

Chapter 521

A Lot More Steps

“Travis is supervising the construction now,” Clive said, shortly after arriving at the cloud house with Gary. They joined the rest of their teams, minus Jason, in getting ready to head for the Adventure Society. Farrah, Gary and Rufus would be joining with Jason’s team for the operation, with only Jason sitting out at Dawn’s insistence. Jason had modified the cloud house to have a locker room with separation screens, allowing the men and women to change privately while still talking.

“The actual construction is being done by high-ranking artificers,” Gary said. “That kind of delicate precision work is outside of my field. All I could offer was what was and wasn’t possible in terms of manufacturing with artifice techniques. I don’t even understand a lot of what he needed, and he said it didn’t even take magic normally.”

“The principles involved were extremely tricky,” Clive agreed. “This whole field of magic-like effects with no magic is fascinating, but I get the feeling that Knowledge is going to be very careful about how it’s introduced to our world. She wouldn’t let Jason do it at all.”

“Even on Jason’s world,” Farrah said, “that kind of expertise requires no less extensive and specialist training than magical study does here.”

“Where is Jason?” Clive asked. He had put on his combat robes and was sliding wands into the thigh holsters. His growth-item staff was slung on his back, held in place by a small circular item set into his robe. It allowed the staff to be grabbed or replaced easily, holding it like a magnet.

“Downstairs in the waterfall room,” Farrah said. “He doesn’t like us all going out like this without him.”

“Are you sure he hasn’t snuck off?” Rufus asked. Farrah shook her head.

“He knows that it’s too easy for the Builder to kill him off in a battle like this where both sides are deploying diamond-rank combatants,” she said. “I know that isn’t the kind of thing that tends to stop Jason, but Dawn stuck her neck out for him here. He’s not going to betray the one thing she asked in return.”

“He won’t be idle,” Humphrey said. “Monsters won’t stop coming just because most of the adventurers are heading off for battle. Those that aren’t participating will have their hands full.”

“I’m going to go let him know how it went with Travis,” Clive said, heading for the stairs.

“Not a lot of point,” Farrah said after Clive left. “With the connection Jason has to his cloud house, now, I’m fairly certain he can see and hear everything that happens in it.”

“He can WHAT?” Humphrey yelled.

“Oh, calm down,” Sophie told him.

The waterfall room was empty other than the boards on every wall that allowed Jason to write in the cloud-stuff like a chalkboard. The notes for Jason’s project were scrawled across them like the mad scribbling of a serial-killing wizard, although Jason wasn’t paying them any attention. He was standing at the cave entrance where the waterfall rushed past in its path down the cliff-face outside. The gap was the only part of the room’s natural stone not hidden behind walls, floor and ceiling.

He stood staring at the plummeting water, close enough to be splashed by it. The roar of the water was muffled as the cloud walls absorbed the sound instead of letting it reverberate through the room. Standing right in front of it, though, Jason got the full effect.

Clive came downstairs, seeing the room for the first time. His eyes immediately shot to the astral magic scrawled over every wall, only for blank cloud walls to rise up in front of them, slightly shrinking the room.

“Another day,” Jason told him as he turned around and moved into the room, away from the sound of crashing water.

“Jason, what was that? I only caught a glimpse, but some of what I saw...”

“We don’t have time for that today. We’ll get into it when we do.”

Clive frowned at the now-blank walls, but after a moment turned his attention back to Jason.

“They’re working on the devices under Travis’ supervision. He keeps reminding everyone that he has no idea if they’ll actually work, though. We’re cobbling together multi-disciplinary weapons with no testing and no one who truly understands how the entire device works. No even Knowledge can tell us that, because there isn’t anyone who knows for sure.”

“Travis has done this kind of work before,” Jason said. “He’s not the most confident guy in the world, but he knows how to improvise overcomplicated magic ordnance. Did he explain about radiation?”

“He said you might ask and to tell you there won’t be any,” Clive said. “The materials the goddess of Knowledge suggested are designed to emit resonating-force damage. It’s perfect for dealing with the Builder’s minions and all the hard materials they like to implant themselves with.”

“Thank you for the update, although it’s not my business at this point. I have my own job, keeping the monsters off this island while most of the adventurers are at war. You and the others need to get your heads in the game. Even if this goes the way we want, a lot of people are going to fall in this battle.”

“Maybe Dawn was wrong about what the Builder is up to,” Clive said. “Maybe it will go better than we think.”

“Don’t bet on Dawn being wrong, Clive.”

Clive nodded to himself.

“That’s about what I figured. We’re about to head out.”

“Good luck, and come back alive.”

“We’ll do our best.”

After Clive made his way back up, the inner walls vanished to reveal Jason’s notes scrawled over the walls once he was gone. Jason was glancing over them when Arabelle came down the stairs.

“You’re not going to see them off?” she asked.

“No.”

“It would be accepting an involuntary separation all over again?”

“We don’t have time to start digging through my head,” Jason said. “That’s far too big a mess to delve into lightly.”

“Yes, but there never seems to be time, does there? You ran off with your team for two weeks.”

“Things are busy for everyone. You do the work and you heal up after. That’s how adventurers operate.”

“Jason, mental recovery isn’t like physical recovery. You can’t just go out, take the damage and then come to me to fix you with a recovery spell. It takes time and work and honesty.”

“I know.”

“There’s no going back to the way you were. There’s only going forward.”

“I know.”

“And knowing is the first step, but there are more steps than that, Jason. A lot more steps. When this is over – and I mean the battle, not the monster surge – then you and I are going to sit down and get into it.”

“Alright,” Jason said.

Fleets of ships and airships converged on the north from all across the Sea of Storms. Every adventurer from silver-rank up had been mobilised, and every airship that could carry them had been commandeered. Regular ships were not used as they would be vulnerable to the Builder's moving underwater city.

One of the sea's magical storms was roaring through the central waters, necessitating a wide, arcing approach. Normal protocols had airships operating at far lower than top speed, so as to avoid monster attention, but moving in a fleet was different. With such a formidable force, any gold-rank monsters too stupid to avoid the sea of adventurer auras were swiftly slaughtered.

The underwater city was also moving toward the northern reaches, as the rolling land city moved south toward the coast. The cities in its path had been evacuated as it moved south, leaving empty infrastructure that it moved through like a bison passing through long grass.

The adventurer fleets and Builder cities all converged on the southern coast of the northern continent for one of the largest-scale battles, both in numbers and rank, that the world had ever seen.

With most of Rimaros' adventure population flying north of crowded airship, only a token force remained to defend the city, on a constant state of alert. This included Jason's team, waiting in a ready area of the Adventure Society campus with other teams selected for the task. Unsurprisingly, talk amongst the adventurers was about the Builder.

"What is even the point of staging attacks like this?"

"I heard it even offered to leave the Storm Kingdom alone."

"There's no way an offer like that is real. It would just be part of some plan to hurt us even worse later."

"But isn't it only after the astral spaces? Why bother attacking us?"

"Who do you think is stopping them? Plus, they probably want to crush the Storm Kingdom so other countries let them take the astral spaces instead of getting wiped out. I've heard some countries already staged attacks on other Builder cities and got wiped out instead."

"Those are just rumours, like that crap about the god of Purity summoning a bunch of bird people."

Humphrey's team didn't participate in the discussion. They stood with other teams attached to the Geller family that hadn't been sent out on airships. This included Rick and his team, who likewise stayed quiet, despite knowing more than most.

The defence of Arnote was low-priority and would remain so unless Builder forces arrived to change that. The island's gold-rank residents were all gone except for Pelli. An elderly member of the royal family, she lived a relatively humble life as mayor of Palisaros, the village where Jason was living. She was a core user, and while she did have the power that came with her rank, her abilities were not combat-focused.

Most of the silver-rankers had also been sent away. Teams had been left at critical points around the island to respond to any normal surge-related threats, although Palisaros itself only had Jason and Pelli, and Jason left the village shortly after his team did. Shade, in the form of a bird-like flying construct, carried him around the island. He stopped in locations just long enough to get a sense of them with his aura perception, to give himself as many viable portal destination options as possible.

Under normal circumstances, extending aura senses to their limits was rude, but this was no time for politeness. Adventurers across the island were pushing their senses to the limit and Jason was no exception. With the island's sparse population making it easier to avoid being overwhelmed with input, he could spread his senses very far.

In the right location, his senses could take in half the island. He could sense the other adventurers likewise extending their perception, one member from each team on the island doing so. By limiting themselves, they wouldn't interfere with each other, which was why rules about using senses at full strength existed in the first place.

Jason sensed another aura and he was fairly certain he recognised it. Some time ago he had briefly sensed an aura pointed in his direction that withdrew the moment he sensed it. From that fleeting glimpse, he had thought it was a gold rank aura, based on the strength. Now that he felt it again, he realised it was more like his own: silver-rank, but immensely powerful.

