping the admin staff."

"I fear you're right," Rufus said.

"Why is it so crowded?" Jason asked. "The monster surge announcement is only hours old. Do even the locals get only a day to sign up?"

"No, they get more leeway," Rufus said. "They still want to get registered as quickly as possible, though."

"They want first pick of contracts while everyone else is still signing up?"

"That's part of it," Rufus said. "The real prize is the contributions leaderboard. Did they explain that to you?"

"Is that like action quotas?" Jason asked. "They explained those."

"Action quotas are the minimum requirements every adventurer has to fulfil during the monster surge," Rufus said. "The contribution board is an incentive system to keep us going beyond our quotas. All the contracts you take over and above your quota are assigned a contribution point value. Contribution points are tallied on weekly and overall

leaderboards, with rewards given out at the end of each week and then major rewards at the end. And those rewards are worth going for.”

“So, it’s not all about duty, then.”

“It would be nice if every adventurer did their part because that’s what being an adventurer is. Not everyone is your friend, Humphrey, though. A little incentive goes a long way, and the incentives on offer aren’t that little. All the major societies, associations and governments give out hefty rewards during a monster surge. Of course, they get benefits as well. They all have interests that need protection and in return for their generosity, the Adventure Society assigns high contribution point values to the contracts that provide that protection.”

“Don’t the big guilds monopolise the top of these leaderboards?”

“They do,” Rufus said, “but that’s okay. Guilds are looking for more esoteric rewards than cash or magic items. They want access to civic services. Organisational benefits from the Adventure Society, Magic Society, Alchemy Association and the like. Material rewards don’t mean much to the top guilds because they’re already able to get their hands on anything money can buy.”

“I get it,” Jason said. “All the material rewards are lower-rung prizes.”

“Exactly,” Rufus said. “They land right where the small-time guilds and independent adventurers can get their hands on them. Plus, the guilds earn their rewards. Not only do they need to reach the highest points on the contributions but they have the highest quotas to beat before they even get on those boards.”

Jason and Rufus were eating deep-fried sausages on sticks.

“In a city like this,” Rufus continued, gesticulating with his food, “about three in ten adventurers are in a guild. One in ten is in what’s considered a high-end guild. And that’s not even counting all the outside adventurers coming in that make their numbers an even smaller slice of the adventurer pie. Yet guilds are given sixty percent of the quotas to fill. Guild adventurers enjoy more privileges than their independent counterparts but the monster surge is when every adventurer pays back. No exceptions. The guilds will be wringing themselves dry over the coming weeks.”

Jason was peering at his half-eaten deep-fried sausage on a stick.

“This meat is pretty great,” he said. “It’s like a saveloy except it doesn’t taste like the animal died in vain.”

“This isn’t meat,” Rufus said. “It’s made of vegetables.”

“This is made of vegetables?” Jason asked, pointing at his food. “This thing here.”

“Yes,” Rufus confirmed. “It’s a mash sausage.”

“There are vegetables here that taste like this?” Jason asked, shaking his head. “I like ratatouille as much as the next guy but my world got ripped off. Vegans would love it here.”

“What’s a vegan?”

“They need to let Farrah out,” Rufus said, sounding bloated. “At this point, I’m fairly certain I’ve eaten my body weight in food.”

“Let’s hear it for converting organic material into autonomically mutable biomass,” Jason said. “Were those dumplings sweet or savoury?”

“Both,” Rufus said.

“As in, they have both sweet and savoury dumplings, or each dumpling is somehow both sweet and savoury? Actually, don’t spoil the surprise.”

Even in the small hours of the morning, the area around the main administration was still full of people. While Jason was waiting in line for dumplings, Farrah was released from the sealed underground complex of the Builder response team and contacted them via voice chat. She, like Jason, had been stuck eating spirit coins for most of the last two years and took to the food stalls with the same enthusiasm he had.

“You never used to mind living on spirit coins,” Rufus said.

“You never used to wax your head,” Farrah shot back before happily biting into a grilled sandwich.

“I don’t wax my…”

Rufus shook his head in resignation.

“What are we doing now?” he said, firmly changing the topic. “This city might be lively at all hours but that doesn’t make this a great time to go hunting for a place to stay.”

“We’ll hit the water,” Jason said. “We can stay in the boat overnight while we travel to Arnote and find a place in the morning. Then we can just portal back to Livaros to take contracts.”

“Or shop,” Farrah said. “I’m surprised you haven’t run off to grab some crystal wash, Jason.”

“I do have some self-control, you know.”

Rufus and Farrah shared a look.

“What?” Jason asked them.

“Jason,” Rufus said. “What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything.”

They both gave Jason a flat look.

“I didn't do anything,” he said again. “I'm just glad people are so open to magic in this city.”

“What does that mean?” Farrah asked.

After Shade turned into a shadow boat that carried them out onto the sea, Jason had used the cloud flask to create a yacht. Shade took the helm was steering them towards the island of Arnote. Jason and Farrah were enjoying the luxuries of the cloud vessel, many of which were unusual to Rufus.

“I'm not sure I understand this music,” Rufus said. “Why are people shouting at this pale boy to play music?”

“To change rock 'n' rolling minds,” Farrah explained. “It's a self-explanatory song.”

“Exactly how thorough was the Adventure Society's identity check?” Rufus asked, narrowing his eyes at her.

While Rufus was familiar with the many amenities of Emir's cloud flask constructs, and while Jason's lacked many of the same, it did boast some that Emir's did not. This was a result of feeding the cloud flask elements only available in Jason's world, including quite a lot of technology quintessence.

The result of this was a variety of effects that could be replicated with magic but were made more convenient with a technological aspect. For example, the extensive media collection in Jason and Farrah's recording crystals could be accessed via menu screens. As Farrah and Rufus were catching up while Farrah shared her new musical tastes, Jason was on the upper deck, laying out a magical diagram.

One of Jason's happy discoveries in his short time on Livaros was that such a cosmopolitan magical city was open to all manner of unusual situations. This included shadowy familiars being seen as perfectly acceptable customers, so long as they had the power to communicate and sufficient coin. In the time Jason had been dealing with the Adventure Society, Shade had been roaming the city's night markets. Along with other critical supplies, he had been purchasing the required materials to resummon Jason's familiar, Gordon.

