

Chapter 527

Band of Misfits

The northern end of the Storm Kingdom was the coastland of the northern continent, much of which was barren desert. This was quite different from the equivalent area in Jason's world, which was the southern United States. Compared to Earth, the region was significantly more arid; not just the counterpart to Texas but everything from Louisiana to Florida was barren and dry.

The other difference was the presence of pockets of odd magic. Frequently these were located in canyons and gorges, many of which hosted fortress towns, utilising the local conditions as the basis for efficient defences. Developing such bespoke protective systems was the speciality of the Irios family and Jason had encountered such towns in the past. He once fought a massive army of monsters in a gorge whose magical winds were turned into a weapon by the local fortress.

One particular desert canyon was incongruously filled with the kind of thick jungle that typified the Storm Kingdom's more southern regions. The jungle was a dense wall of green, the air so humid there was a visible haze. That stopped dead at the canyon's mouth, none of the lush plants reaching beyond its boundaries. The climate around the canyon was the complete opposite of what lay within; nothing but rocky desert and air as dry as old bones left under the scorching sun.

Jason's team, with the exception of Jason himself, were standing near the mouth of the canyon where the jungle stopped precipitously as the magic supporting it ended off. Before heading into the jungle alone, Jason had noted that it was quite like the gardens of the Vane estate. There, verdant greenery had likewise sharply met desert in one of the first examples of large-scale magic he encountered. That had been an artificial situation, where the jungle-filled canyon was a natural magical phenomenon.

The team were lingering casually, chatting as they kept an eye on the jungle. Belinda had conjured a parasol for herself and Sophie, offering a spot to Humphrey but he stood vigilant in the sun, his common sense outweighed by his sense of duty. Clive was more than happy to take the offered place, unconcerned about being the second choice. Neil moaned happily as he tipped a canteen of water over his head. His silver rank was more than enough to endure desert heat but that didn't stop it from being unpleasant.

The team was one of three groups operating in close proximity as part of a large-scale monster eradication contract. Such clear-and-sweep operations had become more common following the terrible casualties from the battles with the Builder. The reduced

adventurer numbers had led to dangerous accumulations of monsters as the monster surge continued unabated.

A large flying carpet approached carrying the other two teams, one of which was Farrah, Gary and Rufus. The other was a local guild team they were working with. The carpet stopped close to Humphrey and the others, floating over the ground for the passengers to step off.

“What are you doing?” Rufus asked Humphrey. “Where’s Jason?”

Humphrey nodded in the direction of the jungle-filled canyon.

“That whole area has been infested with light-eater vines and now some umbral rakells have spawned in there too,” Humphrey said. “A large pack, by all accounts. We’re waiting for them to come out.”

The leader of the other team was a woman named Rosalie Peresda, who gave voice to the confusion Humphrey’s explanation had given her team. They had all studied the monsters that commonly spawned in the Storm Kingdom and knew their behaviour.

“Why would they come out?” she asked. “Umbral rakells are smart, cunning and thrive in the shadows. What makes you expect them to come out and fight?”

“Because there are worse things in the dark than monsters,” Neil said ominously. “You have no idea of the horrors taking place in there, even as we speak. Just thinking about it gives me the chills. At this very moment, those poor monsters are probably hearing a story about a flying carriage with spinning blades that is also somehow a wolf-shaped air elemental. It makes no sense.”

“I wouldn’t call that an accurate representation of *Airwolf*,” Farrah said.

“It’s so tedious,” Neil bemoaned.

“That I *would* call an accurate representation,” Farrah acknowledged.

“Don’t be mean,” Humphrey chided.

“It’s alright for you,” Sophie said. “You went off to that team leader meeting and didn’t have to hear about the talking carriage and the man with the leather jacket. Did anyone ever figure out what a Hoff is?”

The rest of the team shook their heads.

“What is it with Jason and stories about magical carriages?” Belinda asked.

“They’re not actually magi...” Farrah started before trailing off. “Why am I defending *Knight Rider*? I spent too long with Jason and his sister.”

From above the jungle, a beam of glorious light shot down from the sky, mixing gold, silver and blue transcendent power.

“I guess that’s the signal,” Belinda said.

"They'll be coming soon," Humphrey told the guild team that had arrived with Rufus. "We'd appreciate the help since you're here."

"Of course," Rosalie said. "You generalists will get to see how proper adventurers do it."

"We appreciate that," Humphrey said congenially. "It's always good to see how well things can go so long as nothing goes wrong causing everyone to die because they're overspecialised and don't have a gold-ranker protecting them anymore."

"Oh, it's like that, is it?" Rosalie said with a grin. "Watch and learn, Geller."

Rufus shook his head, being familiar with the friendly rivalry between the Vitesse and Rimaros approaches to adventuring.

The three teams all turned their eyes to the jungle. They were all silver-rankers but the stealthy monsters were neither heard nor sensed before they started gushing out of the canyon in a torrent, blanketing the ground. The rakells looked like six-legged black panthers but smaller, the size of medium dogs. They moved with swift and silent grace. They did not hesitate after seeing the three teams, charging towards the line of adventurers.

The adventurers exploded into action, unleashing powers that swept over the monsters like a tidal wave. The might of silver-rankers had been overshadowed of late by the gold and diamond-level conflicts around the Builder war but the three elite teams demonstrated just how powerful they could be.

