

Chapter 625

Neil's Big Mouth

Jason watched from the roof deck as Rufus, Farrah and Gary headed upriver on the skimmers they kept stored on the yacht. With them was Estella Warnock, whom they were escorting from the Adventure Society camp to an actual population centre. Estella would be fulfilling her role of scouting out such places, for opportunities and danger. She didn't need the escort, but it was a chance for Rufus, Gary and Farrah to work together again as a team.

Letting out a sigh, Jason couldn't help but reflect that just as his team was coming together, theirs was coming apart. It was not long after Humphrey, Jason and Clive had done their first job together that Farrah had died, which had profoundly impacted Rufus and Gary. Even though Farrah was now back, none of them had a taste for full-time adventuring anymore.

Rufus was increasingly interested in training adventurers over being one, while Gary and Farrah were focusing on their very different crafts. Gary was seeking to master the old ways, chasing perfection in the smithing of weapons and armour. Farrah, by contrast, was chasing the future, pushing magic into new fields.

This trip was an opportunity to relive the old days when all they had was ambition and each other. It was also a chance to say goodbye to those days, and fully appreciate that their futures followed paths they had not anticipated. Even when they should have because they wouldn't shut up about their family running a school.

Jason chuckled at the thought and pushed himself off the railing. He had his own team and his own adventures to have, even if he was playing the role of secretly awesome cook. He wondered again if he should have named himself after a similar character from the Steven Seagal movie.

"No," he muttered to himself. "Even my rose-tinted nostalgia has limits. A man has to have standards."

"Mr Asano, are you thinking about Steven Seagal again?" Shade asked.

"No."

Jason's team was tasked with heading into Cartise to clear monsters out of the ruined city. They were one of several teams tasked with doing so, and were being guided through their assigned sweeping route by Vestine, an Adventure Society functionary. Jason himself wasn't with them, because why would you bring the cook?

“Not to be ungrateful,” Neil said, “but why do we need a guide?”

“There have been some issues,” Vestine told him. “Teams getting a little over-enthusied, roaming into another team’s territory and suddenly they’re fighting duels instead of monsters. We don’t have time for that.”

“So, you’re guiding teams away from making stupid choices,” Belinda said.

“I hardly think that’s necessary,” Clive said.

“Then you should pay more attention,” Neil told him.

“I completely agree,” Belinda said. “That should be the policy for all teams.”

“You want someone hanging around all the time, observing what you do?” Neil asked her, and Belinda’s expression went stiff.

“I formally rescind my suggestion.”

“We prefer to think of it as helping the teams stay focused,” Vestine said.

“I bet that’s because they’re already trying to ditch you and cause trouble,” Belinda said. “You outright tell them you’re babysitters and they’re going to throw a tantrum.”

A smile crept onto Vestine’s face, despite her best efforts, but she didn’t respond.

As they moved through the ruins on foot, the team made swift progress. Having once spent months in a city not just ruined but overtaken by jungle, the terrain was no obstacle to them. They traversed the city, alert but relaxed, Sophie only occasionally visible as she scouted around them. The team took the chance to learn more about conditions in the area by questioning their guide.

“Just so I’m getting this right,” Neil said, “Something is attracting monsters to the city and we’re *not* meant to stop it?”

“That’s right,” Vestine told him. “When the diamond-rank monster died here in the city, it left behind spots of magical resonance that still linger, and will for weeks to come. Monsters normally fear their diamond-rank contemporaries, but this resonance seems to draw them in, from a hundred kilometres away or more.”

“Then why not get rid of it?” Clive asked. “Eliminating magical resonance isn’t that hard. Even from a diamond-rank monster, it should be easy enough. You just have to align a purgation ritual with an amplification ritual with a—”

“How many rituals would it take in total?”

“Four, maybe five,” Clive said, then shrugged. “Diamond-rank, so let’s call it five. Six at the absolute most.”

“And these would all be in a sequence?” Vestine asked.