In Rimaros, finding the materials to summon any silver-rank familiar was a question of money, rather than time. Jason had looted his way through proto-astral spaces, monster surges and transformation zones, the more numerous and high-rank of which came after he stopped supplying the Network with funds. As a result, Jason's coffers were, relative to a silver-ranker, at Scrooge McDuck levels of overflowing.

Monster surges represented a specific economic cycle. While the surges were costly to communities, the rebuilding afterwards was always a stimulus. Governments funded the rebuilding, the money largely sourced from special services offered to adventurers and the Adventure Society. With the increased looting opportunities that surges brought, there was not shortage of demand for such services.

Jason had been going through what amounted to concentrated private monster surges for years. Outside of family wealth, only a gold-ranker who had been operating for a decade could compete with Jason's current prosperity.

Colin, in the form of a Jason look-alike blood clone, was standing next to one of Shade's bodies as they watched Jason prepare to reunite their little family. Jason carefully completed the ritual circle and chanted out the incantation.

"When worlds end, you are the arbiter. When gods fall, you are the instrument. Herald of annihilation, come forth and be my harbinger. I have doom to bring."

Under the night sky on open water, the stars were bright. The city island of Livaros was beautiful at night with its cornucopia of lights, but without the light pollution, the sky was a sea of twinkling lights, ruled by the twin moons.

As Jason completed his ritual, the light of the moon and stars dimmed as darkness shrouded the boat. Eventually, the light was fully expunged, only Jason's power to see through darkness allowing him to see. Two motes of light appeared over the ritual circle, one orange and one blue. More lights appeared, slowly at first but accelerating until the individual motes became a cascade of blue and orange radiance. It swirled together to take the form of an eye-like nebula that was a match for the ones in Jason's eyes. Finally, the light coalesced into Jason's last familiar, a dark cloak draped over the nebula and orbited by smaller nebula eyes. Jason broke into a huge grin.

"Welcome home, mate."

In the early light of morning, the cloud yacht was approaching the island of Arnote. Jason was on the deck cooking breakfast with ingredients that Shade had picked up in the night markets of Livaros.

"Fair warning," he told the lounging Rufus and Farrah, "I don't know what most of this stuff is, so it's going to be trial and error for a while."

The Sea of Storms was calm, as was normal in any part of it not being subjected to the magical weather for which it was named. After breakfast, as the cloud yacht pulled into a small port, Jason stretched his arms out lazily, finally feeling like himself again. Eating

actual food, fresh from a crystal wash shower and with trusted companions by his side, he felt at home on this unfamiliar sea in a way he never had on Earth.

Miles Cotezee looked up as Humphrey and his team, plus hangers-on in Gary and Jory filled up his office.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve asked me to do for you?” he said without preamble. “How busy I am right now?”

They had returned to Vitesse aboard a Builder airship they casually picked up along the way, which the Magic Society had been very happy to take off their hands. They had immediately started scooping up contracts that others had passed over for being a pain, portalling around to clear a half dozen of them in two days.

Their behaviour made it obvious that they had wanted something from the outset, with Miles the one they sought to get it through. Travel dispensation to an as-yet-undisclosed location during a monster surge was no small request.

“Asking for a status update on a dead team member is weird,” Miles said without preamble. “And another from your team, Mr Xandier, which involved some administrative hoops, given your inactive status with the Adventure Society. Fortunately, your prompt registration for the monster surge brought you some goodwill in the eyes of the society.”

“You have news?” Humphrey asked.

“You know, Humphrey, I thought you took after your father, seeming like such a sensible young man. It turns out that you’re your mother’s son after all.”

“He asked if you have news,” Sophie said, placing both hands on the desk sitting between them.

“Calm down, Sophie,” Miles told her. “It does seem that you are right. Your dead team members have arisen from the grave and are alive and well in Rimaros, in the Sea of Storms.”

The group shared looks of relief and joy.

“I made another discovery along with information, though. Your other team member, Mr Xandier, has registered his participation in the monster surge in Rimaros, alongside the other two.”

“Rufus is there already?” Gary said. “How?”

“You now know as much as I do,” Miles said.

“Rimaros is the other side of the planet,” Clive said.

“Yes,” Miles said. “Which makes obtaining a travel dispensation quite the task.”

“Is there anything you can do?” Humphrey asked.

“Of course there is,” Miles said. “It’s me. Clive, the operation that was delayed when you were sent away is not only back on but has been given priority. You pull this off with the kind of success you outlined in your initial proposal and I can get you your dispensation. You’ll have to travel by airship, though. I can’t shake loose a gold-rank portal user for this. Not even your mother, Humphrey.”

Humphrey nodded.

“I haven’t even seen her since we got back,” he said. “They’re keeping her busy.”

“So we just have to do whatever Clive was up to before we all met up?” Neil asked.

“Yes,” Miles said. “The remnants of the church of Purity have been quiet for years but we’re anticipating a big move from them during the monster surge. The society is looking for ways to hit them before they hit us and your plan, Clive, is one of many proposals being put into action. The new priority comes with a new caveat, however.”

“Meaning?” Clive asked.

“The society wants a three-star silver in charge of it and none of you are higher than two. Someone else will be in charge of your team for the course of the operation.”

Chapter 473

Small-Town Lifestyle

Jason's yacht arrived at the narrow reef passage to a lagoon on the island of Arnote. Normally inaccessible to large water vehicles, the cloud vessel had no problem skimming over obstructions that would ground vessels with all but the most shallow of drafts.

Jason, Rufus and Farrah stood on the yacht's bow as it moved into the lagoon, taking in the postcard-perfect circle of white sand and turquoise water. To their left, pristine sands curved halfway around the lagoon. There they met the base of the cliffs that ringed the other half of the lagoon's span.

Behind the beach was a town that rose up over low hills, with colourful houses set amongst palm trees and lush greenery exploding with tropical flowers. The cliffs weren't a sheer drop. Instead, it boasted more plants and trees, with winding pathways offering passage from the beach to the houses built along the cliff top. A waterfall spilled over the edge, tumbling down over the rocks to join the water of the lagoon.

