

Chapter 461

Of Course He Doesn't Have Pants

In an abandoned outback town, there was something unusual on the dry grass of the football oval. Large stones were set into arches, forming a series of concentric circles. Next to the bar, the only properly-maintained building, was a long wooden grandstand, bleached by the sun. Jason and Farrah had been sitting on it for some time, talking.

"It's time," Jason said and stood up.

"You know they're watching us, right?" Farrah asked as she did the same.

"Leave them to their petty squabbles. I'm done."

"Did you end up talking to Amy?" Farrah asked as they left the grandstand and started walking across the grass. "I know you were in two minds about it."

"I did," Jason said. "Not that there was much to say. It was just sad, more than anything. Once upon a time, we knew each other better than anyone. Than we knew ourselves. Now we barely recognise one another. I think we both felt the loss."

"She wasn't angry?"

"She was tired. Kaito made his own choice to stand up for his world and she knows that. It doesn't change the fact that her kids will grow up without their father."

They walked across the football field, through the stone structures Farrah had put in place. In the centre was an empty circle.

"You won't be back for a long time," Farrah said. "If you want a last look around, this is it. A day or two won't make a difference."

Jason opened a portal to his spirit vault and stepped through without looking back.

Jason's spirit vault was increasingly becoming less of a vault and more of a realm. Not only was his rank growing but the racial power that created it had gone through a rare secondary evolution. He had absorbed the power of the Builder's dimensional door and the World-Phoenix's dimensional bridge. Most of all, his soul had undergone tribulations and come out all the stronger.

The layout of his spirit realm reflected his spirit domains, with a pagoda tower at the centre made of dark crystal infused with sparkling, transcendent light. From there, a vast estate of cloud buildings sprawled out into gardens that ranged from wild groves to carefully cultivated gardens to a cave system filled with luminescent fungus.

At the edge of his domain was a wall of darkness that seemed to devour the light around it. Even the starry void beyond was bright by comparison. The most prominent change brought about by the World-Phoenix's bridge was that the wall now had an arched

gate. Beyond the gate, a rainbow bridge extended into the star-speckled dark. In the distance, a stream of light, also filled with rainbow hues, extended into the void past Jason and Farrah's ability to make out where it began or ended.

Jason had god-like control over his spirit realm and with a blur, he and Farrah were standing at the gate. It was a solid construction of the same dark, sparkling crystal as the pagoda. At a gesture from Jason, it sank into the ground, opening the dark wall that separated the physical space of his spirit realm from the astral void surrounding it. The rainbow bridge spanning out towards the distant stream of similarly polychromatic light.

"That's the link between worlds?" Farrah asked.

"Beyond this wall is the deep astral," Jason said. "What we're seeing is more metaphor than reality. My spirit realm trying to quantify that which cannot be quantified."

"So, how does this work?"

"However I like."

Jason flicked his hand in another gesture and his entire spirit realm started moving along the rainbow bridge. It accelerated more and more until Farrah realised that what she thought was a narrow stream of energy in the distance was planetary in scale, simply much further away than she realised. As they drew closer, they reached the point where all they could see was a vast rainbow wall in front of them.

The spirit realm passed into the stream, the rainbow energy engulfing them but not crossing beyond the wall or an invisible dome above it. The gate rose back up and Jason turned away.

The people observing the stone formation from several kilometres away in a helicopter watched as the ordinary stone transmuted into dark crystal, the inside of it speckled with shifting blue, silver and gold light. They reported that Jason Asano had left the Earth behind.

Jason's team, plus Rufus, Gary and Jory, stood before Dawn in a confrontational array, with Virid sitting obediently at the picnic table behind them. The twisted remains of the sword Gary once gave Jason still rested in Gary's hands.

The local townsfolk knew adventurer business when they saw it and had already given the group a wide berth. After Gary's stone-shattering roar from earlier, they gave it a wider one.

"Why should we believe you?" Sophie asked Dawn. "If Jason's alive, where is he?"

“Jason is on his own world,” Clive said. His eyes moved side to side as he absently scratched his head, his mind putting the pieces together. He looked up, starting slightly as he noticed everyone looking at him. He turned to Dawn.

“You serve the World-Phoenix, don’t you?” he asked her. She smiled.

“He wasn’t wrong about you being the smart one,” she said. “I spent a lot of time with Jason’s collection of astral magic theory. Your notes are impressively insightful, Mr Standish. Especially given the level of astral magic in this world.”

“What’s a world phoenix?” Gary asked.

“A great astral being,” Clive said. “I only know a little, but my understanding is that it’s largely antagonistic to the Builder. Its domain is dimensional integrity, which directly clashes with the Builder’s plundering of worlds.”

“Then where has it been all this time?” Sophie demanded. “Is its other domain taking a nap when it should be getting off its butt and kicking the Builder in the fruit basket?”

“The World-Phoenix is famously indirect,” Clive said. “It works through agents and pawns, which is why information about it is limited. The very fact that one of its agents is here at all is quite worrying. It makes me wonder what the Builder had planned that would warrant intervention.”

“You are right to worry,” Dawn said.

“What does any of this have to do with Jason?” Rufus asked.

“Jason always said he had a way back home,” Clive said.

“One that he didn’t know how to use,” Sophie added. “He showed it to me once. It was an item. Red, with a picture of a bird on it.”

“So it’s true, then,” Clive said. “World-Phoenix tokens really can bring back the dead.”

“Yes,” Dawn said. “This is why they are handed out sparingly. Jason Asano was reborn in his own world.”

“I thought his world didn’t have magic,” Gary said. “What would someone like you be doing there?”

“Jason’s world held many secrets. On returning, he found himself with responsibilities that someone of his rank should not have had to shoulder. Enemies whose power utterly dwarfed his own.”

“No change there, then,” Jory muttered. “Still picking fights he can’t win.”

“I never said he didn’t win,” Dawn said. “Jason managed to provoke my counterpart within the Builder’s forces into overstepping his bounds. This has forced certain compromises on the Builder’s part, allowing for my presence here. There are extreme

restrictions on my power to intervene directly on events but I have already started preparing this world for what comes next.”

“Which is what?” Humphrey asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Sophie said. “The issue is Jason.”

“Since I left Jason’s world,” Dawn continued, “he apparently provoked the man again. In recompense, I am allowed a single instance of intervention on behalf of this world, using the full measure of my power. I intend to use it well.”

“If you were in Jason’s world,” Sophie said, “why didn’t you bring him back?”

“I told you that he has responsibilities,” Dawn said. “Once they are complete, he will return on his own. Further explanation can be left to Jason himself, once he returns, other than to say that when he does, the monster surge will begin.”

“Why?” Rufus asked. “How?”

“And I’m thinking we should get those further explanations now,” Sophie said.

“I will explain the details to Mr Standish soon enough,” Dawn said. “He’s the only one who would truly understand what is happening anyway and can explain it for you in turn. As for further explanations, I have something that you will want to see more.”

“Hold on,” Humphrey said. “You’re doing a lot of talking, but words are easy. I haven’t seen anything to prove you aren’t just playing some game with us.”

“And he said you were the naïve one,” Dawn said to Humphrey. “Mr Blacksmith, would you care to reassure them?”

“The sword,” Virid said, standing up. The group suddenly remembered the blade in Gary’s hands.

“If it’s truly soul-bonded to your friend and your friend is alive,” Virid continued, “then it cannot be hidden from Gary in the process of reforging. It will give us a definitive answer.”

“Still,” Belinda said to Dawn. “He could have at least given you a recording crystal to bring back to us for evidence.”

