

## Chapter 611

### The God in This Scenario

“I can’t believe his majesty went along with this,” Liara muttered as she rode an elevating platform into the bowels of the sky island.

“Dinner and a show,” Jason said. “What’s not to like?”

A vast amount of infrastructure was in the underground portions of the flying island on which the royal palace and residential sectors for royalty and foreign diplomats were located. A large part of that was underwater docking stations where vehicles could arrive in an airlock where the water was pumped out, allowing the passengers to disembark. This was where most of the royal palace traffic arrived, comprised of supply deliveries, palace staff and government functionaries.

The lake at the heart of the royal palace was more naturalistic on the surface, but underneath it was a perfect ring. The sections of it not occupied by docks offered magically reinforced glass walls that made for interesting office spaces and other rooms that abutted the lake below the surface.

One such room was the old duelling area, which was, like the ballroom they had just left, a stadium-scale space, both horizontally and vertically. People were swarming down from the ballroom for a chance to watch the upcoming duels, but most were heading for the audience seating. Those heading for the main area were the royal family, various key attendants, the actual duellists and a few attendants.

“The duelling arena has been used as a training hall by the Sapphire Crown guild for years,” Trenchant Moore explained. He was on the elevating platform with Jason and Liara, as well as Sophie, Humphrey, Zareen, Rufus and Rufus’ mum.

“You’re sure Callum isn’t behind the people breaking into my pagoda?” Jason asked Arabelle.

“I’ve been very clear with him on this,” Arabelle said. “Also, he received quite the impression last time he tried.”

“That doesn’t mean he didn’t send someone else to try,” Jason told her. “People do things that are stupid and make no sense all the time. Myself very much included.”

“Jason, my job is helping people with their mental issues. You think I don’t know what people are like?”

“You help people because they need it and come to you,” Jason said. “I get the ones who lack that much self-awareness. Instead of going to you, they try to murder me. Or

kidnap. Honestly, if you discount monsters, I see more attempts to kidnap that kill me. Does that make me popular?"

"Are you sure you shouldn't be going to deal with the people breaking into your house?" Liara asked.

"I'm a silver ranker," Jason said. "What am I going to do to a bunch of gold rankers?"

"You're sure they're gold rankers?" Arabelle asked.

"I am," Jason said.

"How?" Arabelle asked.

"They're still alive. Okay, that's just me being dramatic; I can sense them."

"You shouldn't be able to," Liara said. "The defences around this sky island are as powerful as any in the world. It should cut off everything."

"Does it prevent gods from speaking with their servants?" Jason asked.

"No," Liara said.

"Then it doesn't cut off everything," Jason pointed out.

"Between you and the cloud house, who is the god in this scenario?"

"I refuse to answer on the grounds that I may incriminate myself. And it's not like they're good gold-rankers. They're all core users."

"All of them?" Zareen asked. "At gold rank, core users are less common than people who trained up properly. Are they a bunch of craftspeople or something?"

"I'll ask them when I get home," Jason said. "I have something to be getting on with first... oh, it looks like they've decided to cut their losses and get out. They've started breaking through walls."

"Then you won't be talking to them when you get home," Liara said.

"Maybe, maybe not. They haven't realised yet that I keep moving the room they're in to the middle of the building."

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Four men forcefully broke through a wall, arriving in another of a series of empty square rooms.

"What did I tell you?" Jedrin asked as the wall they just broke through reformed behind them. "No one pays four gold rankers to come a quarter of the way around the planet to rob some silver ranker's house."

"Shut up, Jedrin."

They were all uneasy. Their senses failed to extend beyond any of the walls and they had stopped finding furnished rooms. Each wall they broke through led them to one empty box after another. There was a pervasive sense that they were trespassing and there

seemed to be formidable power behind it. They couldn't even be certain that power was real, however, as their senses barely brushed against it and it was not something that belonged in a silver-rank construct. It could easily have been their imaginations, except that they had each felt it.