"I told you right?" Jason said. "You can't go wrong with a lagoon."

"It is very nice," Rufus acknowledged. "A little quiet."

"We've earned some quiet," Farrah said.

"Yes, we have," Jason agreed.

Children were playing on the beach, their parents watching over them. They stopped to watch the boat, much larger than most vessels that entered their lagoon. The kids understood that a boat that big meant magic and magic meant excitement. Not everyone was looking for quiet.

There was only one pier, which was far too small for the yacht to even pull alongside. What room there was had already been occupied by a handful of shallow-draft boats and a couple of magical water skimmers. Jason placed the cloud flask down to reclaim the yacht and opened a portal to the pier, allowing Farrah, Rufus and himself to step through.

Jason glanced over at the beach, smiling as the parents stopped the kids from rushing over to harass the unknown adventurers. A laconic middle-aged man came strolling along the pier, biting into a piece of fruit in his hand. Like most of the local celestines, he had caramel skin. His lanky hair was the colour of iron, matching his eyes and his iron-rank aura. He was wearing only a pair of shorts and a straw hat.

He stopped in front of the trio, looking from them to the yacht dissolving behind them. It was being drawn back into the cloud flask like a genie returning to its lamp.

"Adventurers, then?" he drawled.

“That’s us,” Jason said. “Looking for a nice, quiet place to settle in for the surge.”

“If it’s nice and quiet you’re after, you’ve come to the right place,” he said. “Just make sure that is what you’re after, yeah?”

“We’ll get more excitement than we’re looking for on the job,” Jason said. “We want a place where we can leave all that behind. I’m Jason; this is Farrah and Rufus.”

The man swapped the fruit to his left hand to shake hands with Jason. “Emmett Dillivan, but folks just call me Argy.”

“Argy?”

“Like the fruit,” Argy said, wagging his half-eaten fruit in front of him. It looked like a large tangerine. “My family’s grown them here longer than most can remember. Sell ‘em at markets all over the island. Including here in Palisaros, if you’re interested.”

“Believe that he is,” Farrah said. “Palisaros is the name of your lovely town?”

“You didn’t know before you came here?” Argy asked.

“This one was just obsessed with finding a lagoon,” Rufus said, thumbing a gesture at Jason.

“And it was completely worth it,” Jason said. “It’s a genuine paradise you’ve got here, Argy.”

Argy chuckled.

“It is at that,” he agreed.

“I don’t suppose you know where a bloke could lease or even buy a plot?” Jason asked.

“You’ll want to talk to Pelli,” Argy said. “Once you’re done with your ship in a bottle, I’ll take you along.”

“We’d appreciate that, Argy,” Jason said. “Is Pelli the local land broker?”

“Mayor,” Argy said. “She has been since before my family started growing fruit.”

Argy led them down the pier and into the town. Farrah and Rufus were largely silent as Jason and Argy chatted, forming an easy rapport, Jason happily falling into Argy’s laconic pace.

Argy led them onto streets that were sealed with something that felt like asphalt but was more on an earthy light brown colour, flecked with white. Argy exchanged greetings with people dressed in light clothes, with loose shirts and sarongs the norm for both men and women. There were also plenty of skimpier clothes in evidence, with many men wearing only shorts and woman in shorts or sarongs and bikini-style tops. Footwear was either none or sandals and many had straw hats like Argy’s.

None of the people were using transport, magical or otherwise. It was a small-town lifestyle with none of the residents in any kind of rush. Compared to Livaros, even more busy than usual with the impending monster surge, the town Palimaros was laidback and inviting.

Jason sensed a handful of silver and gold-ranked auras around the town but the people on the street were mostly normals, or irons and bronze-rank, core users. The other auras noticed the presence of Jason and his companions as well, none of whom were hiding their presence or power. The people were mostly caramel-skinned celestines with hair and eyes in various shades of gemstones and metal.

Argy played tour guide as they walked, pointing out the saloon and town eateries, as well as where to find the market. The colourful houses were two or three storeys high and big on open space with covered walkways, balconies and awnings abounding. Jason's senses picked up that they all had magical amenities, while some hid more impressive magic. Like the disguised versions of constructs from his cloud flask, they were more than what they appeared.

As they made their way up a meandering hill, Shade emerged from Jason's shadow and handed over the cloud flask.

"Thank you," Jason said as the flask shrank small enough in his hands to be returned to the chain around his neck.

Reaching the house at the top, Jason's senses revealed it to not be one of the more magical ones. What he did sense was the gold rank core user behind it.

Although many looked down on those who rank up through monster cores, a gold-ranker who did so was impressive in their own way. The level of resources required to reach that stage was immense. On Jason's world, only a handful had managed it, even with whole nations dedicating themselves to the effort.

Argy didn't bother to knock or even approach the front door, directly leading the other around the outside. Moving behind the house to the garden, they found a woman crouched down, working in a vegetable garden with rich, dark soil. She had her back to them at their approach, which she didn't acknowledge. Argy stopped, gesturing the others to do the same and stood to wait patiently. Jason, Rufus and Farrah were smart enough to do the same.

It was another celestine, this one with sapphire blue hair tied back behind her head. It was an unusual colouration amongst the locals but one Jason had seen a couple of times before. The female gold-ranker in the anti-Builder taskforce had it, as did the princess, Zara Rimaros.

Eventually, the woman stood up, trowel in hand, before turning to look over the group. She has the youthful appearance of an essence user but Jason felt a profound age in those eyes. The way they looked at him reminded him of Dawn.

“Emmet boy,” she said, her elderly tone incongruous with her young face and voice. “What are you doing bringing adventurers into my yard?”

“They're looking for a place to stay through the surge,” Argy told her. “Nice and quiet is what they said.”

“Step forward, then,” she said to Jason, Farrah and Rufus. “Let’s have a look at you.”

The trio formed a line in front of the woman. She started by looking over Farrah and giving her an approving nod. Then she looked at Rufus, her gaze settling on his face.