“He did,” Dawn said. “I’ve been trying to tell you that but you keep interrupting. No wonder you all became his friends. You’re as bad as he is.”

“How much time did you spend with Jason?” Rufus asked.

“You just can’t stop, can you?” Dawn asked. “You genuinely all deserve each other. I spent more time with Jason than you, Mr Remore. My powers were severely restricted, however. For most of our time together, he was more powerful than I. Now, if you’re all quite done, does anyone have a recording crystal projector?”

Jason and Farrah lay back in lounge chairs made out of cloud stuff, watching the rainbow energies pass over Jason's spirit realm. Then they spotted a figure float swiftly past and they both sat up.

"Was that...?" Farrah asked.

"TV's Patrick Duffy, yeah," Jason said. "I didn't know he was an interdimensional being."

Farrah gave him a flat look.

"Or, it's possible that my spirit realm imprinting physical reality onto a non-physical space is causing anomalous manifestations projected from my psyche."

"And what your mind threw out was Patrick Duffy?"

"He was in *The Bold and the Beautiful*, *Dallas* and *Step by Step*, Farrah. That's a daytime soap, a primetime soap and a classic nineties sitcom; all iconic examples of their respective genres. He's a titan of the industry."

"Most of that is from before you were born. Your father has a lot to answer for."

"Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it, which is probably why they rebooted *Dallas*. Also, you know a lot for someone who claims to hate television."

"I really, really need to get back to my own world."

Clive's crystal projector was set on the picnic table Virid had been sitting at, the group now all gathered around it.

"I haven't seen this," Dawn admitted. "We were both rather caught up in events and he handed it to me as I was leaving his world."

"You don't have an image projector?" Humphrey asked.

"It's primitive magic," Dawn said. "My dimensional vessel doesn't have one. I could have gotten one while I was here, but it seemed right that you should all see it first. He made it for you, after all."

She placed the crystal in the projector and an image blinked to life over the table. It was Jason, covered in blood and dust, wearing nothing but boxer shorts with love hearts on them. He was sporting a slew of wounds, although they were closing at a rate fast enough for them to see.

"Of course he doesn't have pants," Rufus laughed, the delight at seeing his friend thick in his voice.

"I haven't done this in a while, the magic being kind of crap in my world," Jason said.

"So, the recording crystals don't work so well. I'll catch you all up at some point but I'm kind

of in the middle of something right now. I guess I can hit the highlights. Farrah's alive; that's a winner. So am I, for that matter, which may be—”

Gary's hand slammed down, pausing the projection.

“Yes,” Dawn said. “She's alive. I've spent quite some time with her, in fact. You could say she is a mutual friend.”

Rufus and Gary shared a look; hope and joy tempered by a fear that all this was some cruel, elaborate ruse. Sophie, who had only heard about Farrah, reached out to resume the recording.

“...more surprising,” Jason continued. “I die kind of a lot. Is three times a lot? I mean, three isn't a big number, but not many people hit the triple when it comes to carking it. I think three counts as a lot.”

He panned the crystal away from himself, showed off some kind of city street with an architectural style that none of them were familiar with. There was debris all over the street, courtesy of a collapsed nearby building. Jason panned the crystal back to himself.

“I'm saving the world, so I'd best get back to it,” he said. “As you can see, I'm standing in my underwear in the middle of the street, covered in blood, next to a building I just blew up. The street is in an extradimensional city I'm taking over so a hole doesn't get blasted in the side of the universe. Mondays, am I right? Oh, wait; you have a six-day week. Still, it's a day of the week. It's not that hard to pick up from context.”

“Hole in the universe?” Clive asked. “How is that even possible, and why is—”

“Clive,” Jason's projection cut in, wagging a disapproving finger. “I know you've got questions but stop interrupting. People are trying to listen to the recording. Be courteous and wait.”

The group burst out laughing at the expression on Clive's face, the tension they all had breaking like an overflowing dam. They watched Jason pull out a flask of cleaning solution and pour it over himself. He winced as it stung his wounds.

“Jory, if you're watching this, I want you to know I have a new appreciation for the quality of your crystal wash. I am going to need quite a lot of it once I get back, by the way. Like, a lot. I don't want to go running out again, so waaay more than last time.”

Jason tipped another flask of the cleaning solution over some strange looking weapons before putting them away in his inventory.

“Anyway, none of my essence abilities work here, which sucks. I spent the last few hours fighting it out with a small army of astronauts with ray guns, which was pretty awesome. I'll explain what they are later.”

Jason reached up to the crystal and the projection ended.

Chapter 462

Connotations

A bird fluttered out of Humphrey's jacket, then transformed into a puppy as it landed on the table and started pawing at the projector. Humphrey scooped him up and petted him gently.

"It's alright, little buddy," he cooed soothingly.

"That's it?" Neil complained as the recording ended. "That didn't tell us anything. I'm so glad he's alive and I can go back to hating him."

"Neil," Humphrey scolded.

"What?" Neil asked.

Clive shook his head while Belinda snorted a laugh. Jory was contemplating the return of the crystal wash vampire while Sophie was looking shell-shocked. Humphrey reached out to her but she flinched away. He looked hurt and she winced apologetically.

"I..."

Sophie couldn't get out any more words and left in a half-run. Humphrey moved to follow but Belinda placed a restraining hand on his arm.

"You'd do more harm than good at this point," she told him. "She needs a friend, not... whatever you are."

"I have to do something."

"You had plenty of time to do something," Belinda said, the barbs in her voice dripping venom. "If you'd mustered up some courage any time in the last two years then she wouldn't have been stuck between a ghost and a coward. Now the ghost is coming back, so it's time to give it up or rummage around those fancy pants and see if you can't dig out some balls."

She snatched puppy Stash from Humphrey's arms and marched off in Sophie's direction, leaving a crestfallen Humphrey behind her.

Rufus and Gary were looking at one another as if asking for permission to hope. Seeing Jason alive was one thing, but hearing about Farrah without seeing her had a fearful unreality to it. They shared the fear of their hope being cruelly snatched away.

"Mr Standish," Dawn said. "Perhaps you can join me for a lengthy discussion."

Farrah groaned as she watched Jason go through a meditative sword dance. Again. They were on a terrace in Jason's spirit realm, the rainbow lights of the world link washing over them.

“How long until we get back?” she complained.

“I told you that I don’t know,” Jason said, his smooth, graceful movements continuing uninterrupted. “If that changes, I’ll let you know.”

“Are you going to meditate all day, every day? I know training is important but you’re getting worse than Rufus.”

“I’ve been on Earth too long,” Jason said. “Standards are going to be higher than I’m used to and I have no intention of falling behind. It wouldn’t hurt you to do a little practise yourself.”

“Fine,” Farrah conceded. “At least change it up a bit, though. How about a spar?”

“As in a practise fight or a fizzy bath?” Jason asked.

“There’s a spa bath here?” Farrah asked, perking up.

“There can be,” Jason said. “How about we do both?”

Farrah was disoriented as she suddenly found herself standing in front of Jason in a wide-open duelling area. She looked down to find her Earth clothes had been replaced with a training gi.

“Did you use your tin-pot god powers to change my clothes?” she asked.

“Nope,” Jason said. “You were wearing that the whole time.”

Farrah conjured her sword.

“I’m going to enjoy this.”

Belinda walked through the dark outside the town, her way lit by a floating silver lantern shedding a clean, white-blue light that gave a refreshing feeling as its aura replenished her mana. This was Shimmer, her astral lantern familiar.

She found Sophie sitting on a rock on a small rise, staring up at the night sky. She sat next to her friend, leaning into her by way of greeting.

