

Chapter 643

The Power and the Control

Jason had yet to enter any of the towering glass and metal structures he had seen from a distance while approaching the city. This would soon change as the clientele of the underground arena departed, Jason amongst them. As he had speculated on finding the VIP area, there was a private entrance aside from the tunnels he had shuffled in through himself, shoulder to shoulder with the crowd. Rather than just a less crowded set of stairs, the private exit was an underground tram station.

Two lines connected the arena chambers to the city's underground tram network. As Jason let Zolit guide him, the fight promoter answered Jason's questions about the tramway. Jason listened closely, careful not to give his aide, Benella, any undue attention. The entertainment district was the most outlying section of the tram network, which mostly serviced the affluent inner districts. The lines out to the entertainment district were restricted to at least the semi-elite, so they didn't have to mix with the rabble. Jason's silver-rank adventurer badge, even being an auxiliary one, was enough to get him aboard.

The ride had Jason reminiscing about the submerged subway in Greenstone, which was more impressive than the dark tunnels of the tramway. By leveraging the property of the region's unique magic stone, Greenstone's city founders had created a fascinating train made up of submarines. Absently, he wondered how long it would be until he saw it again.

The station they eventually arrived at was disappointingly similar to a subway station on Earth, with plain white tiles covering the walls. The main difference was that the station was cleaner than what he would have expected on Earth.

"Private station, for the building above us," Zolit explained to Jason. "It's the biggest hotel in the region; lots of mercantile river barons."

They stepped onto an elevating platform, crammed in with other lesser lights of the underground fighting scene. Sophie was nowhere to be seen, having been taken on one of the earlier tram rides that were less crowded. Zolit's aide begged off for the night, leaving him and Jason to ride the platform together. It moved swiftly up through the building until it arrived at a floor that appeared to be a private club.

It was not as raucous as a nightclub but more vibrant than a country club. There was a small section where a slew of attractive young people were dancing. They were generally low rank and in clothes that were fashionable but not expensive, akin to what he had seen in the entertainment district. The people watching them from the mezzanine floor

above were dressed in more expensive and conservative attire, and the way they looked at the dancers reminded Jason of people eyeing a buffet.

Masking the distaste in his aura, Jason panned his gaze slowly around the room, taking it all in. There was a double-wide spiral staircase leading up, next to the elevating platforms at the centre of the room. Music that was an odd mix of classical and old-school electronica to Jason's ears came from oversized recording crystals floating in the air. They served double-duty, also shedding the light that illuminated the room.

Columns, booths and tables made the room an obstacle course, which patrons traversed to reach the four bars, each placed against one of the four walls. The room was a perfect square, with walls made entirely of glass. The four bars were situated such that the walls behind the bartender offered panoramic views from the tall building, obscured by various colourful bottles. Jason intended to investigate them shortly.

Before that, he made his way over to the south wall to take in the view, Zolit trailing behind. It was Jason's first real look at the heart of the city, having only seen the dark metal towers and glass ziggurats from afar. It turned out the club was in one of the ziggurats, with Jason's floor being the lowest level of the cube sitting atop the building.

Just to the south of the building, a wide river flowed east to west. The river docks were lit up, operating through the night, but the river also had more decorative stretches. Many sections had trees lining the banks, with multicoloured lights painting them with rainbows. Jason couldn't help but wonder about the value of riverfront property left undeveloped for the sake of aesthetics, but could not deny his appreciation of it. The outer reaches of the city, visible from the height of the building he was in, only showed sporadic lighting. The inner districts, however, were lit up like an Earth metropolis.

"I have to say, Zolit, you've found a pretty nice place to call home."

"Yeah," Zolit said, moving to stand next to Jason as they both looked out over the city. "We endured the monster surge better than most, but this mess upriver..."

"The messengers," Jason said.

"Right now it's only the adventurers getting worked up," Zolit said. "The Adventure Society is talking about war, but it hasn't affected the rest of the city quite yet. If anything, people are scrambling for lucrative contracts to supply the conflict."

"People ignore disaster in the face of profit," Jason said. "I've seen it in my homeland."

Zolit opened his mouth to ask where that was, then restrained himself.

“I think the government and the Adventure Society are trying to shield the populace,” he said instead. “People aren’t ready for another conflict when they aren’t done recovering from the last.”

“That’s what the Adventure Society is for, right?” Jason asked. “Protecting people?”

“That’s what they say,” Zolit scoffed. “You know the society controls all the suppression collars we use in the arena?”

“They are regulated magic,” Jason pointed out.

“Regulated my bony rump,” Zolit said. “I could find someone to sell you an unregistered suppression collar without leaving this room.”

