

## Chapter 475

### Remaining Unremarkable

While Farrah could easily slip into the role of a specialist, Jason could not do so as easily. No amount of items would turn him into the plague cannon the locals wanted in their affliction specialists, able to blanket groups or burn down individuals with equal ease, usually at range from behind the safety of allies, summons or both.

One of the reasons Jason had seen so few affliction specialists was that Greenstone was primarily a human city and few humans pursued that path. Their aptitude for special attacks meant that an affliction specialist would often end up forced into melee.

Jason wasn't even human and was familiar with that challenge. Elves and Runic were the most common affliction wielders, as their predilection for spells made a ranged power set much more likely. If Jason tried to be an affliction specialist in the Rimaros style, from behind a wall of allies, he would only justify his second-rate status by leaving most of his abilities unused.

When gearing himself up, Jason didn't even try to pander to local sensibilities. He believed in the way that Rufus, Farrah and Gary had trained him and he wasn't going to turn away from that to play half-cooked adventurer.

With his plethora of conjured and growth items, Jason had little use for more permanent items to enhance his general combat style. The only item he desired was the sword Rufus told him Gary had already reforged. Items Jason had enjoyed in the past, like the boots that enhanced his jumping, had been made largely unnecessary by his silver-rank attributes and abilities. As such, his item purchases were very much based on the idea of conditional use.

For Jason, battle was about adaptation. Rather than going for fixed items, he stocked up on consumables that he could match to his needs in any given moment. First amongst these was a healthy collection of silver-rank throwing darts with various single-use effects. While not as cost-effective as the lower-rank variants that Jason could make himself, those were no longer good enough at his current rank. Buying from a capable artificer gave him a more powerful, varied and reliable selection.

Jason made more purchases along the same lines, from magical explosives to an array of potions that could potentially come in handy. Jason was confident in any circumstance for which his powers were suited, so he focused on contingencies for circumstances that weren't.

Standing in an alchemy stall with a bag of potions in hand, Jason's mind was drawn back to his first proper fight with a silver-ranker. He and his team had fought the Purity Archbishop, Nicolas Hendren, who had carried on him a similar bag full of silver-rank potions. It had been an incredibly difficult battle, the silver-ranker seeming almost immortal in the face of Jason's bronze-rank team. It reminded Jason that the essence users of this world were so much more dangerous than those of Earth and he resolved again not to underestimate any opponents he might face.

Jason's consumable expenditure was rather excessive, made possible by his significant wealth and the dimensional storage his inventory offered, but he always wore a potion belt to keep critical potions in easy reach. He bought a new silver-rank potion belt to protect potions he wore from incidental damage.

"That colour matches your conjured robes very well, sir," the shop attendant told him.

"My only concern is function," Jason insisted. "I only conjured my robes to test the fit."

"Of course, sir."

"Show me the black one again."

The potion belt was not the only permanent item he purchased, but the others all fell under his doctrine of conditional use. Being in the Sea of Storms, he splurged on several powerful items designed to aid fighting underwater or in heavy storm conditions. This was hardly an uncommon choice, so there were plenty of such items available, although the prices were high and quickly rising. Jason was far from the only outside adventurer looking to tool up for local conditions.

\*\*\*

Once he was done with his equipment, Jason moved on to more important matters. Leaving the market, Shade guided him to a nearby and very busy warehousing district. It serviced both the craftsman quarter and the marketing district he had just left behind.

There was a bustle of activity as wagons and carts, magical and heidel-drawn, carried about large quantities of goods. Some wagons were even floating through the air, although they always remained over the streets. Jason assumed this was due to some manner of air traffic regulation.

Arriving at a small warehouse, Jason waited out of the way, hidden in shadow until a magically driven carriage arrived and stopped in the yard outside the large freight doors of the warehouse. A man with a bronze-rank aura and finely tailored but unostentatious clothes stepped down from the carriage and Jason emerged from the shadows to meet him, Shade at his side.

“Good day to you again, Mr Shade,” the man said with a short bow. “Mr Asano, I presume.”

“Indeed I am,” Jason said.

“Mr Asano, my name is Mr Broyles. I am employed by Lord Casowich to manage and verify his acquisitions. I come to you with his compliments.”

“Thank you, sir. Perhaps we should step inside?”

“By all means,” the butler said and opened a normal-sized door next to the large freight doors of the warehouse with a rune-engraved key. It led into a small private office.

“It’s all in there?” Jason asked, nodding in the direction of the main warehouse.