“You look a lot like your grandfather,” she told him.

“You know my grandfather?” Rufus asked.

“That old bastard has been running around longer than I have. Still, shouldn’t hold that against you. He teach you proper, boy?”

“I’ve done my best to learn from him, ma’am.”

“The name’s Pelli and I’ll thank you to use it,” she said sharply. “How did he take you being a magic swordsman, rather than a swordsman straight up?”

“My father already fought that battle, ma’am... Pelli,” Rufus said.

“I see. I heard he’d mellowed after he took over some little guild somewhere.”

“Vitesse.”

“Well, no accounting for taste.”

She turned her attention to Jason, looking him up and down. Her eyes lingered on where the large scar on his torso was hidden by his shirt.

“Aren’t you just the tough little nut,” she said. “You’ve seen some action, boy. Real action.”

She didn’t ask Jason anything so he decided to stay silent. She nodded.

“Are you going to bring trouble to my island, boy?”

“I’m looking for a place to leave trouble behind,” he told her.

“And why here?”

“I grew up in a little beach town,” he said. “Not as nice as yours, but I had the chance to go back for a while a couple of years ago. It was a nice few months, before life came calling again. It was the last bit of peace I’ve had in a while.”

“And what happened to your little town when less peaceful things came knocking at your door?”

"I saw it protected and left it behind before anything came looking for me. The town was fine when a lot of other places weren't so lucky."

Pelli nodded.

"That was your cloud flask boat down there?" she asked.

"It was."

"You won't be needing a house, then; just a patch. Won't be a problem if it's a little difficult, yes?"

"That'll be fine," Jason said.

"What's your name, boy?"

"Jason Asano."

She burst out laughing, surprising all present, even Argy.

"Oh, this'll be fun," she said. "Emmett, boy, take them up the clifftop. They can have the west side of the waterfall."

"Yes, Pelli," Argy said, throwing curious glances at Jason.

Argy led the others back down the hill, through the town and up onto the cliffs. Although there were roads, he took them down to the beach and then up through the forested cliff-face pathway and its impressive views of the lagoon.

"This is a gorgeous town you have here," Jason told Argy.

"We like it," Argy said. "How is it that Pelli knew your name, Jason?"

"Not sure," Jason said. "Until yesterday, I hadn't set foot on this side of the planet."

"You have no idea?" Rufus asked.

"I didn't say no idea," Jason told him. "I said not sure."

The cliff-side path led up to the neighbourhood that spread inland from the clifftop.

"This is the fancy part of town," Argy explained. The houses here were slightly bigger and Jason sensed more magic from them, but they didn't look substantially different from the others. "If you go back far enough you reach the royal estate. It's all walled off and you can only really get a glimpse of the grounds from the outside. You see them around town from time to time but mostly they keep to themselves."

"That's one of the side branches right?" Farrah asked.

"Wouldn't presume to say," Argy said. "Just watch your manners if you see anyone with blue hair."

"Like Pelli," Rufus said.

"Yeah," Argy said. "She's probably got some blood ties to the royal family but no one's brave or stupid enough to ask."

Argy led them to a path that followed the clifftop edge, accessible to all the houses running along it. The adventurers could sense some kind of magic at the very edge of the cliff.

“There's magic to keep people from falling off?” Farrah asked.

“Kids and booze exist,” Argy told her. “We find it's for the best.”

There weren't any fences between houses and yards ran one into another. There were plenty of people outside, including a lot of children playing with pets or each other. Most of the pets were a breed of dog that looked like short-haired golden retrievers, but there were also playful lizards, six-legged rabbits and what looked like large otters.

Argy exchanged waved greetings as they went until they arrived at an area of long grass beside the river that spilled over the cliff to the lagoon below.

The river was about twenty metres across and had children splashing about with their pets. They looked upstream to where the river came out of the higher hills to split the neighbourhood in two. The halves of the small residential district were connected by a bridge and, further along, they could see a house that spanned the river itself, the water running beneath it.

“I like that house,” Jason said.

“Mr Warnock's,” Argy said. “Adventurer, like you all, but gold-rank. Nice fella, though. Don't look down on people, you know? Your spot is on the other side of the river.”

Argy pointed across the water.

“Are you folks right to cross here or should we head to the bridge?”

“We're fine,” Rufus said. As silver-rankers, they could levitate themselves so long as they were able to concentrate without interruption. They floated over the river while Argy walked over the water using some manner of essence ability.

On the far side was another open patch of long grass, but most of it was occupied by a fenced-off area in the middle. The metal bars of the fence prevented children from falling into the large hole in the ground but Jason could sense the barrier was a magic item producing an unseen magical dome.

“Cave goes into the cliff and out behind the waterfall,” Argy explained. “Pelli had a magic barrier put in because the older kids were always daring each other to go down and getting themselves hurt. Broke my own leg, back in the day. Got me a kiss from Trudi Willix, so I'm going to say worth it.”

Jason walked to the edge of the cliff, Rufus and Farrah following. They looked out over the lagoon and out at the ocean beyond. Jason did something he hadn't done in a

long time and took a deep breath. He wasn't even sure how, given his body no longer had lungs, but the warm air mixed with cool ocean breeze was a balm to the soul.

"This will do just nicely."

Chapter 474

I Don't Need to Invent Ice Cream

The kids playing in the river spotted Farrah disabling the magical barrier around the hole in the ground and came ashore to watch her uproot the fence.

"You can fix that afterwards, right?" Rufus asked.

"Easily," Farrah said. "It's designed to be easy to maintain, so I'm not damaging it at all."

When she was done, Jason set down the cloud flask which started spilling out cloud-stuff to slowly form his new cloud house right over the hole.

The three adults watched as one of the bolder children, egged on by her friends, came up to touch the cloud stuff as it was taking shape. She giggled as the cloud stuff passed through her fingers and shortly after, the children were charging at the walls and springing off like it was a bouncy castle. They only stopped when the house was complete and solidified into a shape that matched the surrounding houses. This drew a chorus of boos from the children.

While the house was forming, the neighbours, keeping an eye on the kids, had come out to take stock of Jason and the others. The presence of Argy and Jason's friendliness quickly smoothed out any friction and they went away anticipating a neighbourhood barbecue.