“They would have to be, yes,” Clive said.

“You just said it would be easy.”

“Yes?” Clive asked, confusion in his expression.

“I think the lady’s point,” Belinda told Clive, “is that not everyone thinks that running half a dozen rituals in a unified sequence is easy.”

“Really?” Clive asked.

“Yes, really,” Neil told him.

“Oh,” Clive said, his tone suggesting he was not entirely convinced.

“I believe that Clive’s original question,” Humphrey said, “was why not eliminate this resonance. The difficulty or ease of doing so aside, I imagine the reason is that the Adventure Society wants the monsters here.”

“Exactly,” Vestine said, still giving Clive odd looks. “The surge is over, but there are still many monsters that manifested in the wilderness that weren’t dealt with because they didn’t pose an immediate threat. This city is an empty ruin, while the towns and villages around it are not. Better to draw the monsters here than have them attack the over-populated and under-resourced locations that are bursting with refugees.”

“Rebuilding the city isn’t a priority, then?” Neil asked.

“It can’t be,” Vestine said. “The monster surge was five years late. Five years of the economy being strained by everything being in a state of readiness for a surge that kept not arriving. Then the surge itself lasted six times longer than it should have, and that’s not even accounting for the Builder invasion. Now there’s a conflict with the messengers, and who knows what trouble that will bring.”

“That is a lot,” Neil conceded. “I suppose you have to do what you can instead of what you want to.”

“I know that story,” Belinda said.

The team heard the high-pitched shrieking of monsters in the distance and rushed in that direction. They sensed auras as they drew nearer, but the auras blinked out, one by one, and by the time they arrived, the monsters were gone. There were signs of combat, claw marks raking stone, but no corpses and no blood.

“Again,” Vestine muttered.

“Again?” Humphrey asked.

“The Adventure Society functionaries guiding the teams are keeping contact through a communication power,” Vestine explained as she crouched to examine a claw mark. “This mark is from a skittering raker, which matches the sounds we heard. They’re ambush predators, a common monster in this region. This is the third instance in the last couple of hours of monster packs disappearing before adventurers could get to them.”

“Almost like someone was running around, killing and looting them,” Neil said innocently, earning him a slap on the arm from Belinda.

“Maybe,” Vestine said. “If so, I wish they’d report to the Adventure Society camp. Someone running rogue means that we’ll have to expend time and people we desperately need to use elsewhere on a false threat. But we suspect it’s another monster, though.”

“Oh?” Humphrey asked.

“One of the teams reported seeing some strange butterflies near where one of the monster packs vanished. The butterflies themselves fled before anyone could get a closer look, though. They were reportedly extremely fast.”

Humphrey caught Clive’s eye.

“Vestine, please excuse us for a moment,” Humphrey said. “I need to consult with my team member.”

Humphrey and Clive walked a little way from the group and Humphrey activated a privacy screen. Clive pulled out a blue marble tablet, the engravings on which started shifting as he moved his fingers across it.

“Shade,” Humphrey said. “Is this Jason?”

“No, Mr Geller,” Shade said from Humphrey’s shadow.

“Are you sure?”

“Quite certain, Mr Geller. Mr Asano discovered just how desperate the Adventure Society efforts in this region are for resources and decided to volunteer himself as an actual auxiliary. He’s been looting monster remains brought in by other teams for materials and meat, which he is cooking in ways friendly to long-term storage. He’s quite busy.”

“Oh,” Humphrey said. “I thought he’d gone off marauding on the sly.”

“Jason’s butterflies aren’t fast, the way our guide described,” Clive said, then held up the Magic Society monster almanac in his hands. “I think I know what this monster is.”

“You just looked it up? Those almanacs are a pain to sort through. My mother used to make me go through them for practise.”

“I may not be part of the Magic Society anymore, but my ability to efficiently search through their record system remains intact.”

“You think it’s a butterfly monster then?”

“Yes, but let’s go back to the group so I’m not explaining it twice.”