This time the sense didn't shrink away from him, although he felt a reaction as his senses encountered it. He suspected it was stronger than his own aura, although the difference was not vast. It was also very well-controlled and he was able to sense very little from it. The one thing he did sense was something about its nature that differentiated it from normal auras. There was a rich and complicated sense of layering to the aura that took him a moment to realise what it was.

Jason had heard about people with four aura powers, although he had only encountered one with four perception powers, which had been on Earth. Normally, both perception and aura powers were restricted to one per essence user. It was possible,

however, for racial gift evolutions to unlock that limitation. A few rare essence users had one aura ability or perception ability per essence. Some even had one of each.

Jason made his way to the town where he sensed the aura, finding the owner waiting for him on the roof of a building as he arrived. It was a celestine woman with candy-pink hair and eyes. Shade's flight form dissolved and was drawn into Jason's cloak as he descended to the roof.

"I think you and I need to have a talk," he told her.

"Is this the time for that, Asano?" she asked, not hiding that she knew who he was.

"If a monster shows up we can postpone. Who are you?"

Chapter 522

A Normal Man

The office door of Havi Estos burst open to admit Havi's stumbling, flustered great-nephew. Havi looked up unhappily from the accounting papers he had been concentrating on.

"Jono, what have we said about knocking?"

"Sorry, boss, but—"

He was cut off as a strong arm grabbed him by the back of the shirt and yanked him back out of the office door to clear the way. A woman with bright pink hair stormed in and planted herself in front of Havi's desk.

"Estella," he said warmly. "I don't normally do personal meetings here."

"My other thought was burning this place to the ground, Estos, so you should be thankful I want the money."

"Then, thank you, I suppose."

"What did I tell you after last time? That if you send me to look into some crazy powerful monster, we're done. So you're going to pay me – triple, by the way – and then you're going to forget I exist and never call on me again."

Havi observed her from under raised eyebrows.

"I take it there was a problem with... what was the name?"

"Jason Asano," Jono's voice came feebly from outside the office.

"That was it," Havi said. "There was a problem with Mr Asano?"

"Yes, Havi. There was a big bloody problem with Jason Asano, starting with the fact that I just got done escaping the shadow monsters he sent looking for me the moment he sensed me. Shadow monsters, by the way, that were extremely difficult to spot and evade."

"All I asked you to do was take a peek at his aura and see what you find. Unless you were careless, he shouldn't have been able to sense someone with your strength. Tell me everything."

"If you want anything out of me, Havi, then you pay me first."

"That is not ordinarily how I do business, Miss Warnock, but—"

"Then I guess I'll go with burning the place down after all."

She turned and strode out.

"Estella..."

She didn't stop and left the office. Havi's figure blurred and vanished and he appeared in his office doorway, but she was already gone from the outer office. Jono was sitting in his chair, looking nervous.

"I thought this building was meant to have protections against people strolling in or out," Havi said.

"I thought you liked using her because she doesn't care about that kind of thing," Jono said. Havi turned a gaze on him and Jono wilted.

"Quite right, Jono."

Jono let out a breath as Havi returned to his office.

"What have I told you about breathing, Jono?" Havi's voice came from his office.

"Sorry boss."

"Find out everything about Jason Asano, Jono. Everything."

"Yes, boss."

"And send Warnock her money. Triple the usual rate."

"You look nervous, granddaughter. Is that why I haven't seen you in a little while?"

"I'm a little concerned about one of your neighbours, Grandpa."

Estella cast her gaze along the river to the house sitting beside where the river spilled over the clifftop. Warwick followed her gaze.

"I was wondering why you had your aura so retracted. You know Mr Asano, Stella?"

"Kind of. Can we just go inside, please?"

In the house, Warwick started brewing a pot of tea.

"What have you gone and gotten yourself into?" Warwick asked. "You know that Asano's name has been appearing a lot over the last few weeks, within certain rarefied circles?"

"Oh, I've heard."

"Perhaps you should tell me everything. I know Mr Asano a little. The man makes a delightful smoky meat sauce. I might be able to smooth things over."

"I don't think he knows who I am and I'd rather keep it that way," Estella said. "I wouldn't be here at all if you hadn't asked me to come. Is it something to do with what's happening in the city? The Adventure Society is mobilising on a level I've never seen. Word is that the city is preparing for war with the Builder cult who were around a few years ago."

"That's exactly what's happening, and exactly why I asked you here. But first, tell me everything about what has you so nervous."

“A few weeks ago, Havi Estos hired me to poke around Asano’s aura.”

Warwick burst out laughing.

“You kicked a steel plate there, girl.”

“Tell me about it. I picked a moment he was the least on guard. He was buying cheese. He noticed the moment my senses got anywhere near him. The way he felt, he’s like Amos Pensinata.”

“I’m quite curious as to what Amos will make of Mr Asano,” Warwick said. “I’m not alone in that regard.”

“I thought you’d tell me off for working for Estos.”

“There are certain inevitabilities within society that can go very messily. Estos is a man who makes such affairs go cleanly and there is always a place for such people. He’s careful about keeping his hands clean and too smart to let yours get dirty for him. If you are going to continue to avoid joining the Adventure Society, you could do worse. Just be careful.”

“That’s why I’m done with Estos. He kept sending me to take a look at the kind of people you don’t want looking back.”

Warwick nodded. He finished the delicate tea brewing process and poured them each a cup.

“What happened with Asano?” he asked.

“He sensed me and sent some kind of shadow creatures to try and track me down. Very hard to detect.”

“But they didn’t manage to track you?”

Estella shook her head.

“Asano didn’t get a clean look at me. It wasn’t long after that when I started hearing his name associated with other names. Like Rimaros. I don’t need that kind of trouble, so I’ve been staying quiet.”

“And that’s everything?”

“It is.”

“I don’t think that will be a problem. I’m sure Asano will be reasonable, and I can’t have my granddaughter too nervous to come visit me. You’ll probably be meeting him soon, anyway.”

“I don’t like the sound of that. This is about the Adventure Society mobilising?”

“Yes. Almost every adventurer in Rimaros will be involved. Pelli has asked me if you would help protect Arnote while that’s going on.”

“Grandpa, I’m a scout and a spy, not a warrior.”

“With the Adventure Society busy, they won’t be tracking manifestations and sending response teams as normal. Teams are being situated around the island to handle any monster manifestations, but Pelli will be the only gold-ranker here. What we need is your sensory range, which can cover a much greater distance than the silver-rank teams assigned to the island. You just need to watch for manifestations outside of the sensory ranges of the teams on the other side of the island. Pelli will cover this side.”

“And where does Asano come in?”

“He’ll also be here on Arnote. He can use portals and is going to help the teams with rapid response. Part of that will be staying mobile and, like you, expanding his senses to cover as much territory as he can.”

“If we’re both blasting our senses at full range, he’s probably going to recognise me.”

“That seems likely, yes.”

“And if he decides to make an issue of it?”

“Then talk to him. The royal family thinks everything needs to be a political game, but my read of Asano is that he’ll appreciate some straightforward honesty. You haven’t done anything to hurt him, so just deal with him straight. Tell him that you’re my granddaughter and I think he’ll be reasonable.”

“You think he will?”

“You can never truly predict another person, granddaughter. I thought you would become a celebrated adventurer, once.”

“And I thought I’d grow up with parents. People inevitably disappoint, Grandfather.”

“All of us?”

“You just asked me to blast my aura out in front of the exact person I’m trying to avoid.”

“I take your point,” he said with a wry smile. “You could say no.”

“You know that I won’t,” she said. “You only ever have to ask. Maybe you can help smooth things over with Asano beforehand, though. Seeing as you know him.”

“I would very much like that,” he said. “Unfortunately, I’m deploying in roughly the time it will take to finish my cup of tea.”

“It’s happening now?”

“I was rather hoping that you’d arrive earlier,” he admitted. “But I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

On the flat roof of the largest building in a small town, Estella Warnock was sitting on a folding chair, failing to concentrate on the book in her hands. She was trying to distract

herself since a monster manifestation would be impossible to miss unless someone came by to knock her unconscious. Which, she contemplated, was not out of the question.

With her senses pushed out to their full extent, every aura on almost half the island was within her sensory range, teasing at the edges of her perception. Only the low population allowed her to push her perception so far without suffering from sensory overload. She was also distracted by the anticipation of a certain aura entering her range. She put away the book, giving up on self-distraction.

It was not long after when she finally sensed the aura come into her range. She felt the reaction as it sensed her in turn, the source of the aura shifting direction to move towards her. She looked up at a dark bird-like shape gliding through the air and watched it disperse into a cloud of darkness that was drawn into the cloak of the man inside it, now floating down towards her. He wore combat robes in the dark red of dried blood and his cloak was lit up with pinpricks of light. He arrived in front of her, eerie blue and orange eyes staring out from a dark hood.