“It certainly is,” Broyles said. “My Lord is very satisfied with the item, so long as its providence can be confirmed. Once it has, I am directed to grant you access to the goods.”

“Excellent,” Jason said.

Broyles plucked a crystal from his personal dimensional space. He used it to test Jason, the crystal shining with a strong silver colour as Jason gripped it. Four markings appeared on the crystal at the same time.

“Silver rank confirmed,” Broyles said happily. “And you’ve reached the fourth threshold with all attributes, which I believe is known in adventuring circles as the wall. Congratulations, Mr Asano.”

“Thank you, Mr Broyles.”

Broyles took out another magical device, this one looking like a set of scales, with one of the two weight plates softly padded with cloth. The central stand holding the scale upright was topped with a clear crystal.

Broyles set the scale on a table and took out a small box. Opening it revealed a padded interior and a single object: what looked like a diamond in the shape of a coin. Within the coin, like ink spilled into water, was the image of a man giving a thumbs up. Broyles pulled on a pair of white gloves, took the coin and held it up, comparing it to Jason. Jason gave Broyles a thumbs up, matching the image on the coin. With a slight smile, Broyles nodded and placed the coin onto the padded weight of the scale.

“Mr Asano, if you would please place your palm on the device.”

Jason placed his hand on the unpadded plate. The crystal on the scale immediately lit up green.

“Perfect,” Broyles said, retuning the coin to the small box and the box to his dimensional spaces, followed by the scale device.

“That’s everything?” Jason asked.

“That is sufficient confirmation that the diamond-rank coin was looted by a silver-rank essence user.”

“I was actually bronze at the time, but I suppose you can’t check that.”

“Sadly no,” Broyles said. “The church of Knowledge has been reluctant to hire out its clergy for the purpose of authenticating valuables. Lord Casowich has already exhausted the local temple’s indulgence on that matter. Even so, a unique coin design, a diamond-rank coin produced by even a silver-rank essence user is quite exceptional.”

Broyles frowned.

“My lord felt ethically bound to have me inform you, on confirmation of the item’s providence, that the goods you have asked for are most certainly not equal to the value of that which you have provided to him.”

Jason smiled.

“Mr Broyles, I hold that you cannot put a price on discretion and the chance to acquaint oneself with people of character and substance.”

Broyles returned the smile.

“Very good, Mr Asano.”

“I do have one question, Mr Broyles.”

“And what is that, Mr Asano.”

“The other gentleman in the room. I assume he is here to safeguard the coin and the goods, should my intentions be nefarious?”

Jason took an argy fruit from his inventory and tossed it casually over his shoulder. A man dressed in black and grey appeared and caught it.

“Fresh from the Arnote market,” Jason said. “They’re very good.”

“Mr Asano,” Broyles said, “I believe you’ve just embarrassed Mr Visk.”

Broyles moved to the door leading into the main warehouse and unlocked it with his key. Visk, keeping an eye on Jason, sat the fruit down on the desk. Jason picked it up and bit into it.

“Everything inside is yours, Mr Asano,” Broyles said. “You require no further transport for the goods?”

“I do not, Mr Broyles.”

“And you wish for us to dispose of the barrels afterwards?”

“That would be appreciated.”

“Of course, Mr Asano.”

“Then Mr Visk and I will leave you to your business. Any of the doors will open from the inside, so if you would close them behind you on your way out, that would be appreciated.”

“I’ll be sure to do so, Mr Broyles.”

Jason waited until Broyles and Visk had entered the carriage and driven off. He couldn’t sense any other observers, either auras or the magic of spying devices, although that did not mean they weren’t present. In Lord Casowich’s position, Jason would have arranged a well-hidden observer to be found and an exceptionally well-hidden observer to not be.

Jason had only revealed Visk to make a point, however, and felt no need to hide his objective. He had no doubt that Casowich had the resources to make a thorough investigation before Broyles arrived at the warehouse. He tugged the cloud flask from his neck chain and pulled a funnel from his inventory.

“Let’s get started, shall we, Shade?”

\*\*\*

A flying manta ray swam through the air over Arnote. The creature’s skin glistened like sapphires in the sun while the air in front of it shimmered in a wedge as the creature’s magic cut through the sky. On the manta’s back was a woman whose hair was an almost exact match for the creature’s sapphire skin.

The manta hovered over the yard of a hilltop house and the rider disembarked as another woman emerged from the building. The two women had a strong resemblance, with caramel skin and vibrant blue hair.

“Vesper,” Pelli greeted.