“I’m not looking to talk,” Sophie said.

Belinda passed Stash into Sophie’s lap and plucked a bottle of amber liquid from her storage space. She took a swig and handed over the bottle.

“Who said anything about talk?” she asked.

They sat in silence, passing the bottle back and forth as Sophie scratched the napping Stash behind the ears.

“I don’t... gods damn it,” Sophie said.

“I haven’t seen you in how long and that idiot still hasn’t done anything,” Belinda complained. “Humphrey’s an idiot.”

“He’s not an idiot.”

“You’re both idiots,” Belinda said. “Since when do you dance about instead of taking what you want?”

“You know since when,” Sophie said. “It’s like Jason has been sitting between us this whole time and now...”

Sophie took a big gulp, letting the silver-rank liquor burn her throat.

“And now he’s coming back,” Belinda finished as Sophie handed her the bottle.

“What do I do, Lindy?” Sophie asked, her voice uncharacteristically small.

“The thing about death,” Belinda said, “is that we don’t look back at things the way they were. We tell ourselves the stories we want to remember and act like they’re real memories. After a while, we forget that they aren’t.”

“What are you saying?”

“That he’s coming back and it’s not about the stories anymore. I knew Jason better than you, Soph, because I wasn’t tied up in nine kinds of mess the way you were. You hated him, and then you... I saw what he was, Soph, while he was always one story or another to you, even before he died. You thought too little or too much of him and never what he really was.”

“Which was what?”

“Some guy. He was kind of amazing and kind of a turd, but he was just some guy. But now he’s some myth in your head and you can’t expect him to live up to that.”

“I don’t seem to be coming off well in this description,” Sophie said, taking the bottle back.

“You weren’t in a well place, Sophie. And Jason never really knew you, either. You spent your whole life building a fortress and he was long gone before you took it down. He was going through his own stuff, too. If you think either of you are the same people you were then you’re deluding yourself.”

Belinda pushed herself off the rock, wobbling with drink.

“In the end, Humphrey and Jason don’t matter,” she said. “It’s about you. Be who you are. Make sure you’re chasing what you want and not what you think you should want. That will only hurt everyone, yourself most of all.”

Belinda staggered off into the darkness in the vague direction of the town, her familiar bobbing after her.

“What if I’m already hurt?” Sophie whispered.

“...which is why Jason’s return to our world will trigger the monster surge,” Clive concluded. Some of the villagers had stopped to listen in with initial fascination, only to drift away as Clive started explaining astral magic to the group.

“Did the explanation have to be that long?” Neil asked. “The monster surge isn’t happening because of a bad magic thing that some stupidly powerful whatever made. Jason, being Jason, heard ‘stupidly powerful,’ immediately decided to annoy it and blew up its magic thing. Now the monster surge is back on, with a bonus invasion, and Jason’s coming here to probably get us all killed.”

“I wouldn’t characterise that as entirely accurate,” Clive said.

“Why is Jason building this bridge to this place anyway?” Neil asked. “Where even are we?”

“He’s not coming to this place,” Dawn said. “What he’s doing is outside of even my experience. He may arrive at the same place he arrived the first time, somewhere completely random or at a location equivalent to one of his...”

“What is it?” Clive asked after Dawn trailed off.

“Some things are better not said aloud,” she said. “Suffice to say, any potential location for Jason’s arrival would be a guess on our part.”

“Then what are we doing all the way out here?” Neil asked. “Does this town even have a name?”

“Of course it has a name,” Jory said.

“What is it?”

“I don’t exactly remember,” Jory admitted.

“Mr Xandier was here,” Dawn said. “I needed his help and this place has fewer eyes and ears. I had enough influence with the Adventure Society to send you all here, so I did.”

“You’ve been warning the Adventure Society,” Humphrey said.

“Yes,” Dawn acknowledged. “This will not merely be cultists snatching away astral spaces. This will be war.”

Dawn departed from the group to resume her work preparing the Adventure Society as best she could. Rufus returned to Greenstone, both to settle his affairs before Jason’s arrival and in case it was the place he arrived. With no better plan than to wait, the others left for the city of Zartos. Home to Gary’s mentor, Virid and the diamond-ranker’s personal smithy.

“It’s the best place to forge a great work,” Virid said.

Gary and Virid spent days examining the sword, seeking to understand it. They carefully selected the supplemental materials they would use and familiarised themselves with the soul echo bonded to the weapon.

The forging was a collaboration, not just between Gary and Virid but also Jason. In many ways, it was the soul-bond that guided the most critical aspects of the work and shaped the final result.

Zartos was a subterranean city built around an underground river, largely populated by celestines. While Gary and Virid worked, the others enjoyed their reunion. None of them had felt entirely whole as a team since Jason's death. As with Rufus and Gary, the loss of a friend and companion had led to them taking separate paths where previously they would have resisted.

Gary and Virid were sealed away in Virid's smithy for nineteen days before they finally emerged. The sword Gary showed the team was wholly unlike what it had been before. Before even its appearance, the blade had a domineering aura that gave a sense that even looking at it was somehow a transgression. There was a benevolence as well, but one looking down from above.

"That's quite a weapon, Gary," Humphrey said. "A real aura from a weapon is quite a feat, especially an aura that strong."

"The aura comes from the soul bond, and Virid covered many of my flaws," Gary confessed. "He pushed me to heights I could not reach alone. The soul bond also guided me. It's like the sword knew what it wanted to be."

The hilt was a simple design of milk-white metal with onyx embellishments and bone grip. The blade was a black so dark as to be unnerving, as if looking upon it was forbidden. Symbols were carved into the blade, starkly contrasted in white.

"That's the same language used in the brand Jason inflicts with his spell," Clive said. "The one that applies the mark of sin affliction."

"That brand was on me once," Sophie said. "It actually means something?"

"It's an ideographic language," Clive said.

"A what?" Sophie asked.

Like Jason, Clive had the power to speak and read all languages. Unlike Jason, he had used it as a springboard for study.

"It's a language where a single symbol can embody a complex concept," Clive explained. "Whether a symbol is alone or contextualised by others can hugely impact the meaning. The symbol from Jason's brand translates to sinner, which makes sense. It's accompanied by an affliction called the mark of sin."

“Are these symbols Jason’s native language?” Belinda asked.

“No,” Clive said. “This is something much older.”

“I don’t even know what it says,” Gary admitted. “It just kind of felt right to mark them on the blade as I was working it. It’s the soul bond. I named the original sword Dread Salvation, but I think it might have renamed itself and that’s what we’re looking at. What does it say, Clive?”

“Hegemon’s Will.”

“You said one symbol conveys a complex concept, right?” Sophie asked.

“It can,” Clive said. “This language has the primary, conceptual symbols, and the secondary, contextual symbols.”

“The sword has six symbols,” Sophie said. “That seems like a lot of context for a short name.”

“There are connotations,” Clive said.

“What kind of connotations?” Sophie asked.

“You felt the aura,” Clive said. “That kind of connotations.”

“Oh, great,” Neil said. “Sounds like Jason’s time away gave him the humility he so badly needed.”

The journey was proving immensely valuable to Jason. The tiny bubble of his spirit realm was a projection of his soul being cast through the infinity that was the deep astral, only the world link it clung to saving him from drifting helplessly forever. His soul was immersed in magic at its most pure and powerful, with even simple meditation accelerating his insights into the most fundamental aspects of cosmic power.

His most common meditative technique was the dance of the sword fairy that Rufus had taught him. Jason was trying to use it to get a better grasp of entering the combat trance state, which he was still struggling to fully master. More than just a simple battle trance, he sought oneness with the cosmos that he was closer to now than he was likely to ever be again.