“I think you and I need to have a talk,” he said, his voice granite cold.

“Is this the time for that, Asano?”

“If a monster shows up we can postpone. Who are you?”

“Estella Warnock.”

He reached up and pushed the hood back from his head. He wasn't especially handsome by silver-rank standards but his dark hair was oddly shiny and his strange eyes compelling. His gaze moved to her hair; the same colour and her grandfather's.

“Warwick?” he asked.

“My grandfather.”

“Did he send you to spy on me?”

“No. That was Havi Estos.”

She could tell from his expression that it took him a moment to place the name.

“Someone pointed me in his direction a while back. He's some kind of criminal middleman, right?”

“Kind of criminal, kind of not. He used to pay me to look into people. Examine their auras to get a sense of them.”

“Used to?”

“I don't do that anymore. He kept pointing me at the kinds of people I didn't want to be pointed at.”

“If it makes you feel better, the royal family sent diamond-rankers to do the same thing. That kind of company speaks highly of you.”

“Diamond-rankers? As in, more than one?”

“I know, right? I should move to a small town or something. Wait, I did, and they came to my barbecue. Do I have to move to the moon? No, if some diamond-rankers found out there was some guy living on the moon, they'd definitely check it out. You're a local, right? How do you lay low in Rimaros?”

“I think that boat may have sailed for you,” she said warily. The encounter was not going the way she expected. “Are you going to come back at me for spying on you?”

“Lady, if I made an enemy of everyone that went rummaging through my soul, I'd have diamond-rankers, gods and great astral beings on my enemies list. Oh, wait. Look, the point is, I can't go after every silver-ranker that comes poking around when I've got Purity and the Builder sending assassins after me. It seems like you were just doing a job, and since you're Warwick's granddaughter I'm not going to make an issue of it. As long as you're done prodding me for goodies.”

“All I'm looking for is to have nothing else to do with you.”

“That's a little hurtful, but smart. I'd have nothing to do with me if I could get away with it. I'm not sure how reliable you are, though. You sold out your employer awfully fast.”

“Not employer. Client. Occasional and former client, who kept putting me in situations I didn't want to be in. And I know what trouble will come from him. You seem like a whole other kind of trouble.”

“Oh, I am. You should definitely have as little to do with me as possible. On an unrelated note, we should stay in immediate contact.”

“What?”

“You're here monitoring the island with your crazy perception range, right?”

“You should talk. At least I have a power for it. You're just weird.”

“I am not weird. I'm normal. I'm a normal man who eats normal sandwiches and occasionally saves the world.”

“What are you talking about... actually, I don't want to know.”

“My point is that we should stay in contact so you can warn me if something pops up so I can portal people as quickly as possible.”

“And how would we do that?”

Something appeared in front of Estella.

➤ [Jason Asano has invited you to join a party.](#)

“What is this?”

“Just a way to keep in touch.”

“I don't like it.”

“It's fine. It definitely won't hurt.”

“Yeah, because no man ever said that to me before.”

Jason snorted a laugh

“Fair enough. Look, it's just a telepathy thing for communication. You've never used one before on an adventuring expedition?”

“I'm not an adventurer.”

“You're not?”

“No.”

“Then why are you here helping out?”

“My grandfather asked me to.”

“Did he tell you that you might run into me here?”

“He didn't say might. He told me I would.”

“And you did it anyway?”

“My grandfather asked me to.”

He flashed an impish grin that definitely wasn't mischievously sexy.

“I like you, Estella Warnock. You should come to one of my barbecues.”

“This would be the barbecues where diamond-rankers show up?”

“Good point. You might want to...”

He trailed off and they both turned their heads to look west.

“Duty calls,” he said. “That's the response team I'm sensing downstairs, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I'll go open them up a portal. You should accept that party invite. The magic communication one, not the barbecue one. Although, that too.”

“Fine,” she conceded.

-
- You have joined a party.
 - Party leader is [Jason Asano].
 - Voice chat is available.
-

The team moved out of the portal and raced off in the direction of the manifestation without a word. Jason stayed next to the portal, a cloud chair manifesting under him as he sat.

“Shade, did I make an idiot of myself with that woman.”

"I thought it was fine, Mr Asano."

"I shouldn't have asked her out like that."

"You invited her to a social gathering, Mr Asano, not to a candlelit dinner."

"I just got done telling people I wasn't looking for someone."

"Are you?"

"No! I need to, you know. Work through my own stuff before I start dumping it on someone else."

"Then perhaps you should stop avoiding Mrs Remore."

"I am not avoiding Arabelle," Jason said. "What I should be avoiding is celestines. All these crazy gorgeous women are affecting my judgement."

"Yes, Mr Asano. That must be what's doing it."

Chapter 523

This One Time

The lumbering figure was only passingly humanoid, its massive body embedded with coral that jutted from its flesh like spiked armour. It was still some way offshore, yet the sea only reached up to the giant's thighs. What was above the surface was already a match in height for a five-storey building.

"Asano," Pelli said through voice chat. "I'm sensing a gold-rank monster near your location."

"Yep," Jason said. "I'm just looking it up."

He was already painted in monster blood, some of which had smeared from his hand onto the magical marble tablet he was holding. It was a copy of the Magic Society's monster almanac in which Jason was looking up the monster wading out of the sea.

"Reef giant," he read from the tablet. "Matches the description."

"They're a common monster in this region," Pelli told him. "Common for gold-rank, anyway. They're slow, but they're incredibly tough, which is a bad match for my abilities."

"It's fine," Jason said. "That's my specialty."

"Jason, don't fight a gold-rank monster alone. I'll be there as soon as I clear the flock attacking this town."

"Don't worry," he told her. "I've got something to boost me."

"If you insist on fighting it, beware of its coral-tipped whips," she warned him. "They're much faster than the monster itself."

"So I'm reading."

The beach was littered with monster corpses; freakish abominations combining elements of grasshoppers, cicadas and lobsters called lobhoppers. Jason put away the monster almanac and cast an eye over the dead creatures.

"Shade, who is naming these monsters?"

"I believe it falls to the person who first encounters them."

"I bet it was the same person who named the shab. It's just lazy; the guy should be ashamed of himself."

Dozens of the silver-rank monsters had launched themselves out of the sea, yet never made it off the beach. The massive swarm of Gordon's affliction-spreading butterflies was still hovering over the beach, almost thick enough to block out the sun. Shade's bodies were flitting across the beach, touching each monster corpse in readiness for looting.

Both Jason and Gordon could direct the butterflies, although the control was haphazard at best. By and large, the conjured entities sought out anything Jason deemed an enemy and attempted to afflict it. They swept out over the water as Jason held his hands out to his sides while chanting a spell.

“As your lives were mine to reap, so your deaths are mine to harvest.”

The remnant life force lingering within the monsters poured into Jason, streams of glowing red energy moving through the air to be absorbed into his body.

-
- You have gained multiple instances of [Blood Frenzy].
 - [Blood Frenzy] has increased your [Speed] and [Recovery] attributes.
 - Your [Speed] and [Recovery] attributes have reached the maximum threshold for your current limitations. Additional instances will be converted to [Blood of the Immortal].
 - You have gained multiple instances of [Blood of the Immortal].
-

Jason's life force was already bolstered by the healing effects he had accumulated during the fight with the lighthoppers, his health extending far beyond his normal maximum and into video game hit point territory. Now with his attributes boosted, he was ready to face the relatively slow reef giant.

The butterflies went out to meet the monster as it waded into shore. The giant was one of the largest monsters Jason had ever faced, but there was an odd reversal between them. The gold-rank monster's speed would have been mediocre for silver-rank, while Jason's was boosted to a level bordering on gold. That did not mean that it was helpless, however, as Pelli has warned him. He saw why as the butterfly swarm drew close to the giant.

The monster's body was embedded with fragments of sharp coral, half-buried in its flesh. As the butterflies drew near, the shards of coral shot out, revealing themselves as the razor-sharp ends to dozen whips made from what looked like thin strips of kelp. The whips flailed in a wild blur, somehow avoiding becoming entangled with one another while thrashing through the butterflies.

The butterflies exploded as they were destroyed, which triggered small chain reactions given how many of the butterflies there were, all swarming on the one enemy. It was not such a problem when they were spread out over many enemies, which was their primary purpose, but clumped around a single foe, their explosive nature became a liability.

Jason was unconcerned that only a few of the butterflies made it through the flailing barrier of whipping kelp tipped with coral spearheads. Even one was enough to get the

affliction ball rolling, after which it was just a matter of time. Jason could have even backed off and waited for the afflictions to escalate, but he didn't. He wasn't walking away from a chance to push himself and grow stronger.

