

## Chapter 603

### Occasionally Carnivorous

A suppression-collared adventurer was trudging through the jungle, but paused in a clearing. He looked around, warily, seeing nothing but lush jungle and dark shadows. His expression was conflicted for a moment, then he turned to walk in a different direction.

“That’s not the way,” a cold voice said, sending a chill down his spine, despite the sweltering jungle. He looked around again, still seeing no one but himself. He turned again, resuming his original direction.

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Jason opened his eyes as he stopped sharing senses with Shade, hidden in the shadow of the latest prisoner. He was deep in the jungle, but moving with caution.

“Thank you, Shade. This one took longer than the others to think about trying to go find his team.”

“I believe you have them rattled, Mr Asano. That’s the fourth person you’ve plucked from right under their nose.”

“Yeah, they’ll be watching for all my quiet tricks, now, and they’ve been way too careful about shielding their other healer. Maybe we should take a run at that other pair of teams.”

“You may want to leave them for now, Mr Asano. They were already at the periphery of potential sites for Miss Leal to conduct her ritual, and they’re only getting further away.”

“They’ve gone in the wrong direction?”

“It is dense jungle, Mr Asano.”

“And dense adventurers, from the sounds of it.”

“In which case, it may be best to let them distract themselves.”

“Fair enough,” Jason said. “Moving around with portals would be so much easier, but one of the prisoners might call my bluff and refuse to go through, even if I threaten to kill them. And then there’s this.”

He crouched down and looked at a thread so fine it was all but invisible to even silver-rank vision. If he hadn’t sensed the thrum of aura connecting it to a network of threads spread all through the jungle, he’d have never known it was there. The scope of it meant it had been put in place over the course of days, maybe a whole week, in preparation for the conflicts currently taking place in this section of jungle.

The web worked by weaving tiny threads over a vast area, imbuing them with a tiny amount of aura, to connect them to the user. Monsters, animals and essence users could

walk right through a thread without ever noticing, the broken thread reconnecting itself even as the user picked up details of the oblivious wanderer.

Logistically, setting up the web net was a huge pain, but there were advantages to the laborious requirements. While wide-area tracking magic was much simpler, it was also easy to foil. The web net was triggered by contact, circumventing effects that foiled regular tracking magic. It did have tracking magic woven into it as well, but this was designed to track portals rather than people. Jason might have an ability that shielded him from tracking, but his portals did not.

“This could have tripped me up if I hadn't seen it before,” Jason mused. Mr North, whose true form was a rune spider, used a similar ability with significantly more finesse. Web essence abilities were also in Dawn's repertoire, which Jason had seen her silver-rank avatar use on Earth. When it came to expertise in the execution of their powers, Jason had never seen anyone come close to Dawn. Jason's sharp aura senses allowed him to navigate without tripping the thread network net unless doing so served his purposes.

“The team led by Maldonado is better than the others in preparation and ability,” Shade observed. “I am being careful of the main group, so I am not always close enough to eavesdrop, but based on their activity, I suspect that they deliberately lured the other teams into this endeavour.”

“They still haven't taken the bait and gone after one of my prisoners roaming around?”

“No. Perhaps if you appear on their web net in the location where you are gathering them, they will believe it to be your base of operations and strike.”

“Maybe. They might think it's a trap. I'd think it's a trap. Are they still gathered at a base camp instead of moving around?”

“For the most part. The bulk of their group has vehicles ready for rapid deployment while their scouts monitor the other groups. There may be another scout moving to survey the prisoner gathering, but either they haven't gotten there yet or they are better at hiding than I am at finding.”

“They're probably waiting for a confirmation of my presence. If my moves against Rangel and Tellez's teams are going to get more overt, I'll have to take out the scout from Maldonado's team watching them first. She almost caught wind of me when I nabbed that last one.”

“Mr Asano, you are kidnapping and hauling off their team members. Does that not constitute overt to you, what does?”

“Having Gordon set off an orb explosion in the middle of them and snatching someone in the chaos.”

“I see. Perhaps you should move on the group going the wrong way after all,” Shade suggested. “Changing up your pattern will make it harder to ambush you.”

“Agreed,” Jason said. “I’ll have to deal with them all eventually, anyway.”

Jason looked up at a patch of jungle canopy.

“What do you think?” he asked.

The air shimmered to reveal a celestine floating in the air with a recording crystal drifting around over her head. Her hair and eyes were a pale sky blue, compared to the rich sapphire of the royal family. Her skin was also very pale, another contrast to the royal family’s typical caramel.