The result was that they quickly found themselves unnerved, and it only got worse. Once they had broken into the house, they had moved through a series of ordinary rooms until they found themselves in a room that was just a plain box. There were no windows and even the door vanished, sealing them in. That was the point they decided to call it quits and started smashing through walls to escape, but each new room was a new empty box.

"Get bent, Kirk," Jedrin said. "I should have told you to shut up when you wanted to take this job. It's not like we're some infiltration experts. The only reason to go that far for us is that it's how far you have to go to find someone who doesn't know how stupid an idea it is."

"I said shut up."

"And I asked why anyone would go that far and pay that much for us? And now we know it's because the people paying attention clearly looked into this job and said no."

"How about you both shut up," William said.

"Exactly," Ray said. "Arguing won't get us out of here."

"Neither will breaking through walls," Jedrin said. "We've gone further than the width of the entire building, yet here we are. Either the rooms are moving or there's dimensional manipulation going on."

"Which we can't tell because our senses won't go through the damn walls," William said.

"If you have a better idea, let's hear it," Ray said.

"I have a better idea," Jedrin said. "Remember when I said that getting portalled in right before the job was a bad idea because it didn't give us a chance to do any research into the target?"

"That's not a better idea," Kirk said. "That's you passive-aggressively bragging - again - about how you didn't want to do the thing that you did right along with the rest of us. Again."

"Maybe let me finish?" Jedrin asked. "My point is that I did do a little research."

"We were told not to, specifically to prevent alerting the target," Kirk said. "And now we're stuck in a trap. Good job."

“Do you seriously think that me doing some research on a different continent was enough that all this was set up specifically to deal with us?” Jedrin asked.

“He’s right, Kirk,” William said. “I’m pretty sure that they just didn’t want us finding out why no one else took the job.”

“They just didn’t want to use locals so it didn’t come back on them,” Kirk argued.

“If you’ll stop interrupting,” Jedrin interjected, “I can get to what my research uncovered.”

“Then stop flapping your mouth and get to it,” Kirk said.

“What did you find?” William asked.

“Not much,” Jedrin said. “It was short notice and I wanted to be careful. What I did find was that the guy who owns this place won a cloud flask from Emir Bahadir in some contest in the middle of nowhere. It was a big deal, with nobles sending a bunch of their young people to compete.”

“Emir Bahadir the treasure hunter?” William asked.

“That’s the one,” Jedrin said. “The point is that I found out that the house we were hired to rob was a cloud construct.”

“Oh, that’s really helpful,” Kirk said snidely. “I hate to break it to you, Jedrin, but we already knew that.”

“Now that we’re here, sure,” Jedrin said. “But I knew before. Long enough before that I knew we’d be breaking into a cloud house, and therefore had time to bring a contingency plan.”

“What kind of contingency plan?” Ray asked.

Jedrin reached into the dimension bag at his hip and pulled out a box the size of a small suitcase, complete with handle. It was made of pale grey ceramic with dark metal covering the corners. A complex array of sigils was engraved into the surface of the ceramic, on each side of the box.

“What is that?” Kirk asked.

“It’s a thaumic cohesion impedance device,” Jedrin said.

“A what?” Ray asked while William backed away from it.

“What in the sweet gods are you doing with that thing?” William asked. “They are very, very illegal.”

“We’re breaking into someone’s house, William,” Kirk said. “We’re already doing crime.”

“We’re doing the kind of crime that means our families have to pay a fine if we get caught,” William hissed. “Jedrin just turned it into the kind of crime where the Adventure Society crawls up inside us and builds a rustic cottage.”

Ray looked at William, then the device.

“I think you need to explain what this thing is right now.”

“It’s—” Jedrin began, only for Ray to cut him off immediately.

“Not you,” Ray said, pointing at Jedrin before moving his finger to point at William. “You.”

“It’s a device for breaking down things made of magic. Not things that are magical, but things actually made of manifested magic. Conjured objects, spirit coins.”