As the monster waded into shore, Jason stood waiting, his new sword in hand. The sigils set into the black blade had the red glow of life force, containing the power that would normally belong to Jason's conjured dagger. His fingers tightened and loosened around the grip, the only sign of his nervousness as the gold rank monster closed in on the shore.

The giant emerged from the water and the fight began. Despite having read the monster's Magic Society listing, Jason was still surprised. He had known the monster was gold rank, but given his abilities and the monster's deficits, he had been anticipating a convincingly one-sided win. Instead, the many warnings he had been given about underestimating gold-rank monsters were borne out.

The lumbering monster, for all its physical power and resilience, was little more than a slow-moving weapons platform. The true threat was the coral-tipped whips anchored all over its body, even to its face. They formed a shifting razor wall that was extremely intimidating to approach.

Jason quickly discovered that staying out of the whips' range was no guarantee of safety. More coral pushed its way out of the giant's skin and was fired off; larger, spiked fragments, not tethered to the giant like the whips were. Jason's cloak was very good at intercepting small projectiles, but these were only small relative to the giant. To Jason, they were more like spears, one of which struck him heavily in the side. It tore through his conjured cloak and robes but glanced off his flesh, leaving only a scratch that healed in moments.

The seemingly insignificant blow had soaked up a huge portion of Jason's accumulated life force. A few more hits like that would take him from shrugging off attacks to his being pinned to the ground like the least pretty butterfly in the collection. Fortunately, his amulet's magic was already at work. Every affliction that built up on the giant also placed a shield on Jason that healed him as it was broken, adding to his accumulated life force.

The amulet's effects were only enough to take the edge off attacks, rather than entirely protect him. This was especially true against a gold-rank monster, but it gave him a valuable margin of safety, so long as he didn't over-rely on it. He admonished himself as he became more conscientiously evasive, using Shade's bodies to shadow-jump around.

While Jason had underestimated the monster, despite telling himself that he wouldn't, he did have surprises of his own ready. When the giant was in the middle of the field of dead monsters littering the beach, Jason looted them all and they dissolved into rainbow smoke. Jason had not grown used to the foul stench, despite his years of adventuring, but could at least endure it as it disoriented the monster, giving Jason his first chance to move in and land hits.

The distraction was only momentary, but Jason's combat style lived in those moments and he earned one opportunity and then another to attack. The giant swiftly recovered from the stench and Jason tossed a throwing dart marked with a green cord. It was intercepted by a whip and exploded into conjured vines that entangled the whips. They swiftly sliced their way free, but not before Jason once more moved in, landed hits and escaped.

Jason made his moves and took his chances. For all that the whips and the coral spears were a threat, the advantages that had prompted Jason to take the fight were real. He was able to choose his range and had the freedom to retreat as needed, allowing him to use his preferred hit-and-run strategy.

Even so, he took plenty of hits, although that was always accounted for in Jason's strategies. His potent drain attacks and spells, plus the regeneration he built up, fed Jason a constant stream of excess life force, even as the whips and spears Gordon didn't block whittled it down. This was normal for Jason, who used the strategy as the key to surviving his skirmishing combat style. He needed to repeatedly conjure fresh combat robes as the old ones were shredded.

Jason's familiars also played their parts. Shade and Gordon were largely safe from the monster's attacks due to their incorporeal nature, although neither had abilities that could substantially harm the immense vitality of the giant. What Gordon excelled at was using his orbs to either shield Jason from coral spears or shoot them out of the air with pinpoint accuracy. His resonating-force beams were well-suited to breaking down the rigid structure of the spears before they could reach Jason.

Shade was Jason's primary shadow-jump platform on the flat, open beach, while Colin was useful in multiple ways. His humanoid form sent straps of blood-slick leather to entangle the coral whips. The whips quickly pulled free but each interruption gave Jason another chance to move in with his sword. Leeches also formed from the bloody leather straps, crawling into the giant's body and digging in with rings of tiny teeth. Coral spikes jabbed through the monster's skin to impale many of them, but there were plenty more. Even the ones that were skewered left yet more afflictions in their wake.

Jason did not accumulate mana with the same alacrity as life force, but his generally efficient powers and the mana regeneration he did have allowed his levels to climb above his normal maximums. Once the afflictions on the gold-rank monster had built up, it was worth looking to spend that mana.

“Suffer the cost of your transgressions.”

Ability: [Punition] (Doom)

- Spell.
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Silver 4 (09%).

- Effect (iron): Inflicts necrotic damage for each curse, disease, poison and unholy affliction the target is suffering.

- Effect (bronze): Inflicts or refreshes the duration of [Penitence].

- Effect (silver): Damage per affliction can be increased by increasing the mana cost to high, very high, or extreme. This reduces the cooldown to 20 seconds, 10 seconds or none. Consecutive, extreme-cost uses have a shorter incantation.

- [Penitence] (affliction, holy): Gain an instance of [Penance] for each curse, disease, poison or unholy effect that is cleansed from you. This is a holy effect.

- [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.

Even for a gold-rank monster, the giant’s vitality was enormous. Jason had never been able to unload as many afflictions as had accumulated on it without killing the victim before, yet the giant remained relatively unharmed. While its flesh was marked with patches of dark necrosis, it was still going strong as it shambled around the beach, trying to catch Jason within the zone of its whips.

Jason’s Punition spell was stronger for every affliction on the target. With what had built up on the giant, one casting would have killed almost anything else he’d ever fought, but the giant kept coming. Normally the mana cost was moderate, but Jason bumped it three stages through high and very high, all the way to extreme. This reduced the incantation of future casting while reducing the cooldown to nothing.

“Suffer.”

More damage.

"Suffer."

More damage.

"Suffer."

More damage, but the giant kept coming even as Jason kept casting. By the time Jason's mana was all but depleted, its skin was blackened and rotting, the colourful coral whip heads becoming bleached and pale. In spite of this, the monster was still going strong. Jason's powers might breach the resistances of gold-rank enemies, but the level of damage they inflicted was still at silver. Gold-rank monsters took a lot of killing.

For the majority of his adventuring life, Jason had rarely gotten the chance to fully explore the impact of his abilities on monsters. While he killed slower than most adventurers, most things still died before his abilities could move through their full sequence. Given the opportunity, Jason's powers told an almost religious story, beginning with the cost of sin and ending with the price of absolution.

"I think Clive was right," he muttered. "The abilities we get are based on our personality. Even my power set's a chuuni."

He raised his free hand towards the monster as cast a spell.

"Feed me your sins."

Ability: [Feast of Absolution] (Sin)

- Spell (recovery, cleanse, holy).
- Base cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Silver 4 (08%).

- Effect (iron): Cleanse all curses, diseases, poisons and unholy afflictions from a single target. Additionally, cleanse all holy afflictions if the target is an ally. Recover stamina and mana for each affliction cleansed. This ability ignores any effect that prevents cleansing. Cannot target self.

- Effect (bronze): Enemies suffer an instance each of [Penance] and [Legacy of Sin] for each condition cleansed from them.

- Effect (silver): Increase cost to moderate to affect all afflicted enemies and allies in a wide area.

- [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.

- [Legacy of Sin] (affliction, holy, stacking): You are considered more damaged for the purposes of execute ability damage scaling. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

As the giant lit up from the inside with transcendent light, Jason's depleted mana was more than filled. With so many afflictions converted into mana, he was so bursting with it that he'd have trouble using stealth because the mana leaking out of him would be so easy to sense. Further, for each affliction, he gained an instance of Integrity that continually fed him health and mana. With so many being stacked on him, Jason was now gaining life force faster than he could lose it, even standing in range of the whips.

"Let's see if we can change that," he said, eyes locked on the giant as the sigils set into his black blade turned from red to blue.

"Mr Asano, you're talking to yourself again."

"Do you mind?"

"I just worry you might be getting ready to take a dramatic fighting pose."

"I am not going to take a fighting pose."

"You're not imagining yourself on the poster of an action movie, then."

"Absolutely not."

"Or a limited-series premium television show with a fight choreographer from Hong Kong?"

"Can you please stop? I'm trying to fight evil here."

"With your powers of blood and plague and your black sword?"

Gordon was floating between Jason and the giant, shooting down spears or deflecting them with shields. Jason spotted his orbs strobing, which was the dimensional being's equivalent of laughter.

"You're all mean," Jason said. "All I wanted to do was look a little bit cool and you've ruined it. At least Colin gets me."

Colin, who looked like a blood clone of Jason, struck a fighting pose.

"Oh, that's not helping," Jason lamented. "You look like a power ranger."

A coral spear passed through Colin's head and he toppled over, the top third of his body breaking into a pile of leeches.

"Oops," Jason said. "I probably shouldn't get distracted."