“Ancestor,” Vesper said with a respectful bow.

“Oh, now stop with that nonsense,” Pelli said, waving her hands at Vesper. “You call me Aunt Pelli, like when you were a girl. I’m just an old core user.”

“Wisdom and experience are both deserving of respect, Aunt Pelli. You have an abundance of both.”

“So, you’re calling me old?”

“Of course not, Aunt Pelli.”

“Oh, you’re calling me very old,” Pelli said, turning and shaking her head as she started wandering away. “Abundance of experience, dear gods...”

Vesper smiled to herself as she followed Pelli around the side of the house. Being teased by the old woman brought back fond memories of days spent in Arnote as a child.

Pelli led them to the front yard where they could look out over the town spread out below them and across the lagoon to the cliffs.

“That house, next to the waterfall,” Pelli pointed. Vesper’s silver-rank vision had no trouble making it out, seeing it looked much like the houses around it.

“Isn’t that where the waterfall cave shaft is?”

“Yes,” Pelli said. “I allowed some outside adventurers to set up a cloud house there while they’re staying for the monster surge.”

“You know, Zara missed out on winning a cloud flask a few years ago. It went to some fool boy who got himself killed and it was lost.”

“You didn’t think much of him, then?”

“It was a rigged contest. He only won it because he’s a friend of Emir Bahadir. Also, the boy was absurd.”

“Perhaps he’s matured.”

“He’s dead.”

“He didn’t strike me as the sort to let that stop him.”

Vesper narrowed her eyes and looked at the distant house again.

“Are you saying...?” she asked.

“That house was most likely made by the very same cloud flask you just mentioned.”

Vesper ran a hand over her face.

“That’s inconvenient. This is why you called me here.”

“I knew it was potentially delicate. Given that you’re close to Zara and met the boy yourself, I thought it was best to see how you want to handle it. The things Zara has been saying, they are lies, right?”

“Of course they are; she met the boy twice.”

“That’s good at least.”

“Is he here for her? Does he think the branch of the family here on Arnote is his way in?”

“I don’t think so,” Pelli said. “Of course, I’ve been wrong before. But my instincts tell me that he has larger concerns than our little princess.”

“You don’t know?”

“I couldn’t see through his aura.”

“What rank is he?”

“Silver, but his aura is quite remarkable. Death is not the only trial the boy has faced.”

Vesper rubbed her forehead as she frowned.

"We kill him," she said. "So long as he's dead or very far away, it doesn't matter what Zara has been saying."

"You should never have let her do it in the first place."

"You think I wanted to? You try getting that girl to do anything you tell her."

"Tone, Vesper."

"Sorry, Aunt Pelli," Vesper said, lowering her head.

"Killing the boy is not a good idea. He has Roland Remore's favourite grandson living with him, so a more diplomatic approach might be best."

Vesper groaned.

"This is going to be a mess," she said. "Perhaps we can politely suggest he go away and never come back. Do you know if he's registered locally for the monster surge?"

"I believe they came here fresh from having done so."

"That's unfortunate. We could get him travel dispensation but not without people wondering why. If House Irios gets wind of this, things could get ugly."

"My dear," Pelli said, "I'm afraid you may need to deal with this one head-on."

"Gods damn that girl."

Pelli chuckled.

"You know, I remember another wilful young girl running around this island."

"I grew up," Vesper said.

"And into a fine young woman, might I say," Pelli told her.

"Aunt Pelli, I'm sixty-seven."

"Exactly," Pelli said. "You've got your whole life ahead of you. Do you expect to reach gold rank during the surge?"

"I hope so, but nothing is certain. This will not be a normal surge, Aunt Pelli. Even more so than people think. Have you been told?"

"Oh, I'm just an old woman on a hill. Who would tell me the important matters of state?"

Vesper gave her ancestor a wry smile, then looked back across the lagoon to Jason's cloud house.

"If he didn't come for Zara, does he even know?"

"I doubt it," Pelli said. "I think he would be conducting himself a little differently if he did."

"Then perhaps it's time he did," Vesper said. "If I can't kill him or get rid of him, I can only try and convince him to quietly ride out the surge and leave. He's just one of countless silver-rankers, after all."

“A sensible approach,” Pelli said, “but one should not wager everything on hope. Some people are simply ill-suited to remaining unremarkable.”

“Of course, Aunt Pelli. I would welcome your counsel on this.”

“Of course, dear. We should start with deciding what to tell Zara. You can never be entirely sure what that girl is going to do...”