“You’re not Luke Skywalker,” Farrah called out from her lounge.

“Shut up,” he said, continuing his sword dance uninterrupted.

“Anakin, maybe. Prequels, not Clone Wars.”

Jason stumbled.

“That’s just low,” he muttered as she laughed.

Farrah was less enamoured than Jason of the journey. For her it was more waiting, which she’d done plenty of while Jason was in the two transformation zones. She became

increasingly agitated as her home, family and friends grew closer, yet felt so far away. Days turned into weeks as they continued their passage through the astral.

Jason went back to his meditative dance as she was listening to music on a recording crystal, lounging in a deck chair made of clouds.

“This is not traditional meditative music,” Jason commented.

“If you don’t like Laura Branigan, that’s not my problem.”

Jason stopped his sword dance again.

“I’m the one who... you didn’t give her essences as well, did you?”

“I wouldn’t do that without telling you.”

“No? Do we need to discuss Pat Benatar?”

“Who told...? I mean, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I should have worked harder to get you back home,” Jason said, shaking his head as he tilted it back to look helplessly at the rainbow sky. “I think you’ve gone native.”

His eyes narrowed, still looking up.

“Was that a tree?”

Chapter 463

What a Monster Surge Feels Like

Gary and Jory and Jason's team were on the open deck of a skyship, heading into the range where they could portal to Vitesse.

"Is everyone feeling that?" Humphrey asked.

"I am," Neil said, the rest of the group agreeing. A tremulation in the ambient magic started small but grew rapidly in strength and was shortly creating turbulence for the skyship.

"What is this?" Sophie asked. "Is this what a monster surge feels like?"

"No," Clive said. "No, it isn't."

The rainbow light over Jason's spirit realm slowly faded out to be replaced with a blank grey. Even as it did, increasing amounts of foliage, branches and even whole trees were blasting past, their number increasing as the light faded. By the time the light was entirely gone, there was a constant stream of debris passing overhead, ripped through the air by devastating winds.

"What's going on?" Farrah asked.

"We've arrived," Jason said. "In the middle of a storm. A cyclone, from the looks of it. There goes my plan to step out and take in a lungful of clean, fresh air."

"We don't breathe."

"Oh, yeah."

Belinda and Clive had already rushed below decks to see if they could help the engineers right the skyship as it moved from poorly controlled flight towards poorly controlled fall. Neil and Gary were ushering other passengers below decks while Sophie and Humphrey had jumped overboard, using flight, teleport and other movement powers to retrieve the few already bucked off by violent turbulence.

There were other adventurers amongst the passengers who likewise stepped in to stem the chaos. Eventually, the ship righted itself and Clive and Belinda came back up, accompanied by the chief engineer.

"...I didn't even know you could do that with resonating cascade rods," the frazzled engineer praised Belinda.

“Improvisation is a specialty of hers,” Clive said. “If you ever need to take her prisoner, I’d just have a guard hit her on the head every time she regains consciousness. And sometimes when she hasn’t to make sure.”

“Hey...” Belinda complained.

“I once saw her take down a trap barrier from the inside with a broken wand and a device for checking the freshness of fish,” Clive continued.

The team regrouped on the top deck, along with key members of the crew and some other adventurers who had likewise helped out.

“Any idea what’s happening?” the captain asked the chief engineer.

“It’s not a problem with the ship,” the chief engineer said. “Ship sensors are reading massive disruptions in the ambient magic as far as they’ll reach. We’ve managed to cobble together an adaptation to compensate but it won’t hold. We need to get on the ground slow before we hit it fast.”

“It’s the monster surge,” Clive said. “It’s starting.”

“I’ve lived through three monster surges,” the captain said. “Monster surges don’t do this.”

“This one does,” Clive said.

“We picked something up on the ship’s sensors,” the chief engineer said. “Something big and strange, somewhere off to starboard.”

They all looked but no one saw anything but clear skies.

“I think your sensors are wrong,” one of the adventurers said.

“No,” Clive said. “You don’t see it because it doesn’t exist yet.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” the adventurer asked. “You’re talking out of your...”

He trailed off as a rainbow light erupted in the sky, above and starboard of the ship. It was the rainbow light of a magic manifestation, but the size was almost incomprehensibly vast.

“I don’t suppose there’s any chance that’s a really, really big awakening stone,” Neil said.

“It has to be a diamond-rank monster, right?” one of the adventurers said. “That’s too big even for gold rank.”

“I saw a diamond-rank manifestation, two monster surges back,” the captain said. “Even that wasn’t this big.”

“Captain,” the chief engineer said. “I take back what I said about getting onto the ground. Let’s get out of here as fast as we can.”

The captain and engineer ran off toward their stations.

“This is what Dawn warned us about, isn’t it?” Belinda asked.

“I think so,” Clive said. “I don’t think being nearby is a good idea. We should go help the engineer keep this thing afloat while we get out of here.”

“Normal manifestations take a while, right?” Jory asked. “Especially the big ones?”

“Yes,” Clive said. “Hopefully we’re well away before something comes out of that light.”

Jason opened a portal from his spirit realm and he and Farrah finally set foot back onto Farrah’s homeworld. It was not a friendly welcome as they were immediately blasted with horizontal rain and the powerful wind that was tearing up the plants and trees of the tropical jungle in which they found themselves. Even as silver-rankers, they could barely stay on their feet because they didn’t weigh enough. Farrah had to conjure her heavy stone armour while shadow arms reached out to anchor Jason to nearby trees and rocks.

Farrah pointed to a rocky rise and they moved downwind of it, hunkering down as the storm raged past them. Their clothes were already drenched, clinging to their bodies as they crouched down, out of the worst of the wind.

“I wish I still had my magic umbrella,” Jason said through voice chat. Trying to speak over the howling wind would be pointless. “I left it with Emi.”

“It was iron-rank anyway,” Farrah said. “It would have a hard time with a storm this strong. We’re in a high magic zone and this storm has soaked up some of the ambient magic.”

Jason pulled up his map power and zoomed out to a global scale. Their location was marked as somewhere in the Caribbean Sea. As he had never been to this world’s equivalent, he saw no details, only the outlines of landmasses. There seemed to be three additional major islands compared to Jason’s world, south of the Greater Antilles. Jason and Farrah were on an island sufficiently minor that at the current scale it didn’t even appear on the map. Jason shared the ability to see the map with Farrah.

“The Sea of Storms,” she said. “Makes sense. We’re in the Storm Kingdom, which rules the islands of the Sea of Storms, along with many of the surrounding coastal regions.”

“Your world doesn’t have Christopher Columbus or cruise lines, so it’s probably nicer here than in mine,” Jason said.

“Don’t be so sure. We have magic and it’s called the Sea of Storms for a reason. There are major storms every month or so during storm season, which is two-thirds of the

year. And during that time, there's always at least one powerful, localised storm happening somewhere in the Storm Sea."

"But it's nice otherwise?"

"So I've heard," Farrah said. "I've never been. Emir has, but he's not allowed back. He stole something from the royal family a few years back."

"That rings a bell," Jason said. "I think he told me about that once. Speaking of Emir, how about we find the coast, pull out a cloud ship and change into some dry clothes?"

"I like this plan."

"Shade, what do you have for us?" Jason shouted into the wind. Darkness spilled out of Jason's shadow, taking the form of a beetle the size of a short passenger bus. On the beetle's back was a dome of translucent chitin, the inside of which was hollow. The beetle had a pair of large, multi-jointed arms that were longer than its other legs.