Jason dashed toward the giant, dark red leather straps shooting out from his conjured robes to entangle the whips. They only held for a moment but Jason's speed still bordered on that of a gold-ranker as he dashed in. He landed a few quick blows with his sword before getting out, but even this was not fast enough to completely escape whips as fast as the giant was slow. The freed whips gouged Jason's flesh, eating away at his accumulated life force more than previously, courtesy of Jason himself. The afflictions his sword had just left behind impacted both the monster and himself in an escalation tactic pairing risk and reward.

-
- [Price in Blood] (affliction, holy, blood, stacking): Damage between people who share the affliction is increased, including damage sources in place prior to this affliction taking effect. Damage from holy sources is further increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

Jason didn't let up, continuing his hit-and-run sword strikes to escalate the damage to both himself and the giant. Once it reached a point where even his absurd life force gain was no longer enough, he moved the fight into its final phase.

"Mine is the judgement and the judgement is death."

Ability: [Verdict] (Doom)

- Spell (execute).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Silver 4 (06%)

- Effect (iron): Deals a small amount of transcendent damage. As an execute effect, damage scales exponentially with the enemy's level of injury.

- Effect (bronze): Damage scaling is increased by instances of [Penance] on the target.

- Effect (silver): Inflicts or refreshes [Sanction] on the target.

- [Sanction] (affliction, holy): Healing, recovery and regeneration effects have diminished potency. Base strength of this effect is very minor but scales exponentially with the enemy's level of injury. Scaling is affected by [Legacy of Sin] in the same way execute damage is. Cannot be cleansed while any instances of [Penance] are present.

Even Jason's most potent ability didn't finish the giant, although the monster finally showed its suffering. Large portions of its body burned away in trails of rainbow smoke as

it staggered and stumbled. Its combat effectiveness dropped as the whips slowed, many of them burning away in transcendent light. Jason no longer kept moving in to attack, instead, waiting for his execute power to come off cooldown to finish the job. Even then, it took three more castings of the finisher before the creature's gold-rank resilience could finally take no more.

In the aftermath of another battle that left him painted in blood, Jason reflected on the power of the gold rank monster. He had every advantage he could muster, from a very favourable power match-up to a pack of monsters he could feed on and buff himself with as a lead-in. Even with all of that, the battle had been an incredible slog. If any of his advantages had been absent, or if unforeseen factors had intervened, the fight could have turned deadly for Jason very quickly. If years of this was what it took to reach gold rank, he had a new appreciation for anyone who managed to accomplish the feat. As for diamond rank, it felt further away now than in Greenstone where it was almost a mythical realm.

While Jason was fighting a giant on Arnote, the war with the Builder had already begun. Airships swarmed over the Builder's submarine city in the Storm Kingdom's northern waters that had surfaced to disgorge airships of its own. Close by, on the rocky desert coast, a vast plume of dust was being thrown up by the approaching land city.

On a rocky coastal outcropping, Dawn stood alone, looking at the dust storm. She knew what the builder wanted from this attack. It wanted her to use up her single chance to intervene while also showing its power to cow the nations of the world. She would allow the Builder its first objective since this was not her world to fight for.

It was not what she would have chosen as First Sister of the World-Phoenix, but that was not her role anymore. The World-Phoenix wanted her to find her mortal sensibilities, and those sensibilities let Jason make the choice for her. It might not be the most strategic move, but perhaps it would be. A victory at this stage would bolster the morale of a world under siege.

That would help stymie the Builder's second goal, of intimidating the world's nations. It was as far as she would go on that since the true fight belonged to those for whom the world was theirs to fight for. She would act this one time, then success or failure would be for them to seize.

She raised a hand to the sky.

Chapter 524

Between Mortal and Something Else

Battle raged over the waters of the Storm Kingdom's northwestern reaches. The Builder's underwater city had surfaced for battle, disgorging airships to meet those from Rimaros in the skies above. Many adventurers were not even in airships, free-floating in the air or even approaching through the water. The Builder's force had many constructs designed to operate in the water, along with abominations modified not from intelligent races but sharks and other deadly denizens of the deep. Fighting underwater was not a weakness to the Adventure Society forces, however. The Sea of Storms had no shortage of people adept in aquatic environs.

The Builder's forces were much more numerous than those of the adventurers. Along with creations designed to swim or fly on their own, more were delivered into battle via airship, triggering ship-to-ship battle between the two sides. While the Builder had the quantity, however, the adventurers had the quality. The mass-produced creations were no match for well-trained adventurers, and the Storm Kingdom's adventurers were certainly that. While most might not be on the level of a Rimaros guild member, even those with Thadwick attitudes did not have Thadwick aptitudes. The Adventure Society branches in the Sea of Storms would not allow it.

Compared to the eclectic creations of the Builder cult, whose essence users served more as leadership, the adventurers were all people. Only their familiars and summons added more extreme diversity to their line-up. The Builder's creations were much more varied, with winged serpents, multi-headed crocodiles and giant sharks either entirely artificial or grotesque combinations of steel, stone and flesh.

Many of the creations were much larger than almost everything on the adventurer side. The only things the adventurers fielded to keep up were a few massive summons, each of which made an impression. From the huge cloud with seven hydra heads dangling from it to the dragon made of loose boulders, held together by electricity, they cut formidable figures. None, however, could match the size of the Builder cult's largest creation.

As the battle began, the adventurers could sense something vast moving in the deeps. From the air above they could make out a leviathan silhouette in the water before it finally moved to the surface and erupted out. It was a massive lamprey; a diamond rank abomination of flesh and decaying metal. Its sides were plated in pitted steel, its maw ringed with rusted iron teeth. It lunged from the water like the grasping arm of some

monstrous sea god. It rose hundreds of metres without revealing the full length of its body. Two low-flying airships were engulfed whole before it reached the peak of its lunge and splashed back on the water with a booming slap as its body fell flat, kicking off massive waves.

The battle had two aspects. One was the diamond-rank powerhouses for each side. They would keep each other in check as any diamond-ranker the other side couldn't account for would rampage through the lower ranks of the enemy. The adventurers had six diamond-rank essence users, while the floating city deployed only two. They had to rely on other diamond-level powers, like the flesh-abomination lamprey.

The Builder cult's great equaliser was the city itself. Like an iceberg, most of it was below the water, making it much larger than it seemed from the surface. This was not news; the city had been scouted and the adventurers knew its true size. What they didn't know was what that humungous bulk contained behind the sealed, underwater walls.

Below the surface, ten massive panels opened up on the city's exterior. From the resulting apertures emerged massive tentacles of segmented steel, so large they either occupied the bulk of the city's internal space or were contained in a dimensional storage space with unheard-of scope. The Builder cult's floating city turned out to be a city-sized kraken construct.

The tentacles rose from the water, each one a diamond-rank construct in its own right. Their massive length and bulk needed no special features; just swaying in the air allowed them to swat airships from the sky with monumental force.

Pandemonium reigned as the sky over the kraken-city become barely comprehensible, let alone navigable. Normally dominant silver-rankers were more reliant on luck than their abilities for survival. Builder airships staged ramming and boarding actions while adventurers flung around powers that filled the air with clouds of energy and flashes of light, along with stranger and more eclectic effects. Trees grew out of clouds, extending vines to pull people from the decks of airships. Jade orbs flew around, hammering constructs out of the sky. One Builder airship grew arms and started attacking itself, the passengers being forced to battle their own ship.

The diamond-rankers, meanwhile, confronted one another. The adventurers had six in their number; Soramir conspicuous in his absence. One each faced off with the Builder cultists diamond-rankers, their clashes spelling doom for any lower-rankers nearby. Gold rankers had a chance to survive the collateral damage, but any silver that drifted too close was in imminent threat of annihilation. One diamond-ranker was attempting to hunt down

the lamprey while the remaining three were shielding the rest of their forces from the kraken tentacles.

The second aspect to the battle, after the diamond-rank powerhouses, was the gold and silver-rank forces on both sides. The objective of the adventurers was to invade the city, find and fight their way to its core mechanisms and destroy them. This was the role of the lower-rankers while the diamond-rankers kept their equivalents tied up.

The Builder's goal was to prevent this and drive away the adventurers, bleeding them without allowing them any gains. The Builder cult could much more rapidly replenish its forces in the aftermath; their creations might be weaker than essence users but were much easier to replace. Attrition and pyrrhic victories were to the cult's advantage.

As the battle progressed, the quality of the adventurer's force became increasingly telling. They were yet to break through the magical dome blocking access to the city, but their six diamond-rankers were slowly but surely proving superior. The same was true of the lower ranks, with the mass-produced creations of the cult failing to match the essence users. The high standard of the Storm Kingdom's adventurers was showing its worth.

The city's defence screen was a formidable thing, but no barrier in the world could hold off a diamond ranker for very long. Once the diamond ranker hunting the lamprey managed to slay the beast, she turned her attention to breaching the barrier. With myriad gold-rankers pounding away as well, it could only hold up so long. With the city's power source also driving the massive tentacles fending off even more diamond-rankers, there was a limit to what it could spare to maintain the shields. When it inevitably broke down, silver and gold-rankers poured into the city.