"We only have so much time to make preparations," Rufus said. "It will only take a few days for the rising magical saturation to start triggering manifestations in earnest. As for the Builder's forces, who knows how or when they'll arrive?"

Farrah nodded.

"We need to gear up first," she said. "We've been making do with what items we could loot, make or trade but Greenstone was bad enough and Earth was worse. Now we can finally get some equipment befitting our rank."

"Alright," Jason said. "Let's take a little tour of the new homestead, grab some lunch at the market then portal back to Livaros."

They thanked Argy, who promised to spread the word about the barbecue.

"Tomorrow night, then," Argy said. "You are going to have enough food, right?"

"I was more thinking just some of the neighbours," Jason said to Rufus and Farrah as he waved at Argy walking off into the distance. "I get the feeling I should check out that market, maybe stock up the food supply a little more."

They went inside the cloud house, which was not disguised as a normal building on the inside and was overtly made from luxurious cloud stuff. Although still primarily cloud white, the supplemental colours had some differences to what Rufus was used to from Emir's cloud buildings.

"Yours doesn't have quite the same sunset colours," he said as they walked through the house. "There are darker areas and the colours are a lot like your new eyes."

"Emir told me that each cloud flask will become different over time," Jason said. "They're bonded to the owners, who also make their own supplemental changes. Plus, mine is a little more bonded than most."

During his time on Earth, Jason had looted a vast number of quintessence gems. This was especially true in the latter stages of his time there when the loot was higher rank and he had stopped supplying the Network. Much of that quintessence had been fed right into the cloud flask and he had yet to test the full breadth of its capabilities.

The idea of replicating a mirage chamber was especially appealing now that Jason has Rufus on hand. He was certain that Rufus could help him master the combat trance and a mirage chamber would be perfect. Adding a mirage chamber to the cloud flask's capabilities was not yet possible, however, and would have significant drawbacks once it was.

Emir had given Jason a thick notebook with all his knowledge and experience from owning a cloud flask, which had been of immense help. This was how Jason knew a mirage chamber function was possible, if troublesome. The cloud flask would need to be gold-rank before it could handle the level of sophisticated magic involved in the complex simulation programming a mirage chamber required. Jason likening it to the CPU needing an upgrade.

Even if it were viable, it would require a very large amount of extremely hard to get and very high-rank quintessence, along with other rare and expensive materials. Beyond the upfront costs, replicating the mirage chamber effect was extremely energy-intensive. Rather than fuelling it with a fortune in spirit coins, it was more cost-effective to hire out an ordinary mirage chamber.

Outside of low-magic zones, where such chambers were rare and privately held, it was more feasible to simply rent one. The cost of adding one to a cloud flask was sufficiently prohibitive that even when he spent a year in Greenstone, Emir did not do so. He had training rooms with cloud-dummy opponents that were good enough that it wasn't worth the effort and expense of a mirage chamber.

Jason's cloud flask was already different to Emir's, with even the usage over time impacting its development. Emir preferred grandiose displays of overt magic and his cloud flask constructs were huge and eye-catching. Jason's, even in grand palace mode didn't match the size of Emir's.

At first, Jason had thought this was a function of rank, with his silver-rank flask not matching up to Emir's gold. As he forged a deeper bond with the flask, though, he came to realise that the way he used it was shaping it over time. Jason had almost always employed the camouflage variant and it had become increasingly flexible and responsive in matching both the local environment and Jason's desires. Each time he created a new vehicle or abode, now, it was like everything in it was exactly how he'd wanted it without consciously considering it.

This was true once again as Jason and his companions checked out the latest cloud construct that would be their home, at least for a while. There were a lot more bedrooms than they needed, which Farrah pointed out.

"Our teams are going to find us eventually," Jason explained, realising the cloud flask had responded to his desire for a reunion with his friends.

"Jory will most likely be with them," Rufus said. "I'm surprised you didn't set up an alchemy lab that only makes crystal wash."

"I don't think I've put in the right quintessence in for that," Jason said. "I still have a long way to go before catching up to Emir on that front. I managed to shovel a lot of stuff in but most of it was of low or mid-rank. Earth is only just coming into real magic. I did manage to dump in some higher-end stuff later on but it was fairly specific to where I picked it up."

"The second transformation zone?" Farrah asked.

"Yeah," Jason said. "Besides, I can't have Jory turn up and immediately put him to the grindstone. I went ahead and made other arrangements."

"Jason, what did you do?" Farrah asked.

"And when did you do it?" Rufus asked. "I was with you from the moment you left the Adventure Society building."

"Shade is as eloquent and distinguished an agent as a person could ask for," Jason said.

"Thank you, Mr Asano," Shade said from Jason's shadow.

"If anything," Jason said, "it's better sending him to get things done than going in person."

"Jason," Farrah said. "Remember the laying low plan?"

"It's fine," Jason assured her. "I've been careful. I remembered something Clive told me about a long time ago that would keep me from making a splash."

"Shade, I think he's ruining you," Farrah said.

"Don't bother," Rufus told her with a laugh. "There's no coming between an adventurer and their familiar."

Rufus was surprised at the dark expression that covered Jason and Farrah's faces, not knowing they were thinking of Noreth. The ambiguous antagonist had once been a familiar that turned on his adventurer, setting in motion events that, centuries later, led to a death toll of millions.

"Let's move on," Farrah suggested and they explored the unique feature of the house that came from the environment. There was an elevating platform that descended into the cave at a slight angle. Rather than seal off the natural walls, the house had left them on full display and illuminating them with colourful lights.

The platform carried them down to a larger cavern that opened out behind the waterfall. The cloud house created a soft, level floor, and Jason could feel an invisible mist below the ceiling that wicked away any moisture that would otherwise drop into the room. The natural walls and ceiling were on full display and, like the cave shaft, lit up with multicoloured lights. The cavern had been made into a bar and dining lounge with cloud furniture, although Jason could reconfigure the room at will. The furniture was laid out to make the waterfall opening the focus of the room, the sunlight sparkling through the water like diamonds.