The translucent chitin opened a gap as the hard substance turned to liquid and flowed to make a round hole. The long arms picked up Jason and Farrah and deposited them inside as climbing or jumping in the blasting wind would be a difficult proposition. The gap closed behind them, shutting out the wind and rain and noise. Chairs made of soft, comfortable shadow-stuff rose from the dark chitin under their feet.

"Nice one, Shade," Jason said.

"It seemed appropriate for the terrain," Shade said.

"This is a treasure beetle, right?" Farrah asked as she started stripping off her wet clothes and pulling dry ones from her dimensional bag. "I've heard of them but never seen one because they get hunted down as soon as they're found."

"I'm assuming that's something to do with why they're called treasure beetles," Jason said, turning to look away despite Farrah's unconcern. He changed his clothes using his inventory system, dark mist emerging and swapping his outfits before dispersing again.

"They're very sensitive to materials with large amounts of magic," Farrah explained as she changed. "Ores, magic herbs, items left behind when some adventurer died alone. They can burrow very well and harvest herbs without damaging them using those big arms. They store them in the domes on their backs, which preserves the magic."

"They're a walking treasure trove. Not a fantastic survival trait."

The skyship was shuddering as it pushed its speed while also running on jury-rigged modifications to handle the disrupted ambient magic conditions. Anyone not an adventurer or crew member had been banished below decks, although there had been few complaints.

Belinda and Clive were working with the engineer in the bowels of the ship while the rest of their group was watching the manifestation they were hoping to escape before whatever was coming out of the rainbow light appeared. They realised that they had underestimated the size of it as they moved away rapidly yet it continued to loom large in the sky above them.

“On the bright side,” Gary said, “this means Jason and Farrah are either here or will be soon, right?”

“That’s what Clive said,” Jory confirmed. “Then it’s just a matter of finding them.”

“It’s going to be a mess getting information with a monster surge going on,” Humphrey said. “Especially this one. The Adventure Society is going to be tying up all the public water-link chambers, making long-range communication tricky. My family always has a private link chamber in our family compounds, although they will no doubt be busy as well.”

“Church of Knowledge?” Neil suggested.

“Jason had a way to come back before he left,” Sophie said. “If she didn’t tell us that after he died, why would she help us now?”

“It’s worth trying anyway,” Humphrey said. “Our best bet is the Adventure Society, though. If Jason checks in with any branch, his status will be updated across every branch. Then we’ll know where to go.”

"Look," Neil said, pointing. "I think it's happening."

The rainbow light started to fade and something was appearing in its place, shimmering into being like a ghost.

“Dawn was telling the truth,” Sophie said weakly. “It really is a city.”

As she said, an entire city was coming into being in the air, floating high above the ground. The underside was all rock as if the city had been ripped from the ground, while the rest was a stone city surrounded by high walls, with towers jutting out over the top.

“Well, damn,” Neil said.

The island Jason and Farrah were on proved to be both small and uninhabited. Shade’s treasure beetle form navigated the jungle terrain handily and they soon reached the coast where Jason opened up his cloud flask. The clouds streaming out were teased by the wind but no more, the cyclonic power of the storm insufficient to disrupt the cloud flask’s magic.

Soon, a very large pleasure yacht was resting calmly on a sea that was anything but. It wasn’t in the Earth style but more like the ones Jason had seen at the Greenstone

marina. He had spent a pleasant day with Cassandra Mercer on a smaller version of such a boat, not that long before she dumped him. Jason and Farrah went aboard and Shade took position as pilot.

“My map is a blank other than raw geography,” he said. “Should we just steer towards a big island and see what we get?”

Jason brought up a map of the Sea of Storms on the wall. Because the cloud flask was soul-bonded, it was able to replicate his map ability, at least to display a map. The more tactical functions, like enemy tracking, were still restricted to Jason himself.

“These islands here,” Farrah said, pointing off the coast of what on Earth was Venezuela.

“I think one of those is Aruba,” Jason said. “Works for me. I’m pretty sure the boat can handle the weather, so you can set out, Shade. What is this place we’re going to?”

“The capital of the Storm Kingdom, Rimaros,” Farrah said.

“Rimaros?” Jason said. “I met a woman named Rimaros. I heard she was the princess of something, which I guess is here. Hey, I know a local.”

“You might not want to lean on that connection,” Farrah said. “We should keep our heads down and not make trouble. Which, I’ll remind you, is kind of not your thing.”

“Oh, I learned that lesson,” Jason said. “I got to be a famous superhero and it turned out to suck. I say we find the nearest Adventure Society branch, quietly do our part with the monster surge, find our teams and finish up this magic bridge without making any waves.”

“You know it’s never going to be that simple,” Farrah told him. “You don’t seriously think you can avoid being caught up in the Builder invasion, right?”

“A bloke can dream, can’t he?”

“What’s that?” Humphrey asked. “Are those airships coming out of the city?”

One of the adventurers around them cast a spell and the air in front of them shimmered. When it settled, everything seen through it looked much closer and they could clearly make out the skyships. They rose over the walls of the city and even emerged from tunnels in the rock underneath.

“Am I mistaken in thinking that it looks like two of those things are coming right for us?” Neil said.

“No, you’re not,” Humphrey said. “Sophie, go get Lindy and Clive.”

Chapter 464

Strategic Doctrine

“Clive,” Humphrey said. “Is that a kind of skyship you’re familiar with?”

“No,” Clive said.

The group watched the two approaching skyships using the vision-magnifying spell one of the other adventurers around them had shared.

The two approaching skyships were unlike any the group had seen. If Jason had been present he would have noticed a resemblance to old ironclad ships from the US civil war. They had a decidedly industrial look, with plenty of thick, crude metal plating and smoke pouring from a pair of stacks on the top. On the deck of the approaching skyships there were construct creatures, humanoid in shape but resembling their vessel in that they were made from crude industrial metal.

“The craftsmanship isn’t there to be true golems,” Clive assessed. “Are those constructs what the Builder cult was using when they attacked the expedition from Greenstone?”

“Similar,” Neil said, “although those were monster shaped, rather than people shaped. What’s the difference between a construct and a golem?”

“Golems are a specific type of construct,” Gary explained. “Usually shaped like oversized people, they’re more powerful than most other constructs. They’re less common because they’re expensive and hard to make.”

Gary was more familiar with Builder construct creatures than most, having studied them extensively in the wake of the expedition that claimed Farrah’s life.

“Clive,” Humphrey said. “If our skyship gets attacked, can it stay in the air?”

“I’m not sure it can stay in the air even if it doesn’t,” Clive said.

“Can we outrun them?” Jory asked. “For what look like flying lumps of iron, those airships seem fairly fast.”

“The crew is already pushing it harder than they should to maintain this speed,” Belinda said. “If we don’t crash first, they are going to catch us.”

“Alright,” Humphrey said. “That narrows our options.”

He turned to the other group of adventurers on the deck with them.

“We’ll take the first airship. Are you good to take the second?”

One of the adventurers stepped forward.

“I don’t see as we have a choice,” she said. “We’ll get it done.”

Humphrey nodded and then turned to his own group.

“Gary, Jory, are you in?” he asked.

“I may have given up adventuring,” Gary said, “but I’m not going to just stand around when trouble comes looking.”

“I need to stop spending time with you people,” Jory complained. “I only ever get in fights when you’re around.”

“Good man,” Gary said slapping on the back almost hard enough to send him over the side.

“Clive and I can port four people each,” Humphrey said. “I’ll go first with Sophie, Gary and Lindy to claim some ground and Clive will follow up with the rest. Everyone ready up.”