Humphrey nodded and disabled the privacy screen. They returned to the others and Clive explained what he suspected to be the culprit.

“There’s a kind of butterfly monster called the glorious harvester,” he told the group. “It’s rare, and normally shows up a decent way south of here, but there are a handful of

records of them showing up almost as far north as Rajoras. It's a swarm-type monster with a few distinctive traits. One is their appearance, which is green, blue and yellow, with a golden glow. Another is that they are one of the rare monsters that hunt other monsters and mostly avoids anyone else. They produce dust that triggers a rapid breakdown in monster bodies. This breakdown continues after death, dissolving them as a looting power would. The glorious harvesters then consume the magic as it returns to a raw state. I'm more or less saying that they eat rainbow smoke."

"So it's really a monster, then?" Neil asked. "I was sure it would turn out to be—" Belinda slapped his arm again.

"Turn out to be what?" Vestine asked.

"You are so bad at this," Belinda told Neil shaking her head. "And I mean *Clive* bad."

"Hey!" Neil and Clive exclaimed simultaneously, then glared at each other.

"This dust that the butterfly monster produces," Belinda said, drawing attention away from Neil's big mouth. "It dissolves monster bodies, right?"

"Yes," Clive confirmed.

"High rankers, and even well-trained mid rankers, have bodies that are basically the same as that of monsters," Belinda said. "Wouldn't that make us vulnerable to this dust?"

"No," Clive said, shaking his head. "Well, not as much. The almanac noted that it doesn't affect essence users the same way, which is why glorious butterflies are one of the rare monsters that hunt other monsters. I'm not sure why it's less effective on essence users; the almanac didn't say."

"There's a reason we say our bodies are 'basically' the same," Neil said. As a healer, he had the best understanding in the group of how their bodies worked. "There are key differences between the very similar makeup of an essence user and a monster's body. The big one is that, barring essence ability intervention, monster bodies are a lot more resilient. That's because monster bodies don't have to contain an actual soul, like an essence user, or an actual spiritual entity, like a summoned familiar. Because their bodies don't need that spiritual reinforcement, they can focus on physical reinforcement."

"Then it sounds like this dust targets whatever makes monster bodies tougher than ours specifically," Clive said. "It will affect us to some degree, but not to the same degree. It won't be as severe as... someone else's afflictions."

Belinda shook her head.

"So bad at this," she muttered. "Clive, he went off into the cosmos with a diamond ranker, not a mystic land where saying his name will levy a curse. You can say his name."

"Ah, yes, right," Clive said. "He went off with a diamond ranker."

Belinda groaned.

“Yeah, real convincing, Clive,” she complained. “I take it back. You’re not allowed to talk about him.”

“Who are we talking about?” Vestine asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Humphrey said. “We should get moving again if we want to complete our sweep on...”

Sophie dropped to the ground next to the group.

“I found some weird butterfly monster,” she said. “It was more yellow and green than Jason’s.”

“Who is Jason?” Vestine asked.

“Some guy we used to work with,” Sophie said. “He went off with a diamond ranker for being an extra-special boy or some nonsense.”

“Callously abandoned us,” Belinda confirmed.

“Did you see which way the butterflies went?” Vestine asked.

“They didn’t go anywhere,” Sophie said. “They weren’t very fast, so I just dealt with them.”

“Wait,” Vestine said. “You’re saying they were slow?”

“Yeah,” Sophie confirmed. “Not you people slow, but slow.”

“You probably shouldn’t fly around,” Vestine warned. “Monsters might see you and end up following you back to us.”

“Exactly,” Sophie said. “You people are slow, so I rounded some up. You should sense the first group any second.”

“Sophie!” Humphrey scolded. “What did I tell you?”

Sophie’s face took on an expression of exaggerated uncertainty.

“That you like it when I tickle your—”

“I said stop rounding up monsters because you think we’re too slow!”

“Oh, that makes more sense,” she acknowledged. “The other thing is kind of private.”