Six diamond-rankers acting together was a world-shaking force. The doom of the floating city was clearly coming, but it was extracting every drop of blood it could. In the wake of the battle, the adventuring strength of the Sea of Storms would be considerably diminished.

A crew of pirates had been hovering around the periphery of the Storm Kingdom since the beginning of the monster surge and their bold captain, on hearing about the mobilisation, saw a once-in-a-lifetime chance to make a raid that would affix his name in the annals of pirate history - raiding Riaros itself.

Of the three major islands of Rimaros, Arnote was the least populous and least defended. Without the riches of Livaros or the people of Provo, its more powerful residents had always been the only protection it needed. But with the forces of Rimaros mobilised,

only a handful of teams remained. Most importantly, the only gold-ranker still present was the core user, Pelli, who was mayor of some village.

If enough monsters spawned in the area during this time – a good chance in the middle of a monster surge – then the defenders might well be drawn away from a juicy target long enough for a successful raid. For this reason, the captain had planted people in the towns of Arnote, with signal beacons to call the pirates in should the chance arise. This exact thing had happened, and the pirates had moved in on the town of Kasilaro.

At first, things had gone exactly as expected. The team stationed there were busy fighting monsters underwater, off the coast. The pirate's airship had swept in, the residents fleeing as the pirates kicked open doors, snatching anything of value. They even took the time to grab the pretty women and boys who looked fun to play with, which was around the point that things started going wrong.

The gold-ranker, Pelli, had arrived within expectations. Any gold-ranker could move swiftly enough that they would reach the town before the raiders had their fill of plunder. The captain was also a core-using gold-ranker, which was a rare rank amongst pirates. It had won him the prestige he enjoyed within the pirate circles and was the source of his current boldness. His part of the plan was to keep the gold-ranker busy while his first mate led the crew in continuing to loot the town.

Pelli did not want the collateral damage of her confrontation with the pirate captain to wreak havoc on Kasilaro and its residents, which was why she fought outside the town. As this exposed the town to the pirate's crew, she had called in backup.

In the town, the crew was hauling everything of value to the airship tethered to the ground, just beyond the town gates. They used carts and wagons pilfered from the townsfolk, as well as using the residents themselves as pack mules. Their activity centres on the town square, which made a useful transfer point for looted goods and had the main road running straight to the gates.

The crew began to notice that some of their number hadn't shown themselves in a while. At first, it hadn't been apparent. Those missing were the ones who'd grabbed a pretty boy or girl and dragged them into a building for some fun. When they took too long to re-emerge, the first mate became concerned. She grumbled to herself that they should have known better than to be so long about their sordid business, but pirates were not famous for discipline.

She was about to go looking for them when the presence of trouble was confirmed by the missing crew's reappearance. They came staggering out of buildings, stumbling and some falling over entirely. Their skin was blackened, their limbs withered and their eyes

were full of fear. As the rest of the crew noticed them emerging, they stopped hauling loot in the direction of the airship and looked around, worried.

“What happened?” the first mate asked after she marched up to the closest of the stricken still on their feet. The man opened his mouth to speak but only coughed black blood over her before falling to his knees. Then a cold voice spoke, echoed from points all around the town square, even though the speaker was nowhere to be seen.

“Did I say you could go?”

Long shadow arms emerged from dark doorways and alleys, grabbing the afflicted crew and dragging them back into the alleys and doorways they had just emerged from. Those still standing toppled over as they were all dragged into the darkness and disappeared.

The first mate was the strongest member of the crew short of the captain himself, but she couldn't sense the speaker with her senses. It was unlikely to be a gold ranker though, or he wouldn't be hiding. More likely, it was a stealth specialist looking to intimidate them. Unfortunately, she knew that her crew were bullies it would be likely to work on.

“It's just some adventurer,” she called outleaping up onto a wagon. “Hey, adventurer! Unless you want us to slaughter everyone in this town, you'd best show your face.”

Cruel laughter came from every shadow. Disconcertingly, even her own.

“I didn't come here to save them,” the cold voice informed her. “I came here to kill you.”

“Screw this,” one of the bronze-rank pirates said and broke out into a run. That triggered most of the others, only the few silver-rankers remaining behind. The pirates ran with the sun at their backs, their shadows stretched out in front of them. A dark figure rose from the shadow of the first pirate to run, grabbed him by the neck and gave a single sharp shake.

The fleeing pirates pulled to a stop as the figure dropped the pirate with the now-broken neck. He was shrouded in a dark cloak over robes the colour of dried blood. Two strange orbs floated around him like disembodied alien eyes. Two smaller versions of those eyes watched them from within a dark hood. he drew a sword with a black blade, marked with ominous red sigils.

As the battle over the floating city raged, only one person stood on the coast to confront the approaching land city. The great fortress approached hidden in a storm of desert dust kicked up by its passage. Dawn raised an arm in the air and pointed to the sky. As she moved her hand, lines of fire lit up the sky, drawing out a ritual circle even more

vast than the dust cloud hiding the rolling city. When she started chanting, her words were like a tsunami, audible even over the cataclysmic sounds of the diamond-rankers battling above the ocean.

“I call back to the origin of infinity. From the fires of creation were you born in the days before days, and from the fire shall you come again. The birth of all things marks the beginning of the end, for in creation is the promise of annihilation. In the place, the end has come, so bring forth the flames of beginning and let them mark the end.”

Dawn’s words of fire and thunder carried out over the land and water, even the madness of the nearby battle coming to a momentary lull. All eyes present turned to see the grand summoning circle in the sky. The circled started to close in on itself, its lines entangling and folding over one another like a wire sculpture of white, yellow and orange. It took on the framework of a fiery bird of barely comprehensible immensity, flames lighting up to fill in the gaps and flesh out the great phoenix blanketing the dust storm below.

The sky started to darken as if the sun was trembling before a presence born of power older and greater than itself. Day turned to night as the flaming bird took on the role of a burning moon, lighting up the dark as the dust cloud beneath it burned away, combusting from the heat sweeping out from the awe-inducing firebird.

The land city was silhouetted in flames as the dust cloud was burned off around it. An apocalyptic column of fire descended from the cosmic phoenix’s body onto the heart of the city. From its wings came streamers of flame, twisting through the air on their way down to ravage the city’s outlying districts as the centre burned away.

An aura, more oppressive than anything the world had felt before, crashed down on the burning city. Even the diamond-rankers within, who had been readying to go and confront Dawn, were suppressed. The raw power on display did not belong to this world but to something greater; a force that belonged to the cosmos.

No defenders emerged from the city. No defences rose to protect it. The vast city of stone and steel was melted down like slag in a foundry, along with everything in it - living or otherwise. Dawn only had one chance to intervene and she used it to the absolute limit, showing the world a power it had never seen before and might never see again. Even the inhuman forces of the Builder, battling off the coast, took pause as they were struck dumb, shocked at the spectacle.

Such a vast power, so beyond the limits of the world into which it was summoned, could only last a short time. The burning light of the phoenix dimmed, the sun shining brighter again as the great phoenix grew dark, slowly turning to ash and drifting away.

Even with such a sight before them, the terrible carnage of the battle over the floating city battle could only be stalled for so long. As the ashen remains of the phoenix floated on the air like a volcano's expulsion, the brutal war resumed.

"Thank you," Pelli said to Jason.

"I couldn't stop them all before they hurt and killed some of the townsfolk."

"I thought you didn't come to save them?"

"You heard that."

"I'm going to assume that was something you said so they wouldn't try taking hostages."

"Thank you."

"You didn't kill them all?"

"The bronze-rankers died too fast. The silver core users I was able to keep alive, but there was a woman who was more skilled than the others. No cores, maybe an ex-adventurer. Not guild level, but there was clearly some training there. I didn't take any chances with her. I felt the gold-ranker run off."

"I tried to finish him, but it's hard to kill a gold ranker, even when you are one. You need powers to outpace them, trap them or load them up with ongoing damage. Not an issue for you, I suppose."

"For me, the trick has always been taking them alive. I have a tool for that now, but in groups, the weak ones die too fast."

"You can kill them all as far as..."

Pelli trailed off as an aura unlike anything she had ever felt washed over the island. Then the sky started to go dark as the sun dimmed. Even from fifteen hundred kilometres away, the events to the northwest could be felt.

"What in the names of the sweet gods is that?" Pelli asked in a trembling voice. "It's not an eclipse. I've never felt power like that."

"That's my friend Dawn," Jason said.

"That's a person?"

"This is the power that lies between mortal and something else."

"I don't even know what that means."

"I don't think we're meant to. Not yet."