“It’s the perfect thing for trashing a cloud construct,” Jedrin said. “Which you all know that we could very much use right now. That’s my better idea; you’re welcome.”

“You know what else is made of magic?” William asked. “We are. We’re gold rankers, so our bodies are made of magic. It’s why we don’t die when we get stabbed in the head.”

“If it’s going to affect us,” Ray said, “then I think that more specifics on exactly what you mean by ‘breaking down’ would be something worth hearing.”

“It means,” William said, “turning manifested magic, meaning magic that’s taken solid form, back into non-manifested magic. Like when a monster dies and it turns into rainbow smoke.”

Ray backed off alongside William.

“I’m not interested in turning into rainbow smoke today.”

“I didn’t bring something that would kill us, you idiots.”

“I’m sure you didn’t,” William said. “That’s why they made them incredibly illegal. How did you even get one?”

“I know a guy,” Jedrin said.

“What guy?” Kirk asked.

“Sak.”

“Sak?” Ray explained. “That guy definitely sold us out.”

“To who?” Jedrin asked.

“To anyone he could,” William said. “It’s Sak. Why would you ever consider buying something that illegal from him? And where did he even get it?”

“He knows a guy too.”

“What guy?” Ray asked.

“I don’t know,” Jedrin said, increasingly defensive. “He had a hat.”

“A hat?” Kirk asked.

“Yes, a hat. A big hat.”

“Oh,” William said, his tone suddenly convinced. “You should have said that he had a *big* hat. That makes it perfectly alright to BUY VERY ILLEGAL MAGIC DEVICES FROM A COMPLETE STRANGER RECOMMENDED BY THE LEAST TRUSTWORTHY PERSON IN THE ENTIRE COUNTRY!”

“Just so I’m following this correctly,” Ray said, “you bought a massively illegal device that will melt us, assuming that the random man with a big hat you brought it from wasn’t lying about what it is. A man you went to on the advice of a person most famous for selling out the people he works with.”

“It sounds bad when you say it like that,” Jedrin said. “And it won’t melt us. These things are optimised to break down amorphous substances replicating rigid substances. Heavy conjured armour and cloud houses. Will it string us a bit? Yes. But right now we’re trapped on the wrong continent for a job we never should have taken in a house of infinite boxes. A house that I’m fairly certain hates us. So, we can stay here, waiting for someone to find us with this incredibly illegal device, or we can set it off to get us out of here and wipe out the evidence in the process.”

The four men looked at each other and the box they were trapped in. After more back-and-forth arguing, they finally agreed to set off the device, but not in the room they were in. They would set it to activate and breach into another room, putting a wall between them and the device.

Their precautions meant little as the device detonated. The room around them was disintegrated, and plenty more besides. Suddenly there was a massive sphere-shaped absence of anything in the middle of the pagoda, everything in the space having been utterly annihilated. Partly destroyed rooms were exposed, sending furniture tumbling through levels.

“I feel tingly,” Kirk said.

All four men had closed their eyes, wincing as it felt like sandpaper had been rubbed all over their skin. They had fallen as the room they were in was destroyed and they opened their eyes to see the destruction. The hole the device had ripped in the place had dropped them into a mezzanine level with access to a large open atrium with a wall that let them see outside. The air was filled by a hazy mist that was the dissipated remains of what had previously been walls, floors and ceilings.

“Okay, we can get out,” Jedrin said. “I told you that... Kirk, where are your clothes?”

“I wear conjured clothes,” Kirk said. “Just from a magic item, nothing special. Easier than owning a bunch of different stuff.”

“Do you have the item on you?” Jedrin asked.

“Yes.”

“Then how about you put on some damn pants before we make a run for it?”

“I think it’s a little late for that,” William said and the others joined him in looking around. Dark figures, each with a large alien eye instead of a face, were swarming out of the rooms that had been rent open.

“They’re silver-rank,” Jedrin said. “We can fight our way through.”

The haze suddenly coalesced in the centre of the space forming a giant blue and orange eye. Then the four men’s flesh started to rot.