"I think we found the VIP room," Jason said.

The island city of Livaros was rich in both magic and people. Like many such cities, it had several open squares set aside for teleportation and portal arrivals. While the arrival of a portal was not inherently dangerous, it was potentially disruptive and could lead to accidents. Using such means of travel to arrive in public spaces other than portal squares was prohibited.

When he had registered at the Adventure Society, Jason had been given an item that would give a visual indication at the Livaros portal squares before his portal opened there. The market district portal square lit up with bright silver light before Jason's portal arch rose from the ground and he stepped out, followed by Farrah and Rufus. Rufus took a moment to shake off the disorientation of dimensional travel that neither Jason nor Farrah felt, being outworlders with a shared affinity for astral energy.

“So, shopping,” Jason said. “We can keep in contact with party chat and meet up before we head over to the jobs hall. If you don’t have anything to buy, Rufus, get an ice cream or something.”

“What’s an ice cream?” Rufus asked.

A look of panic crossed Farrah’s face.

“Jason, you have to invent ice cream. You do know how to make ice cream, right?”

“I don’t need to invent ice cream; this world has it already. I had something a lot like qulfi when I was Jayapura. I have to imagine there are variants of ice cream all over.”

Her shoulders slumped with relief.

“Since when do you care so much about food?” Rufus asked her.

“You can eat spirit coins if you like,” Farrah told him. “I’ve lived in the land of refined sugar.”

Farrah's dimensional bags were laden with her share of the spirit coins they looted on Earth. She had fought far fewer monsters than Jason, having worked on the grid while he was clearing proto-spaces. She had also missed both transformation zones but Jason never bothered to count up and just gave her half.

As she roamed about the shops of Livaros catering specifically to adventurers, she had specific goals in mind.

Farrah and Humphrey filled the same role, that of brawler. High durability melee attackers, their purpose was to dish out damage while being able to take an amount of punishment in return. Their power sets had differences, with Farrah having a variety of mid to long-range attacks while Humphrey had higher mobility, but on any team, their position would be to both give and take heavy hits.

Once they started to supplement themselves with items, their differences in approaching the same role became increasingly apparent. Because items, unlike power, were purchased and could be changed, they had a level of flexibility and, with sufficient money, the wearer could even use multiple equipment sets to modify the way they filled their role.

This was an expensive endeavour, leading to most adventurers gearing up to enhance the direction their powers already lead. Belinda was a victim of this with her focus on adopting various roles. Not only did she need a lot of equipment but ideally, the equipment would be good enough to help compensate always being an imitation of the real thing.

Both Humphrey and Farrah combined durability with excellent attack power and the ability to operate at different ranges, either through mobility or ranged attacks. All of that came at the price of endurance, their mana and stamina unable to sustain them for long at full power.

The items they sought out highlighted their different responses to this shared weakness, shaped by their specific powers and circumstances. For Humphrey, his team offered both exceptional mana recovery and accelerated ability cooldowns. He leaned into this and equipped items that would accelerate his mana and stamina recovery. This allowed him to extend his impactful presence in battle and bring some much-needed reliability to the team.

Where Humphrey sought to mitigate the weakness, Farrah sought to enhance her strength. She had a handful of passive powers that amplified her basic attacks to levels that were acceptable, if not ideal. She generally used these to keep her true might in reserve for when it was needed most. In critical moments she would explode with power, unleashing overwhelming eruptions of damage.

She doubled-down on this by picking up items that either boosted ordinary attacks or offered significant but short-lived power amplification. Her mana and stamina items were powerful and immediate, at the cost of less sustained recovery.

Farrah's approach was the best fit for her powers and a good match for how adventurers operated in Rimaros. The local adventurers valued those who excelled in highly specific roles, even if that specificity came at a cost.

Rufus did buy himself some upgraded equipment. Having spent most of the last few years in Greenstone he had neither the opportunity nor the need for quality silver-rank equipment. Rimaros during a monster surge was a very different story. He had less to buy than Farrah or Jason, though, and took the time to casually wander the market. At a nearby stall, he overheard another variation of the conversation he'd heard a half-dozen times already.

"No, I wanted a whole case."

"I don't have a whole case; I have six bottles. That's the price for six bottles."

"Yesterday, that was the price for a whole case."

"Yesterday I had a whole case."

"You told me that you had a barrel of the stuff."

"Yesterday I did. I'm not responsible for your lack of decisiveness."

"Who bought a whole barrel?"

“I don’t know. Some lord brokered it through the Alchemy Association, and it wasn’t just me. If you want a crate’s worth, I suggest you grab what people have on shelf right now. It’ll be lean pickings until people get their next batches from the vats. Don’t expect it any cheaper than here, though. I’m only offering you this because you married my ex-wife.”

“Can I get a discount if I give her back?”

“Do that and I charge you double.”

“You’re already charging me double.”

“Yeah, well it’ll be double-double.”

“Do you mean quadruple?”

“Shut your smart mouth!”

“You know, this is why Ella left you...”

Rufus shook his head and moved on.

Chapter 475

Remaining Unremarkable

While Farrah could easily slip into the role of a specialist, Jason could not do so as easily. No amount of items would turn him into the plague cannon the locals wanted in their affliction specialists, able to blanket groups or burn down individuals with equal ease, usually at range from behind the safety of allies, summons or both.

One of the reasons Jason had seen so few affliction specialists was that Greenstone was primarily a human city and few humans pursued that path. Their aptitude for special attacks meant that an affliction specialist would often end up forced into melee.

Jason wasn't even human and was familiar with that challenge. Elves and Runic were the most common affliction wielders, as their predilection for spells made a ranged power set much more likely. If Jason tried to be an affliction specialist in the Rimaros style, from behind a wall of allies, he would only justify his second-rate status by leaving most of his abilities unused.

When gearing himself up, Jason didn't even try to pander to local sensibilities. He believed in the way that Rufus, Farrah and Gary had trained him and he wasn't going to turn away from that to play half-cooked adventurer.