Farrah swung her obsidian sword that broke up into segments connected by a stream of lava, becoming a chain whip of ragged, razor-sharp stone and searing heat. Traps already set out by Clive and Belinda detonated as monsters ran over them.

The guild team were area-attack specialists, which is why they had been chosen as the centrepiece of the clear-and-sweep expedition. Whatever Humphrey might have said, no one was under any illusion of competing with the magical carpet-bombing carried out by Rosalie and her team. The more melee-oriented members of the group didn't even bother moving in, lest they be caught up in the sea of destructive power.

The other teams were responsible for making up for the shortfalls of the specialists in the case of an unexpectedly dangerous encounter. This was not the case against the rakells, who were swift and stealthy but small and frail by silver-rank standards, ill-suited to a direct conflict. Even so, the monsters did not turn and flee, to the surprise of the guild group. Instead, they charged recklessly to their deaths.

As more of the monsters emerged from the jungle they were looking increasingly miserable even before encountering the adventurers. Their bodies were feeble, slow and

marked with ugly rot. More and more moved out of the jungle in terrible condition, with some glowing from within as transcendent light ate them up from the inside.

The increasingly stricken monsters pushed out of the jungle and into the meat grinder of silver-rank adventurers who massacred the rakells in relatively short order. In the wake of the one-sided extermination, Rosalie looked at the slaughter field in confusion.

"Why would they run out to die like that?" she asked. "The only times I've seen monsters that way was to escape worse monsters. The kind of things they'll charge into death rather than confront."

A figure wandered out of the jungle wearing a bright floral shirt, tan shorts and sandals. He was carrying a long, thin tree branch that had grown twisted over itself.

"Hey, guys!" Jason called out. "I found a stick that looks like a giant's spectacles. Do giants make spectacles out of big sticks?"

"We don't have spectacles here," Farrah called back. "Anyone who can afford them can afford magic."

Rosalie's team rode their flying carpet just above ground level as it flew over the flat desert terrain. Without Rufus, Gary and Farrah taking up space they were sat comfortably, the carpet shielding them from rushing wind. Jason and Farrah's teams rode in a pair of large black land skimmers. Rosalie kept throwing glances over at Jason, who was gesturing effusively as he said something to his team that had them rolling their eyes.

The team had heard various rumours about the man, but he seemed like just another member of what was quickly becoming known as Humphrey Geller's band of misfits. Gellers were known for building extremely powerful teams, but Team Biscuit was building a reputation as oddities both socially and professionally. Only Geller himself seemed normal amongst the pair of thieves, the sarcastic and muscular healer and the respected magic researcher known for detesting the Magic Society.

As for the last member, Asano, all manner of rumours were swirling about. When checking out the other teams assigned to the expedition, he had proven to be the centre of many conflicting stories. When truth and rumour were that mixed up, Rosalie preferred to defer judgement and judge for herself. She had been confident that with a Geller in charge of the team they at least wouldn't be completely hopeless.

She hadn't exactly seen Asano in action now; only the results. She wondered what he had done to spook the monsters so badly they had charged into the cataclysmic powers of her team, who were wondering the same thing.

Jason could sense their attention on him through their auras but paid it no mind, guessing the reasons behind their interest. He had the answers they were looking for but no interest in handing them out. His essence abilities, while quite imposing once their effects began to show, were not enough to put the kind of fear into monsters that had affected the rakells. The secret to that was one of the many elements of his complex aura that he normally kept locked away.

Title: [Giant Slayer]

- Overcoming a much stronger enemy has left a permanent mark on you that can be sensed by others. This may trigger a fear reaction from the unintelligent and the weak-willed if your aura is significantly stronger than theirs. Your actual rank being lower than theirs does not diminish the effect.

Jason's aura was the strongest weapon in his arsenal. Not only was it his most potent power but also the one he was the most skilled with. It was also arguably the most versatile, with the effects of his aura power only the beginning of what he could accomplish with it. What Jason could accomplish with his aura was a representation of what Rufus had taught him from the very beginning: that experience trumping isolated training. Jason's aura techniques went way beyond what any system box had ever told him about it.

Noreth, Jason's sometimes-ally, sometimes enemy, once advised him to make his aura the centrepiece of his adventuring toolkit. While he had never trusted Noreth, he did believe the former familiar's general intentions were good. He had more than lost his way, spending lives by the million to achieve what he believed was necessary, which was something Jason sometimes feared in himself.

Jason's enemies list included beings whose very nature was beyond his ability to comprehend. How far would he be willing to go to stop their schemes? Jason had learned important lessons in the transformation zones where he had leveraged power much greater than himself to accomplish what would normally be impossible. He understood that the best he could do against cosmic forces was find a point where he could be a fulcrum and apply what strength he was able. If it came down to it, would he make the same choices Noreth had if that was what it took to stop a god or great astral being?

Jason shook his head to clear it, seeing the concerned looks on his companions as he fell into dark contemplation again. He was back in a world of magic and power, now. He had no illusions of being done with the Builder or Purity's minions but the big picture was

the concern of kings and diamond-rankers. Jason had done his part and it was no longer his fight. He'd told himself exactly that over and over, and hoped he'd eventually believe it.

Putting those thoughts aside, he grinned as he watched the desert landscape rush by. He felt like he was riding a speeder across Tatooine and was struck for the first time in a long time with the pure joy of the adventuring life.