Everyone started grabbing gear from dimensional bags and storage spaces or conjuring it outright. Sophie pulled on a pair of tight, thin gloves while Jory put away his coat and pulled out another one, covered in pockets. Clive took out a wand and a staff and started drawing ritual circles in the air with his finger to attach to the ends of them. Gary wore armour that looked like an overheating furnace and took a shield and hammer from his dimensional bag. Belinda was engulfed in silver mist, which quickly faded to reveal a female leonid with forged armour, shield and hammer, courtesy of Gary. Gary’s eyes went wide.

“Oh, hey, Lindy,” he said. “Uh... how’s it going?”

“I’m not really a leonid, Gary.”

“We’re essence users,” Gary said. “It’s not who you are on the inside that matters. It’s what you look like that counts.”

“You’re going to let that go?” Neil asked Jory.

“Yep,” Jory said.

“You don’t feel any need to defend your lady?”

“She can take care of herself,” Jory said. “If she wants my help, she’ll ask. She’s not shy.”

Leonid Belinda leaned down to give Jory a peck on the cheek.

“That tickles,” he said as her fur brushed his face.

“If we’re quite done?” Humphrey asked. He had conjured up his dragon armour, the scales shimmering with rainbow colours, and sword stylised as a dragon’s wing.

Sophie, Humphrey, Gary and Belinda vanished as Humphrey teleported them to the closest skyship.

From inside the massive yacht, Jason and Farrah lounged in luxury as they watched the storm rage outside. The wild seas and sweeping winds did not trouble the cloud ship,

the interior resting as gently as a baby in a cradle even as the interior smashed through waves like a battering ram.

“I need to run you through some important aspects of local culture before we arrive,” Farrah said. “With the monster surge there will be a lot of adventurers that aren’t local, so people will be a little more accommodating in regards to etiquette, but that will only go so far.”

“That’s a good idea,” Jason said. “Easier to lay low if I know the rules. I didn’t think you’d been to Rimaros, though.”

“I haven’t, but it’s one of the big adventuring cities, like Vitesse. If we’d had time to train you properly, you’d have learned all this but you had more than enough to catch up on as it was.”

“Okay. Sexy teacher Farrah time it is.”

“Are you looking to get spanked?”

“Is that a trick question? I have been a naughty boy.”

“That’s enough out of you,” Farrah said.

“Yes, Mistress.”

Farrah shook her head.

“At least that brings us to the first and most important thing you need to know, which is that everything about you is bad and you shouldn’t do it.”

“That’s a little harsh.”

“Jason, Rimaros isn’t some little provincial town where people will leave you be because you have a few high-rank friends. There is an expectation of respect to those both higher and lower rank than you. What this means is that if a gold-ranker messes with you, the Adventure Society will come down on them like a hammer, so long as you weren’t acting like you. If you talk to gold-rankers like you talk to everyone with more power than you, they’ll slap you through a wall and no one will say a thing because you were asking for it.”

“Sounds fair.”

“I wish Gary was here. We could bet on how many hours it takes for a gold-ranker to punt you into the ocean.”

“I can be respectful.”

“A conclusion based on what evidence?”

“That’s a little hurtful.”

“Look, just don’t get up in anyone’s face,” Farrah said. “There’s a lot of reasons not to go roaming around during a monster surge, especially this one. First and foremost is that

whatever else we have going on, we're adventurers. This is the time where we step up and earn all the privileges we enjoy."

Jason nodded his agreement. He wasn't going to skip out on the monster surge, which was exactly the level of responsibility he wanted. After having the fate of the world on his shoulders, the idea of being an inconsequential, rank-appropriate part of a larger effort was exactly the palate cleanser he was looking for.

"There are other reasons for participating in the monster surge, of course. The chance to kill some of those Builder pricks is at the top of my personal list. Plus, if the Adventure Society finds out you did anything other than report to your nearest branch and do what you're told, you'll find things get tricky after the monster surge. Getting decent contracts suddenly gets hard and accessing society resources gets harder."

"So, we'll report in, do our part and then move on," Jason said. "Two, unremarkable silver-rankers who came back from the dead. Maybe it won't be a big deal because Knowledge told people I was alive."

He thought about it for a moment.

"No, she didn't see me die," he said. "Knowing her, she'd probably say something about being the goddess of Knowledge and not the goddess of Solid Deductions Made on the Basis of Reasonable Evidence."

"Knowing her?"

"We're acquainted," Jason said. "I wouldn't say friends, though. There's some tension there."

Farrah put her face in her hands.

"We haven't even met a single person and you're talking about socialising with a deity," she complained.

"It's fine," he assured her. "I mean, have I met a bunch of gods? Yes, but it's not like we hang out."

Farrah gave him a flat look.

"I told you, it's fine. What's the next thing I need to know about our destination? What's the signature drink? Does it have coconuts? I love coconuts."

"I don't know the signature drink."

"What kind of half-baked training did you go through? I should make some notes for Rufus and his family's academy. They could do Responsible Service of Alcohol certifications. What's better than an adventurer? An adventurer with an RSA."

Gary's huge hammer had its name, Gary's Medium Hammer, engraved on the metal shaft of the handle. Held in one hand, he smashed it down onto another of the crude metal constructs. Most of them were only bronze-rank, which was good because they were tougher than equivalent-rank monsters and there were a lot of them. The silver-rank ones scattered amongst them were extremely tough, along with being overpoweringly strong. If not for their relatively slow and clumsy movement, the numbers swarming the open deck of the skyship would have overwhelmed the team.

Fortunately, Gary's hammer was the right tool for the job. Ever since Farrah's death, he had made his personal weapons specialised to fight constructs and the freakish cultists that incorporated construct parts into their bodies. Even so, the silver-rank constructs boasted an almost implausible resilience. Belinda was wielding a replica of Gary's hammer he had made for her but the rest of the team would exhaust themselves before dealing with all the constructs.

The team had a lot of abilities that allowed them to endure, from cooldown reduction to mana recovery, in auras and active abilities. Even so, more and more of the constructs kept emerging from the lower decks, as if there was a barracks down there where the constructs were slowly waking up.

For this reason, the group switched to a strategy based on using the strengths of the constructs against them. The power and resilience of the constructs also made them heavy. Combined with their chosen mode of transport, a skyship, the solution was made obvious by Jory. He had drunk a large potion that transformed him into a hulking brute even stronger than the constructs and started flinging them over the side. Even if they survived the two-kilometre drop, they were no longer an immediate threat.

"We aren't over a town or something, are we?" Humphrey yelled out to Clive. Clive was off the side of the skyship, floating on top of his familiar, Onslow. Clive looked down and saw only uninhabited, rocky badlands. Clive gave Humphrey the thumbs up.

"We're switching to a fall guy strategy!" Humphrey bellowed and the team moved into action. Humphrey had been the driving force in building a comprehensive tactical and strategic doctrine. Jason had been the driving force behind the names.

Jory wasn't familiar with the team's strategies but was already ahead of the curve in throwing enemies overboard. Gary's powerful roar could blast the weaker bronze-rank ones off the ship in small clusters and Belinda, currently in leonid form, could do the same. Gary and Belinda were holding the line while the rest of the team went to work.

Sophie seemed to be everywhere at once. One moment she was stalling a construct long enough for a team member to deal with it. The next she was positioning herself so

that Neil could drop an explosive shield on her and blast one or even two constructs over the side. Then she leapt overboard herself, where Clive used his switch-teleport spell. Sophie was suddenly amongst the constructs again, having swapped places with a construct now plummeting towards the ground.

