

Chapter 194

Departures

Danielle Geller played the recording of the mirage chamber fight for her important visitor.

“They used my son’s status against him,” the Mirror King said. “It seems your son has picked up your knack for spotting people’s leverage points.”

“No he hasn’t,” Danielle said. “My Humphrey’s a good boy.”

“I see,” the Mirror King said. “You teamed him up with someone who thinks more like you.”

“The man is good at making friends,” Danielle said. “Just ask your son.”

Valdis was deeply regretting his insistence on joining Jason in drinking bronze-rank liquors. It was the farewell party for his team on Jason’s houseboat and when he saw Jason drinking the higher-ranked stuff he had joined in over Jason’s warnings. He didn’t remember anything between that and waking up with a pounding headache and his father at the end of his bed. Now his team were making final farewells on the deck of the houseboat, although he wasn’t saying or listening to anything as he struggled with a throbbing head and unruly stomach.

Valdis and his team were packed and ready to leave via portal, having spent the night in the houseboat after the raucous party. They had only travelled to Greenstone via boat originally because of the arrangements made by Emir. He liked big entrances, as evidenced by the grandiose arrival of his cloud ship days after Hester had quietly portalled him to the city.

There was also the problem of actually opening a portal to Greenstone. Whatever other nuances a dimensional transport power might have, the requirement to have visited the destination was universal. Most of the teams had been portalled as close to Greenstone as their people could reach that was in the path of Emir’s transport ships.

“It’s for the best,” Sigrid told Jason, nodding a head at Valdis. “If he was in a better state then he’d be making a last-minute attempt to poach your team members.”

Valdis looked like he was going to say something, then looked like he was going to throw up, giving up on the former to avoid the latter.

“You’re not going to make a recruiting pitch on his behalf?” Jason asked.

“My job, first and foremost,” she said, “is to keep Valdis out of trouble. You are definitely trouble.”

Jason laughed. "Next time we see you, we'll all be bronze rank. We might come visit that kingdom of yours and give you a chance for revenge in your local mirage chamber."

"You do remember that we repeatedly beat you, right?" Sigrid asked.

"You're only as good as your last fight," Jason said. "That makes us the winners, leaving you to return home in disgrace."

She shook her head. "I still can't fully parse you, Jason Asano. Are you a fool, a genius or a monster?"

"Yes," he said with an impish grin.

Suddenly every member of Valdis' team dropped to one knee, except for Valdis himself. Jason's own team followed a beat later. Jason turned around to find a man standing on the deck that he hadn't sensed, even through his connection to the boat. The man was dressed well but not extravagantly, looking to be somewhere in his late thirties with a neatly-trimmed blond beard.

The man's appearance was unremarkable, but his aura was something else entirely. It was not overwhelming, in fact, just the opposite. Jason could hardly tell where the man's aura stopped and the rest of the world began, as if the very world around him was simply an extension of his power.

Another man walked across the cloud-stuff gangplank and onto the deck from the marina. His positioning and posture marked him as subordinate to the first man, despite his own powerful, gold-rank aura. He was glaring unhappily at Jason.

"You should kneel," he told Jason.

"Why?" Jason asked.

"To show your respect. You stand before the king."

"I've always felt that if someone wants you to kneel, it isn't respect they're after, whatever they might tell you. Also, *the* king? I mean, he's *a* king, I'll grant you. Certainly not my king, though."

"Do you even have monarchs where you come from?" the Mirror King asked. His voice was deep, rich and tinged with amusement.

"Kind of," Jason said. "We sort out our own business, but old folk like to have a royal or two floating about, so we borrow someone else's queen from time to time."

"You borrow a queen?"

"Yep," Jason said. "We pop her over, wheel her down the street so people can have a wave and then send her back. It works out for everyone."

"That's madness," the Mirror King's offsider said. "He's telling strange outworlder stories to disrespect you."

The Mirror King laughed. “What he’s doing is poking the nest to see how aggressive the wasps are. You remind me of Danielle Geller when she was young and precocious.”

“Thank you,” Jason said.

“You’ll have to forgive my friend Hastor,” the Mirror King said. “Among his varied and valuable roles is protocol officer, at which he very much excels.”

“Thank you, your majesty.”

“Sadly,” the Mirror King continued, “the traits that makes him an excellent protocol officer serve him less well in more informal settings. If there isn’t a chart so seat everyone in the room by relative rank, he starts getting snippy.”

“Your majesty!” Hastor protested.