Jason didn’t argue. The person Zolit found could even have been Jason himself, having accumulated his own notable collection of suppression collars over the years.

“The Adventure Society makes a big show of bringing in auditors to make sure none of the collars have gone missing, as if the arena was where they all leak from. What they really want is to remind everyone who has the power and the control.”

“I thought power and control were the Church of Dominion’s, er... dominion.”

“I don’t see them speaking up. The Adventure Society has been telling everyone what to do for years now. Surge readiness, then the surge, then the Builder and now these guys with wings? There’s always a new reason they get to tell everyone what to do. The society has been encroaching more and more, and I’ve never even met a priest of Dominion.”

“You’re better off,” Jason said. “Their boss is annoying.”

“Boss?” Zolit asked before stopping himself. Jason felt him forcibly staunch the curiosity he could feel in the small man’s aura. The small man couldn’t entirely help himself, though, for all the good it did him. The penetrating look he gave Jason was spoiled by his big chihuahua eyes.

“If a man was looking to stay out of trouble, he’d move along nice and quick,” Zolit said. “If he stays in a place like this, it could be the man is just telling himself he wants to stay out of trouble when what he really wants is to find it. However much damage it does.”

Jason glanced at Zolit and chuckled.

“Someone put the wind right up you, didn’t they mate? I’ve got no problems with you, Zolit. But I’m not the danger you should be watching out for.”

“And what should I be watching out for?”

“Best you don’t watch out at all, lest you draw its attention. If you are what you seem, then the safest move for you is to stick to your normal routine. Just avoid any uncertainty as much as you can.”

“Avoiding uncertainty is my normal routine. But normal is in short supply these days.”

“Isn’t it just?” Jason agreed with a chuckle. He then turned his gaze from the window to the bar. “I think I might get myself a drink.”

“Stick to the bar down here or one floor up,” Zolit said. “Higher than that is for the big-timers, not the likes of us. Maybe your Nightingale friend can get you up there. They like winners, and they love big-time adventurers, and she’s both. She’ll be enjoying a sickening amount of adoration right now. The top end of this club is still the bottom end of high society, and important adventurers are famous for opening doors.”

Jason could feel Zolit’s frustration, which was causing him to prod at Jason, even knowing that anything he learned was trouble. Jason mercifully left the man behind and made his way to the bar, flashing the elven bartender a smile.

“What’ll it be?” she asked.

“I don’t know the local beverages very well. Something colourful and sweet?”

“What rank, and how fancy do you want to go?”

“Silver,” he said, “and as fancy as it’ll go.”

“You should go one floor up,” she said. “That’s where they keep the stuff the people down here can’t afford.”

“Good to know, thank you,” he said, getting back off his stool as he flashed another smile. “Shame, though. What I’ve seen down here seems quite enticing.”

Jason made his way to the stairs, following them up to another level. The only overt difference from the floor below was the additional bouncers in front of the stairs leading further up, as well as at the elevating platforms. None of the bouncers were elves, and instead were mostly imposing leonids, plus one of the rarely-seen draconians.

Jason headed for one of the bars and his eyes landed on the bartender, who looked identical to the one below. Peeking closer with his aura he sensed they were definitely different people, but with a subtle bond between them.

“Oh no,” he muttered as he wandered over. The bartender came to serve him.

“You have a familiar face,” he told her.

“You met my sister downstairs? She’s Isabelle, and I’m Mirelle. But everyone calls me Elle.”

“There aren’t eight of you, are there?”

“Just twins, sorry. Disappointed?”

“On the contrary; I’ve been having trouble keeping up.”

“I’m not quite sure what that means,” she said, narrowing her eyes as she looked him up and down. He noticed her gaze paused on the scars on his face, as well as the larger one at the base of his throat

“Adventurer?”

“Sort of.”

“Sort of?”

“I cook for adventurers. There’s still stabbing, but it’s safer.”

“You don’t look like someone who avoids danger. You came in with the cage arena crowd?”

“I did.”

“You’re a fighter?”

“No one told me the rule about needing a flunkey to fight for you. I fought, but I’m not sure that makes me a fighter. A fighter would end up with sore fists instead of a sore head.”

“Get dropped in the first round?”

“Third.”

“At silver rank? That’s suspiciously good for someone who got pushed into a cage for not knowing the first rule.”

“I had it on good authority that the first rule was to not talk about fight club. I don’t suppose you have something for a sore head?”

“Not a problem,” she said. “Everything I’ve got back here will give you a sore head.”

He snorted a laugh.

“I’m going to have a rough morning. Alright, set me up with something colourful, sweet and expensive.”