With his plethora of conjured and growth items, Jason had little use for more permanent items to enhance his general combat style. The only item he desired was the sword Rufus told him Gary had already reforged. Items Jason had enjoyed in the past, like the boots that enhanced his jumping, had been made largely unnecessary by his silver-rank attributes and abilities. As such, his item purchases were very much based on the idea of conditional use.

For Jason, battle was about adaptation. Rather than going for fixed items, he stocked up on consumables that he could match to his needs in any given moment. First amongst these was a healthy collection of silver-rank throwing darts with various single-use effects. While not as cost-effective as the lower-rank variants that Jason could make himself, those were no longer good enough at his current rank. Buying from a capable artificer gave him a more powerful, varied and reliable selection.

Jason made more purchases along the same lines, from magical explosives to an array of potions that could potentially come in handy. Jason was confident in any circumstance for which his powers were suited, so he focused on contingencies for circumstances that weren't.

Standing in an alchemy stall with a bag of potions in hand, Jason's mind was drawn back to his first proper fight with a silver-ranker. He and his team had fought the Purity Archbishop, Nicolas Hendren, who had carried on him a similar bag full of silver-rank potions. It had been an incredibly difficult battle, the silver-ranker seeming almost immortal in the face of Jason's bronze-rank team. It reminded Jason that the essence users of this world were so much more dangerous than those of Earth and he resolved again not to underestimate any opponents he might face.

Jason's consumable expenditure was rather excessive, made possible by his significant wealth and the dimensional storage his inventory offered, but he always wore a potion belt to keep critical potions in easy reach. He bought a new silver-rank potion belt to protect potions he wore from incidental damage.

"That colour matches your conjured robes very well, sir," the shop attendant told him.

"My only concern is function," Jason insisted. "I only conjured my robes to test the fit."

"Of course, sir."

"Show me the black one again."

The potion belt was not the only permanent item he purchased, but the others all fell under his doctrine of conditional use. Being in the Sea of Storms, he splurged on several powerful items designed to aid fighting underwater or in heavy storm conditions. This was hardly an uncommon choice, so there were plenty of such items available, although the prices were high and quickly rising. Jason was far from the only outside adventurer looking to tool up for local conditions.

Once he was done with his equipment, Jason moved on to more important matters. Leaving the market, Shade guided him to a nearby and very busy warehousing district. It serviced both the craftsman quarter and the marketing district he had just left behind.

There was a bustle of activity as wagons and carts, magical and heidel-drawn, carried about large quantities of goods. Some wagons were even floating through the air, although they always remained over the streets. Jason assumed this was due to some manner of air traffic regulation.

Arriving at a small warehouse, Jason waited out of the way, hidden in shadow until a magically driven carriage arrived and stopped in the yard outside the large freight doors of the warehouse. A man with a bronze-rank aura and finely tailored but unostentatious clothes stepped down from the carriage and Jason emerged from the shadows to meet him, Shade at his side.

“Good day to you again, Mr Shade,” the man said with a short bow. “Mr Asano, I presume.”

“Indeed I am,” Jason said.

“Mr Asano, my name is Mr Broyles. I am employed by Lord Casowich to manage and verify his acquisitions. I come to you with his compliments.”

“Thank you, sir. Perhaps we should step inside?”

“By all means,” the butler said and opened a normal-sized door next to the large freight doors of the warehouse with a rune-engraved key. It led into a small private office.

“It’s all in there?” Jason asked, nodding in the direction of the main warehouse.

“It certainly is,” Broyles said. “My Lord is very satisfied with the item, so long as its providence can be confirmed. Once it has, I am directed to grant you access to the goods.”

“Excellent,” Jason said.

Broyles plucked a crystal from his personal dimensional space. He used it to test Jason, the crystal shining with a strong silver colour as Jason gripped it. Four markings appeared on the crystal at the same time.

“Silver rank confirmed,” Broyles said happily. “And you’ve reached the fourth threshold with all attributes, which I believe is known in adventuring circles as the wall. Congratulations, Mr Asano.”

“Thank you, Mr Broyles.”

Broyles took out another magical device, this one looking like a set of scales, with one of the two weight plates softly padded with cloth. The central stand holding the scale upright was topped with a clear crystal.

Broyles set the scale on a table and took out a small box. Opening it revealed a padded interior and a single object: what looked like a diamond in the shape of a coin. Within the coin, like ink spilled into water, was the image of a man giving a thumbs up. Broyles pulled on a pair of white gloves, took the coin and held it up, comparing it to Jason. Jason gave Broyles a thumbs up, matching the image on the coin. With a slight smile, Broyles nodded and placed the coin onto the padded weight of the scale.

“Mr Asano, if you would please place your palm on the device.”

Jason placed his hand on the unpadded plate. The crystal on the scale immediately lit up green.

“Perfect,” Broyles said, retuning the coin to the small box and the box to his dimensional spaces, followed by the scale device.

“That’s everything?” Jason asked.

“That is sufficient confirmation that the diamond-rank coin was looted by a silver-rank essence user.”

“I was actually bronze at the time, but I suppose you can’t check that.”

“Sadly no,” Broyles said. “The church of Knowledge has been reluctant to hire out its clergy for the purpose of authenticating valuables. Lord Casowich has already exhausted the local temple’s indulgence on that matter. Even so, a unique coin design, a diamond-rank coin produced by even a silver-rank essence user is quite exceptional.”

Broyles frowned.

“My lord felt ethically bound to have me inform you, on confirmation of the item’s providence, that the goods you have asked for are most certainly not equal to the value of that which you have provided to him.”

Jason smiled.

“Mr Broyles, I hold that you cannot put a price on discretion and the chance to acquaint oneself with people of character and substance.”

Broyles returned the smile.

“Very good, Mr Asano.”

“I do have one question, Mr Broyles.”

“And what is that, Mr Asano.”

“The other gentleman in the room. I assume he is here to safeguard the coin and the goods, should my intentions be nefarious?”

Jason took an argy fruit from his inventory and tossed it casually over his shoulder. A man dressed in black and grey appeared and caught it.

“Fresh from the Arnote market,” Jason said. “They’re very good.”

“Mr Asano,” Broyles said, “I believe you’ve just embarrassed Mr Visk.”