At that moment, Valdis, who had been lurking behind Jason, lost his battle with his stomach. Lurching to the side of the deck, he vomited loudly over the side.

“Good thing I ranked up by poison resist power,” Jason confided in the Mirror King. “It soaked up just the right amount of alcohol. Also, I apparently don’t have a stomach. I was going to ask my mate Clive about it – that’s Clive kneeling there – but I figured the answer would be pretty gross. Which may sound odd, coming from the guy with the flesh-rotting powers, but there you go.”

“It seems my son has learned a lesson about limitations,” the mirror King said with a chuckle. “Those can be hard to find for princes.”

Valdis staggered forward to stand next to Jason.

“Dad,” Valdis croaked in greeting. The Mirror King gave his son a wry smile.

“Having fun?”

Valdis let out a wordless groan and the Mirror King chuckled again.

“Thank you for putting up with my son, Mr Asano. I think it’s time to go.”

“No worries, your kingness. And you can call me Jason.”

The Mirror King grinned and threw an arm around his son’s shoulders, who groaned.

“Come along, boy; you can explain the state you’re into your mother. If you would, Hastor?”

Hastor called up a portal that looked like a sheet of glass and the Mirror King marched his son through. Just before he passed through, Valdis shared a put-upon look with a grinning Jason, departing with a wave. Once the king was gone, Jason and Valdis’ teams stood up, Sigrid politely moving to greet Hastor. The disgruntled look on Hastor’s softened with their brief and formal, yet somehow still warm interaction.

“It’s good to see you, father,” Sigrid said after her formal greeting.

“Wait, this guy’s your Dad?”

“He is my father,” Sigrid confirmed.

“And he doesn’t get a hug? That’s cold.”

Sigrid giggled, shaking her head.

“Thank you for the hospitality,” she said to Jason’s team. “I look forward to the next time we meet.”

She led the rest of her team through the portal, leaving only Hastor with Jason and his team.

“Thank you,” Hastor said, to Jason’s surprise. “While I cannot agree with your gross deficit in etiquette, the young Prince doesn’t have a lot of friends who will stand beside him instead of kneel.”

Hastor didn’t wait for a response, stepping through his portal, which vanished.

“That was unexpected,” Jason said. “So, Emir’s portal lady is Hester, and that guy’s portal guy was Hastor,” he mused. “Are portal powers a name thing?”

“Of course not,” Clive said. “You need to watch your decorum around royalty.”

“Do I?” Jason asked. “I was more thinking that I need to get powerful enough that they have to watch their decorum around me.”

The keg of crystal wash was much larger than the cloud flask, yet Jason emptied it into the flask without any sign of the flask being full. He had returned the houseboat to the flask in preparation for their departure, which left Rufus and Gary once again stripped of accommodation for the duration of the road contract. With the conflict with the Builder cult at an uneasy pause, Gary and Rufus turned to other endeavours. Gary would be rejoining Emir at Sky Scar Lake, while Rufus would lodge at the Geller estate as he refocused his attention on the training annex project.

The fight against the Builder cult was at a lull after the raid on their island outpost and the Purity church was in something of a limbo while everyone waited for word from on high, be that the main branches of the churches or the gods themselves. In the meantime, the church of Purity’s people were comfortably but thoroughly detained under the authority of the ecumenical council.

Once he had drained the cask of crystal wash, restoring the cleaning functions of his magical abode, it was time to head out. It was a short walk from the marina to the loop line station for Jason and his team, which carried them to the Adventure Society campus. Waiting for them outside the jobs hall was Humphrey’s sister, Henrietta.

Henrietta was a statuesque and handsome woman whose short-cropped hair swept back dramatically. In practical leathers and with a dimensional bag slung over her shoulder

she had the confident ease of an experienced adventurer. Her eyes were a bright shade of purple, a sure sign of a summoned familiar inhabiting them. Belinda's lantern familiar, Shimmer was likewise subsumed into her eyes, turning them silver instead of purple.

Henrietta was a minion specialist and Jason knew that she would have her three summoned familiars inside her body. Her fourth familiar was bonded to her like Stash was to Humphrey. It was a phoenix, the classic variety native to the desert. Rare and elusive, people lived whole lives and died out in the desert without ever seeing one. It was a gorgeous creature with feathers like living fire, which stood out even when familiars were a common sight. As the phoenix could not disguise itself the way Stash could, she largely left the mystical bird to its own devices, since she was always able to sense and communicate with it.