Most of the team's familiars were also in play. Belinda's lantern was mostly serving to replenish mana as its attacks did little to the constructs. Her other familiar was replicating Humphrey, swinging a huge sword at the enemy.

Onslow was hitting constructs with various elemental powers. At silver-rank, his abilities were more sophisticated, with control aspects to go with the existing raw power. Electricity attacks were especially effective on the metal constructs, although focus wind and water attacks also knocked them around and sometimes off the boat entirely.

Stash was more elusive, mostly going unseen. Then a giant bird would scoop up a construct and drop it off the ship or a tentacle would snake over the side and drag one overboard.

Occasionally a different and more dangerous enemy would arise from below decks. One was an ogre-like construct, obviously more powerful than the others along with being much better made. This was a true golem, not as clumsy or slow as the others.

Belinda used her Pit of the Reaper ability to conjure an inverted, extradimensional pit of shadows over the ship. Shadow arms reached down from its maw, plucking up constructs and dragging them in. Many arms picked up the golem but couldn't haul it into the pit. It fought itself free of the arms with prodigious strength but it was too late. The skyship was still on the move and in the time the golem freed itself, the pit had been left behind. The golem fell through the air in the skyship's wake.

The golem was not the last dangerous construct to emerge from the bowels of the ship. The next was much smaller, but also much prettier. A complete divergence from the heavy constructs and even the golem, this was a finely crafted and delicate sculpture. With many long, thin, interwoven parts, it looked somewhere between a winged insect and a chandelier. Sunlight glinted from its polished silver body, with many legs and four mantis-like blade arms. It was as much artwork as death machine.

It could fly but mostly moved in fluttering hops, quickly darting about. It made its way around Belinda and Gary with flickering ease, darting right at Neil, who didn't bother to dodge. The blade arms moved in a blur, almost too quickly to see. Sophie, however, was moving fast enough to be all but invisible.

"Mine!" she called loudly as she blocked the flashing attacks of the construct with her hands. The construct had four blade arms but Sophie had hands, feet, knees, elbows and

a forehead, all of which peppered the construct with attacks. Its body was sharp, yet even headbutting the creature left Sophie uncut as her powers negated retaliatory damage.

Despite looking delicate, the construct was remarkably tough. Sophie didn't hit all that hard but every attack came with resonating-force damage, bane to even the hardest armour.

Sophie had long ago accepted that her attacks would never deliver powerful, singular damage outside of careful setup and unusual circumstances. What her attacks did do was reliable damage, no matter how tough or strange the opponent. Her solution, then, was just to attack a lot. The construct was fast but it was like lightning trying to outpace light. Slowly but surely, the construct was reduced to a ball of wiry scrap.

The team were eliminating constructs faster than they were emerging from below and they finally took the fight below decks. What they found was an automated construct factory, which they decommissioned with some judicious violence directed by Clive and Belinda. Eventually, they found the only living enemy of the ship, which was a pilot. When they burst into the bridge he exploded as a huge crystal star erupted from his insides, ripping his body to shreds.

"Haven't seen that in a while," Sophie said as she wiped pilot off her face. "So, do we steer this thing into the ground?"

"Seems like a waste," Belinda said. "Especially when our own skyship is getting a bit wonky."

Chapter 465

I've Seen Your Best

Farrah paused from her explanation of what Jason could expect from their destination once the cloud ship cleared the storm. In only a few moments they went from blasting horizontal rain and mountainous wave crests to calm seas and blue skies. They went out onto the deck of the boat to take a look, leaning against the railing as a cool ocean breeze pleasantly offset the warm air.

Behind the yacht, the edge of the storm just stopped, as if trapped behind glass. Even the seas swiftly calmed beyond the boundary, massive waves dwindling to nothing in a boat length. All around was a bright sky and gorgeous turquoise water, the air undisturbed by the storm raging only hundreds of metres away.

"This doesn't seem natural," Jason said.

"And what's natural?" Farrah asked. "This isn't Earth, Jason. Our magic doesn't come in discrete bubbles. If there isn't something strange and magical going on, people start investigating. Remember the expedition where I died? That started because magic water stopped turning up in the middle of the desert."

"Oh, yeah. I'm still getting into that magic mindset."

He flashed her a grin.

"It's good to be back."

Jason and Farrah moved to a pair of loungers on the open deck with an awning to shield them from the bright sun. As they relaxed, Farrah continued preparing Jason for their destination.

"Adventuring culture in Rimaros," Farrah, said, "is a little bit notorious."

"Oh?" Jason prompted.

"They're obsessed with extreme specialisation."

"Isn't overspecialisation bad?"

"Yes," Farrah said. "For one thing, it's tricky, expensive and unreliable. When you're picking up essence abilities, your power set tries to round itself out. Some people are more specialised than others but the abilities you gain as you fill out your set will naturally cover your weaknesses to some degree. If you want to get around that, you have to very carefully choose your essences and awakening stones and the order in which you use them. The Magic Society in Rimaros has been at the forefront of gaming essence ability acquisition for decades. Centuries, maybe; you'd have to ask Clive."

“But there are no guarantees, are there?”

“Just the opposite; it can go very wrong. You remember when I was first teaching you aura manipulation and I told you about high-rankers with no aura power?”

“Sure. You end up hurting normal-rank people because your aura is powerful and uncontrolled.”

“Most of those stories come from Rimaros. You have to severely interfere with your ability acquisition to avoid aura powers and perception powers.”

“But in Rimaros, that’s what they do?”

“Exactly. They aren’t trying to avoid aura powers, because that’s idiotic, but sometimes things go wrong. And because the people with the money and connections to attempt this are from the top end of town, the failures still frequently get resourced enough to reach high rank. Usually through cores.”

“What’s so worth all that cost and effort and risk?” Jason asked.

“It’s the idea of being the very best at something. Look at you, for example. You’re an affliction specialist, except in Rimaros, you aren’t. There, with your stealth, utility, mobility and summoning powers, you’re a generalist. In Rimaros, there are no focused or wide area affliction specialists. There are only affliction specialists and dabblers. Every power that doesn’t either inflict or interact with afflictions is a mark that you aren’t good enough.”

“That’s bollocks. What about diminishing returns? Barely more than half my powers are affliction abilities and it’s already a highly synergistic power set. Trading in everything else for more powers would just add lots of bugging about. Maybe an extra power or two to round out my weak spots, but ranking up is doing that just fine. Every ability I gave up would cost me more than whatever minimal power bump I got from another affliction power replacing it.”

“For people in Rimaros, that minimal power bump is enough to trade off the rest. Because then they’re the best at what they do.”

“So is Wolverine and he sucks. Magneto can just make him keep stabbing himself in the plums, only for them to grow back so can do it again.”

“Yeah, I don’t like Wolverine,” Farrah agreed. “Hugh Jackman was so much sexier in Kate and Leopold.”

“I know, right?” Jason said. “The way that man talks about butter. I mean, bloody hell. What were we talking about?”

“Diminishing returns.”

“Right, yes. My power set brings a lot of assets to a team. This super affliction guy you’re talking about would need a whole team around him to be viable at all.”

“Now you’re getting it,” Farrah said. “That kind of overspecialisation isn’t practical on a wide scale. It’s the people with the strongest backgrounds who get that level of attention and care, which is only a small portion of adventurers. The most prestigious teams will have one extreme specialist, with the entire team built around capitalising on their specialisation, whatever that might be.”

“I’ve seen the same strat in video games,” Jason said. “It can be powerful, but you put a crack in that egg and the whole thing can fall apart.”