“It’s not that kind of establishment, fighter boy,” she said with a cheeky smile. He flashed her a grin.

“I’m just looking for drinks; I’ll make my own arrangements for the other thing.”

“Good to know,” said a handsome man with midnight black skin and colourful beads woven through his hair. He slid onto the stool next to Jason. “Are you going to be monopolising this lovely young woman all night?”

“That’s up to her,” Jason said, holding his hand out for the other man to shake. “John Miller, nice to meet you.”

“Emir Bahadir.”

“I think someone like you belongs on the higher floors, Mr Bahadir.”

“I was looking for my friend Jason. We were meant to meet in a couple of weeks, but then I heard he was running off to hunt a species of dangerous and aggressive birds.”

“I have it on good authority that he won’t be available until the end of next week. Maybe you should take that time to visit other old friends.”

Emir stood up, sliding a gold spirit coin onto the bar that only lasted a moment before vanishing into the barkeeper's hands.

"I'm confident that John here can more than cover his own drinks," Emir told her, "but it's always nice to give a gift when making new friends. I'll see you again, John."

Jason shook his head.

"You know who that was, right?" Mirabelle asked once Emir was gone.

"He did just tell me his name. Emir something?"

"That's Emir Bahadir. The treasure hunter. You know him, don't you?"

"In another life. Since he went ahead and paid you, let's go ahead and rack up some drinks."

Mirelle gave him another assessing look.

"Colourful, sweet and expensive, was it?" she asked.

"It was indeed. I'll trust your judgement."

"Oh, you probably shouldn't do that," she said as she turned around to pull one colourful bottle after another from the shelves behind her.

"You know, a lot of the out-of-towners like that awful, throat-burning stuff," she said. "I like amber as much as the next girl, but who needs a hundred varieties of throat fire?"

"I have always enjoyed elven liquor, ever since I first discovered it," Jason told her. "A sweet rainbow of drunkenness for me, thank you."

"I can arrange that. A lot of the fighters like to one-up each other with the nastiest drinks anyone will sell them."

"I've had to drink quite enough bitterness in my time, thank you."

Jason watched as she poured out a row of expensive drinks. The kind of specialised ingredients that went into high-rank liquor, at least anything that was more drink than boat polish, cost the kind of money that regular people used to renovate their homes. High-end spirit coins were not used for ordinary transactions. They were used to buy things like buildings and skyships, or the kind of indulgences that powerful adventurers enjoyed.

"I'm making what we call a rainbow wave," Mirelle told him. "There are countless variations, based on price and availability, but the idea is for each drink to be enhanced by the one that came before it. A good rainbow wave is how you tell the difference between a real bartender and someone just handing you drinks for money."

"Well, you certainly ain't that," a voice slurred from a few seats along the bar. "I've been waiting for you to serve me, but you just keep talking to rich pricks."

"I'm not the only bartender," Mirelle said, gesturing at the other staff. "In fact, I watched you wave one of them off. Also, you seem to have had quite enough."

"I want to be served by you. I like pretty girls."

"Well, if you want them to like you back," she told him, "I suggest spending less on drinks and more on soap."

A snarl crossed the man's face until a massive hand covered in dark green scales arrived on his shoulder. It belonged to a massive bouncer who was all the more intimidating for being a draconian. Jason had only seen a few of them before, but they were tall and well built, with swept-back faces and tiny scales instead of skin.

"There are three kinds of people in this club," the draconian said with a deep hissing voice. "Those important enough that they can be obnoxious and those that aren't. You're coming with me."

"Is the third kind the ones who aren't obnoxious at all?" Jason asked.

"It is," Mirelle said.

"Well, that's not me. I think I'll have these drinks and then get thrown out. Will you put in a good word for me?"

"Drink up and we'll see," she said as she went to serve another patron.

As Mirelle moved away, a tall elf claimed the barstool to Jason's left. Jason looked over and then up at the woman who had beaten him in the third round. Unlike Neil, whose bulk shifted his proportions from the elven norm, this woman looked like a normal elf but scaled up.

"This yours?" she asked, nodding at the yet-untouched row of drinks.

"It is," Jason said. "You like a rainbow wave?"

"Gods, no," she said, then nodded at Mirelle who was coming back. "Give me a hursketh claw."

Jason watched as Mirelle mixed a drink that smelled like aviation fuel.

"I'm Avale," the large elf introduced herself.

"John Miller."

"You fight well, John Miller."

"You fight better."

"That's why I came and found you," she said. "I like drinking with good fighters, but I also like being the best."

"Then this might not be your night," Jason said, leaning forward to look past her.

"Hello, Sophie."

Avale turned to watch Sophie slide onto the barstool on her left.

"Damn it."