Broyles moved to the door leading into the main warehouse and unlocked it with his key. Visk, keeping an eye on Jason, sat the fruit down on the desk. Jason picked it up and bit into it.

“Everything inside is yours, Mr Asano,” Broyles said. “You require no further transport for the goods?”

“I do not, Mr Broyles.”

“And you wish for us to dispose of the barrels afterwards?”

“That would be appreciated.”

“Of course, Mr Asano.”

“Then Mr Visk and I will leave you to your business. Any of the doors will open from the inside, so if you would close them behind you on your way out, that would be appreciated.”

“I’ll be sure to do so, Mr Broyles.”

Jason waited until Broyles and Visk had entered the carriage and driven off. He couldn’t sense any other observers, either auras or the magic of spying devices, although that did not mean they weren’t present. In Lord Casowich’s position, Jason would have arranged a well-hidden observer to be found and an exceptionally well-hidden observer to not be.

Jason had only revealed Visk to make a point, however, and felt no need to hide his objective. He had no doubt that Casowich had the resources to make a thorough investigation before Broyles arrived at the warehouse. He tugged the cloud flask from his neck chain and pulled a funnel from his inventory.

“Let’s get started, shall we, Shade?”

A flying manta ray swam through the air over Arnote. The creature’s skin glistened like sapphires in the sun while the air in front of it shimmered in a wedge as the creature’s magic cut through the sky. On the manta’s back was a woman whose hair was an almost exact match for the creature’s sapphire skin.

The manta hovered over the yard of a hilltop house and the rider disembarked as another woman emerged from the building. The two women had a strong resemblance, with caramel skin and vibrant blue hair.

“Vesper,” Pelli greeted.

“Ancestor,” Vesper said with a respectful bow.

“Oh, now stop with that nonsense,” Pelli said, waving her hands at Vesper. “You call me Aunt Pelli, like when you were a girl. I’m just an old core user.”

“Wisdom and experience are both deserving of respect, Aunt Pelli. You have an abundance of both.”

“So, you’re calling me old?”

“Of course not, Aunt Pelli.”

“Oh, you’re calling me very old,” Pelli said, turning and shaking her head as she started wandering away. “Abundance of experience, dear gods...”

Vesper smiled to herself as she followed Pelli around the side of the house. Being teased by the old woman brought back fond memories of days spent in Arnote as a child.

Pelli led them to the front yard where they could look out over the town spread out below them and across the lagoon to the cliffs.

“That house, next to the waterfall,” Pelli pointed. Vesper’s silver-rank vision had no trouble making it out, seeing it looked much like the houses around it.

“Isn’t that where the waterfall cave shaft is?”

“Yes,” Pelli said. “I allowed some outside adventurers to set up a cloud house there while they’re staying for the monster surge.”

“You know, Zara missed out on winning a cloud flask a few years ago. It went to some fool boy who got himself killed and it was lost.”

“You didn’t think much of him, then?”

“It was a rigged contest. He only won it because he’s a friend of Emir Bahadir. Also, the boy was absurd.”

“Perhaps he’s matured.”

“He’s dead.”

“He didn’t strike me as the sort to let that stop him.”

Vesper narrowed her eyes and looked at the distant house again.

“Are you saying...?” she asked.

“That house was most likely made by the very same cloud flask you just mentioned.”

Vesper ran a hand over her face.

“That’s inconvenient. This is why you called me here.”

“I knew it was potentially delicate. Given that you’re close to Zara and met the boy yourself, I thought it was best to see how you want to handle it. The things Zara has been saying, they are lies, right?”

“Of course they are; she met the boy twice.”

“That’s good at least.”

“Is he here for her? Does he think the branch of the family here on Arnote is his way in?”

“I don’t think so,” Pelli said. “Of course, I’ve been wrong before. But my instincts tell me that he has larger concerns than our little princess.”

“You don’t know?”

“I couldn’t see through his aura.”

“What rank is he?”

“Silver, but his aura is quite remarkable. Death is not the only trial the boy has faced.”

Vesper rubbed her forehead as she frowned.

"We kill him," she said. "So long as he's dead or very far away, it doesn't matter what Zara has been saying."

"You should never have let her do it in the first place."

"You think I wanted to? You try getting that girl to do anything you tell her."

"Tone, Vesper."

"Sorry, Aunt Pelli," Vesper said, lowering her head.

"Killing the boy is not a good idea. He has Roland Remore's favourite grandson living with him, so a more diplomatic approach might be best."

Vesper groaned.

"This is going to be a mess," she said. "Perhaps we can politely suggest he go away and never come back. Do you know if he's registered locally for the monster surge?"

"I believe they came here fresh from having done so."

"That's unfortunate. We could get him travel dispensation but not without people wondering why. If House Irios gets wind of this, things could get ugly."

"My dear," Pelli said, "I'm afraid you may need to deal with this one head-on."

"Gods damn that girl."

Pelli chuckled.

"You know, I remember another wilful young girl running around this island."

"I grew up," Vesper said.

"And into a fine young woman, might I say," Pelli told her.

"Aunt Pelli, I'm sixty-seven."

"Exactly," Pelli said. "You've got your whole life ahead of you. Do you expect to reach gold rank during the surge?"

"I hope so, but nothing is certain. This will not be a normal surge, Aunt Pelli. Even more so than people think. Have you been told?"

"Oh, I'm just an old woman on a hill. Who would tell me the important matters of state?"

Vesper gave her ancestor a wry smile, then looked back across the lagoon to Jason's cloud house.

"If he didn't come for Zara, does he even know?"

"I doubt it," Pelli said. "I think he would be conducting himself a little differently if he did."

"Then perhaps it's time he did," Vesper said. "If I can't kill him or get rid of him, I can only try and convince him to quietly ride out the surge and leave. He's just one of countless silver-rankers, after all."

“A sensible approach,” Pelli said, “but one should not wager everything on hope. Some people are simply ill-suited to remaining unremarkable.”

“Of course, Aunt Pelli. I would welcome your counsel on this.”

“Of course, dear. We should start with deciding what to tell Zara. You can never be entirely sure what that girl is going to do...”