Summoned familiars had a number of practical advantages over bonded types, but the bond was not without its perks. A bonded familiar could be sensed at all times in a way summoned familiars only could be while subsumed within the summoner, which was not a practical advantage. The closest Jason had to this was Shade and his three bodies. While Shade's other bodies were out and about, Jason could sense them so long as at least one copy of Shade took the place of his own shadow. It also helped make Shade a useful spy.

"I've already picked up the contract," Henrietta said. "Let's head out."

Every road contract consisted of a group of iron-rankers, usually a team, with a supervising bronze ranker. In the current, uncertain times, Henrietta had appointed herself to look after her brother and his team. Danielle had also made sure Henrietta had certain expensive magical consumables to use in a pinch.

The team turned around and headed back for the loop line. After leaving the station, they prepared to head out for the desert. Clive had arranged for a heavy duty skimmer that could handle rocky terrain to be waiting for them at the edge of the delta. Skimmers specialised to sand were relatively cheap, but the magic that kept them aloft became less effective over less smooth, sweeping area. Knowing they would be ranging far and wide, Clive had requisitioned a more robust model designed for all kinds of terrain.

To get to the Magic Society outpost at the edge of the delta, the team started deploying their various means of transport. After returning from the trip to Jayapura, the team had new means of transportation available to them.

Humphrey already had Stash, who would happily transform into a heidel. Stash didn't like the colour of regular heidels though, leaving Humphrey riding a bright pink animal. Jason's familiar mount was Shade, who could transform each of his three bodies into horses due to Jason's dark rider power.

The hair of each horse was black, with white, glowing hooves, eyes and mane. White mist, shining against the black coat of the horses rose up from the hooves. Jason would have been satisfied so long as Shade didn't turn into a heidel, but what delighted with the glorious form he took.

"Looking sexy, Shade."

"I believe," Shade said, "that comment is inappropriate on numerous levels."

Clive had purchased a floating disc during their trip away. It was much the same as the ones they had used in Jayapura, but could function in low-magic areas like Greenstone. As with most such cases, it required someone with a special power to use magical tools to function.

Neil has no such power and no shape-changing familiar. He ended up in a floating trolley, towed behind Clive by a magical tether.

"This doesn't feel dignified," Neil said as Clive towed him along like a child. He looked over at Henrietta, riding a heidel-like construct creature, strangely crafted from what looked like folded paper. It would not hold up to the rigours of combat but could fold itself down small enough to carry in a pocket, like a two-headed origami horse.

"I should have bought one of those," he lamented. He had seen them for sale in the Mystic Quarter in Jayapura but had balked at the price. Given the money he still had from the essence auctions, he was now regretting his own prudence.

"I watched the recording of your fight with that Prince and his team," Henrietta said as they rode through the city streets.

"What did you think?" Neil asked. "Beating that team is impressive, right?"

"Impressive?" Henrietta asked dismissively. "It was a travesty. You lined your familiars and summons out like they were bricks in a wall. Do you have any idea how much potential you squandered?"

Henrietta had already spent some time with the team, training them in the use of their familiars and summons. She was, it turned out, unhappy with the results.

"During this trip I'm going to drill you all until you stop wasting your familiars. Jason is the only one of you even starting to use his familiars properly and he still has a long way to go."

"Thank you," Jason said.

"I wouldn't get too happy," Henrietta said. "Your performance was only decent compared to the rest of this lot. You left one of your familiars standing around with the others, too. You'll be drilling as hard as anyone."

"I don't mind a bit of hard work," Jason said.

Henrietta grinned at him.

“You will when I’m done with you.”

They were making their way down Broadstreet Boulevard, one of the main artery roads between the Island and Old City’s north east gate when they all felt a surging aura. Looking in that direction, they could see rainbow light shining over the rooftops from several streets away.

“A manifestation,” Henrietta said darkly. “Right in the middle of the city.”

“Maybe it’ll just be an awakening stone,” Neil said.

“Not with light display of that size,” Clive said. “That’s a monster. Probably silver rank.”

“Silver rank?” Neil said. “Do we go?”

“Of course we go,” Jason said. “We’re adventurers.”

“I’m not,” Belinda said. “I haven’t had my assessment, yet. Does that mean I get to not go?”

Jason flashed her a grin. “No.”

He urged his shadow horse to a gallop, roaring ahead of the group. Trailing behind him was the sound of hooves on the packed earth of the street, mixed with the sound of Shade’s voice.

“I would like to remind you that I can talk. You could just ask me to go faster instead of digging in with your heels.”