“Oh, it’s you,” Jason said.

Jana Costi was a gold-rank stealth specialist from Princess Liara’s team. He had not seen her since before the attack by the Builder’s flying city. Her brother had sacrificed himself to detonate the weapon Travis designed that brought the city down.

“I’m sorry about Ledev,” he said. “He was a dick, but so is everyone they build a statue of, and he definitely deserves a statue.”

“Thank you... I think. How did you sense me?”

“I didn’t; you hid from me perfectly. You weren’t quite as perfect at masking the recording crystal, though. Close but, that only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades. Neither of which you have in this world, now that I think about it. Heidel shoes and alchemy bombs? It doesn’t have the same ring.”

“You’re still the same, then.”

“Well, I’m fighting people alone in the jungle while you secretly follow me around again. We have been here before. I don’t suppose you want to do a little light scouting for me?”

“Your familiar seems to be doing just fine on that front.”

“He is pretty great.”

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There was a cave in one of the tracking web's dead spots. To further shield it from prying eyes or their magical equivalent, Clive and Belinda had established several magic wards. They wouldn't last long, but they wouldn't need to. This kind of magic was a speciality of Belinda's, going back to her days of setting up operation points when she and Sophie were thieves.

Jason's team, minus Humphrey and Jason, were sitting on picnic furniture conjured up by Belinda, eating from a sandwich platter set up on a table. Along with the platter were two pitchers of iced tea and one of juice.

"Only two blends of iced tea," Neil complained. "I hate roughing it on contracts."

"After three years of spirit coins, you adapted to Jason being back on the team pretty quick," Sophie pointed out.

"I've been eating spirit coins in the field for three years," Neil said. "If you want to go back to that, leave me your sandwiches. You know, I quite like the idea of Jason being an auxiliary. More sandwiches, less trouble."

"I'll believe that when I see it," Clive said.

Humphrey wandered in with a confused-looking, suppression-collared adventurer. He was peering at the floor, surprised at the lack of a need to watch his footing. Not far into the cave, he had found where Clive and Belinda had used some simple rituals to turn rough stone into smooth floor. It made traversing the cave much less tricky, as the light stones weren't set up until far enough in that they couldn't be spotted from the outside.

"Another one?" Neil asked, then jabbed a thumb at the corner. "Over with the others."

Humphrey shoved the prisoner towards a ritual circle with three more people sitting in it. The ritual circle caused only silence and did not restrict the occupants from leaving it. What had happened when they made a break for it did that. The others waited for him to enter the silence zone before talking again.

"Should Jason be so blatant with using suppression collars?" Clive wondered as he watched the prisoners. "I know that a lot of adventurers keep them handy, but they are, strictly speaking, restricted tools."

"It's not like that's ever enforced unless the Adventure Society is looking to harass a member in poor standing," Neil pointed out.

"The purpose is political," Humphrey said, wandering over to the table and taking a sandwich. "Showing that Jason has enough support from the Adventure Society, or just enough influence, that he can flaunt the rules. Even if everyone is flaunting that rule already, he doesn't even have to pretend to hide it."

"Hey," Neil said. "Did you just take the sandwich with willowcress and boar chunks in spicy sauce?"

Humphrey looked at the sandwich in his hand.

"Yes. You've still got half a sandwich left to eat."

"I was going to eat that one next," Neil complained.

"You realise that you're going to get fat again," Belinda told him.

“I was never fat!”

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Eric Maldonado was pacing back and forth in the ready site that had been set up days earlier. It was a cleared section of jungle with a ritual-magic perimeter to stop the jungle from growing back. In high-magic zones, plant growth could be sudden, unpredictable and occasionally carnivorous.

Maldonado had sunk exorbitant amounts into this operation, from burning favours to most of the money he had earned during the surge, but he was struggling to see the value. The specialist tracker who had been so expensive to hire was completely failing to track Asano, despite her assurances that her net would work around tracking-magic countermeasures.

All she had found was the people Asano had taken from their teams and sent roaming through the jungle alone. Maldonado even had a scout to check on them as they moved through the jungle and they were, in fact, alone. As for their destination, where other prisoners had already gathered, he was yet to send a scout because it reeked of a trap. If nothing else, the tracker had detected a portal some time ago, making it Asano's likely entry point to the area.

Asano himself was a stealth user, according to Maldonado's research, but the rest of his team was not. It was Maldonado's guess that the rest of the team were in that location, guarding Asano's prisoners and preparing an ambush.