Jason turned his gaze from the northwest, where the aura was coming from, to the east and the direction of Livaros.

"Now it's time to see if she was right," he said.

“Right about what?”

“The Builder’s intentions.”

Even as the incredible aura continued to wash over the island, another vast and powerful aura erupted from where Jason was looking. It was distant, but large and high enough in the air to be visible. A massive manifestation of rainbow light had appeared in the sky.

“And right she was,” Jason said grimly.

“What is that?” Pelli asked a second time.

“That,” Jason said, “is a Builder fortress-city, appearing over Livaros.”

“But all our forces have gone to the north-west.”

“Not all,” Jason said. “Just most.”

“Who are left?” she asked. “There’s barely a token force left by the Adventure Society, right?”

“Yes,” Jason said. “It’s just them and your family.”

Chapter 525

Stand at the Front

The royal family of the Storm Kingdom was very large. Every combat-trained member of silver-rank or above was gathered in a ballroom in the royal palace; one of the few rooms large enough to hold them all. From Zara and Vesper to Soramir and the Storm King, the only absent member of that group was Zila, who had gone northwest to fight in the battle there. Only untrained core users like Pelli were exempted from the family call to arms.

With them was the royal guard, all members of the Sapphire Crown guild, representatives from the Irios family and a contingent of clergy. Most of the churches' combat forces were also adventurers and had set out for the battles in the northwest. Even so, the churches had placed their core reserves under the command of the royal family for the defence of the city.

"The first part will not be the most critical," Soramir told them, standing before the gathering with the Storm King and Trenchant Moore flanking him. "What it will be is the hardest. We couldn't hold back more than one diamond-ranker or not only would the attack on the water city be less likely to succeed, but the Builder could realise that we were preparing for his sneak attack."

Soramir looked up through the glass ceiling of the ballroom in which they had gathered. All eyes followed his gaze to the mass of rainbow light floating high above, from which the Builder's fortress-city would soon emerge.

"I have no shame in claiming to be strong," Soramir said, "but I am not so strong that I can handle every diamond-rank threat the Builder cult will have ready for us. We can hope that the cult believed they would catch us unprepared and used their greater resources elsewhere, but to assume that would be folly. We can only operate under the assumption that whatever they send against us will be more than I can handle alone."

He gestured expansively around him.

"Our advantage is home territory. We know that the Builder cult has limited diamond-rank essence users and relies heavily on their creations and the power of the cities themselves. In this case, however, we can match them. We have our own city, with its own power, built up in the centuries since I founded this kingdom."

He nodded at the leader of the Irios family contingent.

“From the first days of this kingdom, the Irios family has built the walls that shield its people in times of crisis. The founder of their family was a man I called brother, and I know he would be as proud of what your family has become as I am of mine.”

He glanced at the Storm King with a smile.

“Every generation has made this kingdom stronger than the one before. Now the time has come to show this interloper who thinks he can destroy us the strength of what we have built together. We are the Storm Kingdom. Some of us carry the very name of this city. Others are its most staunch defenders or the architects of its defences. The people of this Kingdom have given all of us so much. Now, in our time of greatest crisis, we will show them that their faith in us was not in vain.”

Again Soramir looked up before turning his gaze back on the crowd in the room.

“The first step, as I said, will be the hardest. We have a great weapon, but the enemy stronghold is mighty. Our weapon must be carried into the heart of their city so we can be certain of destroying it. This means breaching the city's defences while its defenders wield the full force of their power against us. Normally, that task would fall to me, but I will not be free to do so while harassed by the cult's diamond-rankers. Fortunately, we are not alone. This entity has invaded our world, but our world has gods to watch over us. Archbishop, Rimmon, if you would?”

A man in the garb of the church of Knowledge stepped to the front to address the group.

“Even gods and beings like the Builder have rules,” the archbishop said. “The Builder has been pushing against the limits of those rules, which gives our gods the leeway to push back. Thus far, they have bided their time, waiting for the best opportunities. One of those opportunities is now. The gods are stepping forward to protect the people of the Storm Kingdom.”

Reassurance showed on the faces of the royal family, the Irios family and the royal guard. Soramir's speech was all well and good, but they were up against forces greater than any mortal. It was a relief to know the gods would be standing with them.

“Each of the gods will do what they can,” Archbishop Rimmon continued. “They have granted us, their representatives, miracles to aid the city. The archbishop of war will empower the city's defences beyond what should normally be possible. The archbishop of Ocean will have the sea itself aid us. Knowledge has revealed to me many secrets of the Builder city, from where to place our weapon to how to breach the defences without diamond-rank assistance.”

“This does not mean the task ahead of us is easy,” Soramir said. “Only that it is possible at all. Make no mistake: many of us will fall today. The price we pay for our Kingdom’s safety – for its very survival – will be high. But we will pay it, because that is our duty. Throughout the history of this kingdom, we have always stood at the top. Now the time has come for us to stand at the front.”

Jason’s team, minus Jason himself, were one of many teams given a device to carry into the city. Only one was the true bomb, but once the cult realised the objective of the Rimaros defenders, they would focus on stopping it. For that reason, many teams had been handed dummy devices, with the church of knowledge giving target locations within the city to activate it. As to which device and which target were the real ones, the people assigning tasks claimed not to know. Everyone would have to do their utmost to succeed in case they were the true hope for the city.

“It’s definitely not our team,” Neil said as they waited on an airship docked at a sky tower. “No way they gave us the real thing. The cult will probably put extra effort into killing us just for being Jason’s team, so giving it to us is a terrible idea.”

“It’ll be some gold-rank guild group,” Sophie said. “It’s too important to hand over to anyone but those with the best chance.”

“Unless that’s exactly what they want the cult to think,” Belinda said. “Maybe it is us.”

“It’s not,” Sophie said. “They’re telling everyone that no one knows who has the real thing but that’s just to motivate the rest of us. The ones who have the real thing know what they’ve got.”

“It would have been nice to have Gary, Rufus and Farrah with us,” Clive said.

“They have their own task,” Humphrey said. “Farrah is a formation magic expert and they need every one of those they can get. If we can’t breach the magical defences of the Builder city, none of this will work out.”

The rainbow light above the city was something between a portal and the manifestation effect of a monster or essence, without exactly being either. Only possible during the monster surge when the dimensional membrane of reality was in tatters, it faded away as it disgorged the Builder’s flying city.

It looked like a fairly normal city, except being in the sky. The city rested on a massive disc of stone with a massive and complex ritual circle engraved into the underside. The top of the city looked like any city built heavily of stone, with towers, streets and other buildings that looked remarkably ordinary for a flying city of doom. The defensive dome glimmering

over it was also common in major cities, although being visible when not actively being attacked was unusual.

The battle began with the lines of the massive ritual circle under the flying city lighting up, swiftly glowing brighter until a massive beam of red-white magic shot directly down at Livaros. The ritual circle was not the mechanism by which the city flew but a giant magic beam cannon.

Livaros itself was a city larger than the one flying above it, the entire island being urbanised. The protection that appeared to intercept the beam was not a dome, like that over the Builder city. It was a circular barrier of blue and green magical energy, looking much like a ritual circle. In the near-instantaneous moment the beam was descending, the shield appeared, then another behind it and a third behind that. The first shield wavered and then broke, even as shields continued to stack up. The second, third and fourth shields were broken through before the beam's energy was finally expended.

The glowing ritual circle under the flying city started to fade, the potent beam having pushed the ritual disc near the limit of its endurance. It would take time before it was able to fire again, and the disappearance of the beam was like the crack of a starting pistol. Airships full of adventurers started flying up from Livaros' sky docks, while cult airships passed through the flying city's dome before descending to meet them. Other enemies emerged as well, from constructs and abominations flying through the sky to the diamond-rank forces the defenders of Rimaros had been anticipating.

To Soramir's relief, as he flew up into the sky on a magical cloud, he only sensed one essence user at diamond rank. He sensed other diamond-rank auras, but essence users were always the greater threat. He had no illusions about defeating them all but if he could occupy the strongest of the Builder cult's forces, the gold and silver-rankers had a real chance to secure victory and protect Rimaros.

As he ascended, Soramir gathered power around himself, conjuring water and air to shroud himself in a miniaturised hurricane. With diamond-rank speed, it took only moments to clash with his cultist counterpart, where it immediately became apparent that Soramir was stronger. That was not the same as being in a domineering position, however, as no diamond-ranker should be underestimated.

There were two other diamond-rank auras on the cultist side. One was a massive construct bird with four wings. Unlike the essence user, Soramir was confident he would be able to destroy it given the chance, although that chance was unlikely to be forthcoming. The last diamond-rank aura was strange and diffuse, which Soramir found almost as concerning as the essence user. He had sensed that kind of aura before,

recognising it as the signature of swarm-type entities. As predicted, a swarm of constructs, sharing a single aura, came pouring out of the flying city's defence dome.