“I’m not arguing,” Farrah said. “Despite the sketchy basis for your tactical thinking, I agree that it’s a terrible approach. It’s building a strategy around everything going right when being an adventurer is about everything is going wrong. It’s not like the Adventure Society doesn’t understand that, though. The majority of Rimaros adventurers are no different from you or I. The reason I’m telling you all this isn’t because it’ll have a big impact on who we might work with. Those Rimaros elites won’t have anything to do with the likes of us.”

“You’re telling me because of attitudes.”

“Yes,” Farrah said. “You need to be aware that while not many adventurers in Rimaros will be specialised like that, it permeates their thinking and values. You will be judged based on your level of specialisation. You can overcome that with performance, of course.”

“Which is another reason not to stand out,” Jason said. “If someone perceived as a generalist starts doing well, I’m willing to bet a certain section of the adventuring community will start paying some unwelcome and unfriendly attention.”

“I don’t know, but it makes sense,” Farrah said. “I’ve never actually been there; this is all second-hand information. Just don’t go off on any of your ‘here’s why everyone but me is wrong’ speeches.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Could you strive for my best?” Farrah asked. “It’s just that, you know... I’ve seen your best.”

“Are you feeling that?” Jason asked, sitting up in his lounge. “Something’s going on with the ambient magic.”

Farrah concentrated, making her magic senses as delicate as possible. The strength of Jason’s soul didn’t advantage his magic senses as much as his aura senses but it did still improve them. His unusual nature of being both a physical and spiritual entity also increased his sensitivity to magic, especially astral magic.

“Yes,” Farrah said. “What is that?”

Farrah was also an outworlder, and while not as sensitive to astral forces as Jason, still had an astral affinity that helped her detect the disturbance in the magic around them.

“Astral energy is seeping through the dimensional membrane and starting to raise the magical saturation,” he said. “More magic is coming in and the monster surge is starting.”

Unlike Jason’s team, who had found themselves next to an abnormal manifestation, the ambient magic around Jason and Farrah was not as heavily disturbed. They shared a look, knowing that they had been the ones to trigger the events that would lead to a lot of death and destruction.

“It was going to happen, one way or another,” Farrah said. “If it had taken longer, the surge would be even worse. We actually made things better by starting it off, even if it doesn’t feel that way.”

“I know,” Jason said giving her a sad smile. “I have enough regrets that I don’t need to borrow ones I didn’t earn.”

“It should still be a while before the magical saturation starts causing manifestations,” Farrah said. “We should get to Rimaros before things start going wild.”

The first sign of civilisation that Jason and Farrah encountered were windmills the size of eight-storey buildings, standing on rocks jutting out of the sea. They were spaced out, roughly half a kilometre apart, in a line stretching out into the distance.

“Storm accumulators,” Farrah said. “They drain magical energy from storms, which causes them to collapse before reaching population centres. Anywhere big enough uses them not just to shield the towns and cities but also fuel the magic infrastructure. It turns what should make it incredibly hard to live here into a massive asset.”

“What about places that aren’t big enough to have these things?” Jason asked.

“Not sure,” Farrah said. “I was mostly interested in the accumulators themselves because that kind of wide-area array magic is exactly my field. These things run in a twenty-kilometre ring around Rimaros, so we’re getting close. I’d love to get a closer look at one, but I’ll need to get permission. The protection on these things is no joke.”

“I suppose they’d have to build their towns as shelters,” Jason said. “Lots of basements and the like.”

“Don’t expect to see that here,” Farrah said, pointing. “This is Rimaros, the city of islands.”

Jason’s gaze tracked where she was pointing to a point in the sky. Courtesy of his silver-rank visual acuity he could make out an island floating in the sky. Nestled amongst

tropical plants atop it was a small village. The underside of the island was a smoothly carved curve of stone, with two holes in the middle. A thick stream of water was spilling down from one hole, while the other had a stream rising from below to enter the island.

“That’s pretty neat,” Jason said.

“Neat?” Farrah asked. “It’s a flying island.”

“I’m not saying it’s not great,” Jason said. “I definitely want to take a look for myself but I own two interconnected pocket-universe cities. My bar for amazement has shifted up a little.”

“I suppose that’s fair.”

“So, you said the city of islands, meaning there’s more of those?”

“Yes,” Farrah said. “Rimaros covers a huge area based around three islands that hold the majority of the population. Those with enough money and power live on artificial islands, which can hold anything from a single estate to a small town. Some of them are in the water, which are for merchants and the like with money but limited connections. Also, adventurers in the silver-rank range who don’t have strong backing and are just starting to make their way.”

As the boat moved forward, they spotted more of the sky islands.

“The flying islands are for the cream of society, as you’d expect,” Farrah continued. “Big name adventurers, long-standing adventuring families and aristocrats, which are usually the same thing. Any family that becomes known for producing good adventurers usually finds itself inducted into the nobility. Any noble house without some good adventurers will find itself falling into obscurity sooner or later.”

“Where do the Magic Society and Adventure Society fit in?” Jason asked.

“The Magic Society has the second-largest sky island in Rimaros, right after the royal palace. The Storm King is a gold-ranker, which you have to be before they’ll let you take the throne. Most nations shield their royalty and bring them up with cores, but that disqualifies you from becoming monarch here. All the potential heirs from every branch of the royal family are adventurers trying to prove themselves. Not just in monster fighting but statecraft, diplomacy, administration. It’s a decades-long contest until the current monarch is satisfied, chooses an heir and steps down.”

“So, the Hurricane Princess is just one of many.”

“Yes, although the designated frontrunners are always the children of the current monarch. The Hurricane Princess is the title given to the firstborn daughter and the Storm Prince to the firstborn son. At least, the firstborn ones that are competing. Many royals

bow out from the start, preferring to be adventurers or magical researchers or join a church.”

“They aren’t looked down on for that?”

“Not so long as whatever they do, they excel. There’s no shortage of people vying for the crown, so any path that brings prestige to the royal house is acceptable.”

“And whoever wins, the king just steps down?”

“Or the queen, yes. Voluntary surrender of the throne is a cornerstone of their society. Besides, there are rumours of some diamond-rank ancestor quietly watching over things from behind who would step in if any of his descendants got power-hungry.”

“Sure,” Jason said, “but I bet every decent-sized country in the world has pretty much the same rumour.”

“Just about,” Farrah said with a laugh.

“I think we can happily stay out of that mess,” Jason said. “I don’t anticipate bumping into Zara.”

“Zara?”

“The Hurricane Princess.”

“Oh, it’s Zara, is it?”

“Come on, I met her twice.”

“Did you give her any baked goods?”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Jason asked, avoiding Farrah’s gaze. Then he changed the subject.

“Hey, you didn’t talk about the Adventure Society,” Jason said.

“They’ve claimed what amount to dominion over one of the natural islands. They’re a largely independent district within Rimaros where all the shops and services for the rich and powerful are concentrated. They also have the main entertainment quarter, most of the magical trade and the second-largest skyship port.”

“Skyships?” Jason said, perking up. “I just remembered; this thing can fly. I’ve just never had it somewhere with enough magical density before. I’ll have to shrink the size for the flying form, but still.”

Jason hung his head. “I guess I’ll wait until we’re leaving. A regular boat is less attention-grabbing than a flying cloud boat.”

“Yes, it is,” Farrah said. “You’ll have plenty of time to play with your boat later.”

Jason blinked and then broke out in a happy grin.

“I will, won’t I? No Network alternately trying to kidnap me or leech off me. No gold-rankers hunting me down. Just good, old-fashioned adventuring.”