It was increasingly clear that not only was Asano aware that he was being hunted, but had cancelled the familiar ritual and was hunting them, in turn. It was only the sunk cost of the operation that had stopped Maldonado from calling an end to it.

One of the reasons Maldonado was willing to continue was that the most expensive specialist on hand was a communications specialist. This was a member of the Adventure Society and getting him to participate in such a shady operation had been extremely pricy. His scout being able to feed him real-time information had made Maldonado more confident in maintaining a level of control. But the longer they operated without catching Asano's tail, the more that confidence eroded.

Asano had managed to take four people from Rangel's group. Not only did he do so under the nose of the rest of the group, but also under that of Maldonado's scout, watching them. Despite his assurances that he would not let himself be distracted again, Maldonado was not confident.

“Mr Maldonado.”

The communication specialist, Constantin, approached him.

“I believe that Asano has decided to change his pattern and strike the other group.”

“That makes sense. His attacks on Rangel’s group were becoming increasingly untenable. What do you mean by ‘you believe?’ What did Piera report?”

Piera was the scout observing the second group.

“Piera was removed from my communication group,” Constantin said. “That she did so without reporting it suggests that the first target of the attack was her.”

Maldonado ran a hand over his face.

“How long ago?”

“Moments.”

“You’re saying that a silver-ranker was taken out before she could even report being under attack?”

“Unlikely. It is more likely that the communication was interfered with.”

“How?”

“There are spells and wards that can do so. Many dispel effects can cut an individual out of a communication link. Also, such abilities work like auras and magical senses, in that they are an expression of the soul. A sudden soul attack could account for it. You said it was an ability of Asano’s.”

“An unconfirmed ability. Low probability of being true, according to my source.”

Maldonado shook his head angrily.

“If Havi Estos hadn’t gone dark I wouldn’t have been forced to use an untested information broker.”

“Perhaps that was a sign that you should not have undertaken this at all,” Constantin suggested.

“You were happy enough to take the money,” Maldonado said bitterly.

“It was a lot of money,” Constantin replied calmly.

Maldonado sighed and ran his fingers through his hair.

“Alright,” he announced loudly. “Everyone gather round.”

The rest of his team moved closer and he explained the situation.

“I know this isn’t what any of us wanted,” he said. “But the reality is that Asano isn’t the soft target we thought. We knew he wasn’t going to be what we made him out as to that idiot Rangel, but this is more than we thought. By a lot. He knew we were coming and the information we had about how he fights was woefully inadequate. To the point that it might have even been fed to us that way.”

“You think we were set up?”

“It’s clear that he knew we were coming, so it’s a possibility. It may be that his connections aren’t *all* at the expensive end of town.”

“What about Piera?” asked Reyes, one of his team members. “We’re just going to let him have her?”

“Either she’s dead or she’s not,” Maldonado said.

“She’s not,” the mercenary tracking specialist said. “I’ve just picked her up walking in the same direction as the others Asano took out.”

Maldonado nodded.

“Pull out,” he instructed. “I’ll stay alone and approach where the prisoners are gathering.”

“The damn ambush site?” Reyes asked. “Boss, you shouldn’t go up against Asano by yourself, let alone his whole team where they’re set up waiting.”

“It won’t be to fight. If Piera and the others are alive, it’s to make a point.”

“I knew we should have hired a gold ranker,” said Nuñez, another team member.

“The whole point was to show that *we* could handle Asano,” Maldonado said.

“Yeah, except you lured in a bunch of other teams and hired merc specialists.”

“Silver-rank specialists,” Maldonado said. “This whole thing is about perception, not facts, and what people care about is rank. Outside of aberrations like Asano – which is why we targeted him in the first place – people don’t play outside their rank. As long as we only use silver-rank assets, we’ll just be looked at as resourceful. Getting a gold ranker would have defeated the entire point.”

Maldonado hung his head.

“You’re all leaving,” he said. “I will go to Asano and negotiate Piera’s return.”

“Boss,” Reyes said. “That will be giving Asano all the cards.”

“He already has them,” Maldonado said wearily. “We bet heavy and we lost. It’s time to accept that with dignity and pay up. Make no mistake: we’re in the wrong. We gambled our money and our reputations, and we didn’t win. I’m not sure that we ever had a chance. The stacked deck is what drove us to this in the first place, and I’m not sure we ever really did have a chance. What comes next will be bad. How bad depends on Asano.”

“It won’t be that bad,” Jason said, stepping out of the jungle. “I respect someone who knows when to cut bait.”