The diamond-rank conflict was the key to the early stage of the battle, as the Rimaros defenders needed the freedom to breach the defences of the flying city. Formation specialists, many of whom were from the Irios family, were being carried into battle on airships, along with protective escorts. The greatest danger to them wasn't the cult forces but the collateral damage from a diamond-rank battle that was just beginning.

Soramir's storm powers were formidable in the face of multiple opponents, which was exactly what he needed when outnumbered. They were effective against the swarm constructs which, like many swarm-type enemies, were vulnerable to wide-area attacks. The drawback of Soramir's expansive powers was that the lower ranks of both sides had to stay well clear.

While much of the swarm was struggling against Soramir's storm powers, clusters of the swarm managed to escape in isolation, separating from the main swarm to hunt the lower-ranked Rimaros forces. They were still diamond-rank, but their components, - fist-sized locust constructs – were individually frail for their rank. With their numbers reduced in the smaller swarms, the gold rank adventurers were able to put up a fight.

The battle quickly turned to chaos as the Rimaros airships tried to fight their way to the underside of the city through storms of battle and powers flying back and forth which included actual storms. The formation magic specialists needed to be delivered to the flying city's underside.

Using the information given to them by the goddess of Knowledge, they knew there were nodes not visible from a ground level on the city's ritual disc. If enough of them were impacted by the right rituals, also provided by knowledge, they could bring down the magic dome and expose the city to invasion.

The flying city's beam weapon recharged before any of the Rimaros forces managed to fight their way to it. In the chaos of battle, many from both sides failed to move out of its path in time as it once more hammered at the city below. The flying city needed to be breached before Livaros was cracked open by the repeated beams.

Livaros did not helplessly wait to suffer more attacks. Magic circles, similar to the shield it used, appeared over the city and fired back beams of its own. They weren't anything like the magnitude of those the flying fortress used, and wouldn't be enough to damage the ritual circle of the underside of the city. The flying city, however, was not the target. The Irios family members controlling the defences aimed the beams at the swarm construct, attempting to thin it out as much as possible and take pressure off of Soramir.

Perhaps intimidated by the wild auras from the battle above Livaros and in the aftermath of Dawn's actions, the monster activity that had been raging around Arnote had gone quiet. It had been unusually busy, even for a monster surge, but now it had fallen off entirely.

Jason found himself back at home with Travis and Taika, their bronze-ranks leaving them in the role of civilian. Pelli had joined Jason at his cloud house and they all sat on an upper-floor deck, watching the distant battle. They could make out little at such a distance but they watched nonetheless.

"I feel helpless," Travis said.

"Travis, you're the one who made this battle even viable," Jason assured him.

"Without you, things would have been even more desperate."

"Assuming it even works," Travis said.

"Bro, at least you got to do something," Taika said. "All I could do was sit here."

"You're doing something," Jason assured him.

"I am?"

"Damn right you are."

"What am I doing?"

"Looking good. You're a big, sexy chocolate drop."

"Thanks, bro," Taika said brightly. "That's nice of you to say."

Farrah was drawing in the air with her finger, leaving behind lines of flame that formed ritual circles as she continued to draw. Their airship was hovering under one of the nodes on the underside of the city, each barely the size of a basketball. The airship was being attacked by flying cult creations and enemy airships, the adventurers around her desperately keeping the enemies away from her.

Rufus was a monster, smoothly dashing around with his golden sword. Everywhere he went, a construct fell apart, its neatly cut halves glowing with heat. Gary didn't have the skill to match some of the guild adventurers around him but his specialty tools more than made up the difference. He had long ago crafted weapons specialised in fighting cult creations and his hammer was practically ordnance as it smashed apart constructs, sending waves of force behind the shattered enemies to batter its fellows. His shield grew and shrank as he used it to shield Farrah, the way he had failed to do years ago when she died. He let out all his pent up rage, his roars blasting enemies overboard.

The Rimaros forces managed to take down the dome over the flying city, although the price was high. Many adventurers threw their lives away getting the formation experts to the underside of the city disc to perform their work. Once it was done, airships poured up and over to invade the city.

The diamond-rank defenders moved to stop them. Soramir had managed to destroy the weakest of them, the bird construct, but the essence user was predictably resilient. As for the swarm, that was more troublesome. The beams from below, the gold-rankers fighting it and Soramir himself had managed to shave off a large portion of it, but much remained. It continued to calve off smaller swarms to hunt the Rimaros adventurers, chasing them into the city.

The city itself was an odd mix of familiar and alien to the adventurers moving through it. Stone streets and buildings were not that different from what might be found in a normal city, but the denizens that came out to fight them certainly were. Cultists led packs of their bizarre creations, ranging from humanoid magic cyborgs to floating ring constructs that shot beams of energy.

Ramon Keel was a member of the anti-Builder task force. He was in charge of organising a beachhead in the city and called out as he spotted a group of silver-rank adventurers.

“Hey!”

The group came over, recognising Keel. They had all passed through assessment by Keel’s unit when they registered for monster surge activity.

“Yes, sir,” Humphrey said by way of acknowledgement.

“You’re Asano’s team, right?” Keel asked.

“That’s right,” Humphrey confirmed.

“If I remember correctly, you have multiple portal and storage powers between you right?”

“We do,” Humphrey said.

“Great. I’m assigning you all to logistics, search and recovery. We’re setting up a medical camp here. You’re going to find and bring in the injured, portal them to the city as needed and portal back extra supplies.”

“Sir, we have one of the devices. For all we know, it might be the one.”

“It’s definitely not,” Keel said. “Asano annoys the Builder more than he does me, so he might swat all of you just for fun. There’s no way they gave you the real thing.”

“See?” Neil asked. “What did I tell you?”

“Sir,” Humphrey said. “Given the stakes, I’m not sure we should be taking that risk.”

“Fine,” Keel said. “Pull out your device.”

Clive looked to Humphrey, who nodded. Clive opened his rune portal storage space and pulled out a device the size of a hiking backpack. Keel took a crystal from his pocket and held it near the device. The crystal turned red.

“There you go,” Keel said. “Dummy device confirmed. Now stop asking questions and do what I tell you.”

The adventurers fought their way through the city and into the deeper reaches through tunnels descending underground. The sense of alienness grew in the subterranean depths that were filled with industrial centres akin to foundries and ore refineries. Hot and humid, they were filled with dark corners and orange light. Tunnel warrens led deeper down into the city’s core where the most important parts of the city were secured.

Liara Rimaros had the true destructive device and, as Sophie predicted, had been told its actual nature. She moved with two of her team members; the brother and sister pair Ledev and Jana. The trio of gold-rank stealth specialists had been chosen as most likely to deliver the device successfully, which had largely proven true. After the dome went down they had quickly penetrated the city, finding their way into the depths.

As they moved deeper, however, it grew increasingly difficult to move undetected through cramped tunnels filled with increasingly dangerous fixed defences. They had been forced to fight through more and more constructs anchored in place to move forward, slowing their progress. The stealth specialists excelled at surprise attacks, not breaching emplaced defences.

They were caught up in running battles as the fight from the higher levels of the city started to catch up to their increasingly stalled progress. The only benefit was that people from their own side started to reach them, teaming up for the final push.

They joined a group that was mostly made up of adventurers whose teams had been split up by chaos or casualty. They had found one another and grouped up to push forward. It was a mixed group of golds and silvers, including Vesper and Jeni Kavaloa, whose team Vesper had been assigned to for the invasion.

When Liara revealed they had the true device, the group pulled out all the stops to get them to their destination. They knew that any cost was worthwhile to get it to the target zone. More than one sacrifice was made to get them closer, but as they approached the

location, they were set upon by multiple groups of fresh cult defenders in quick succession.

The problem facing the group was that once placed, they needed to escape before the device detonated. The ideal scenario had been the stealth team placing the device and it going undiscovered, but that no longer seemed viable. In a lull between groups, Vesper addressed Liara.

“We’re close now,” Vesper told her. “Close enough that you can sneak the rest of the way if the rest of us grab enough attention.”

“Vesper...” Liara said.

“We don’t have time to argue, Liara.”

There was no time to argue and the hasty plan was put into motion. Liara only paused a moment before hugging Vesper, nodding and moving off, her stealth powers rendering her invisible. Her brother and sister teammates did the same.

The rest of the group moved to attack the converging cultists and trigger the emplaced defences while the stealth trio moved on. Where they previously avoided facing too many defenders at once, they now grabbed as much attention as they were able. They fought hard and savagely as Liara’s trio avoided the final defenders between themselves and the target location.

Although Liara’s senses were reined in to avoid attention, the other group was close enough that she could sense their auras being snuffed out one by one. She stopped as she felt Vesper’s aura wink out, steeling her resolve and stopping her aura from revealing their location with emotional turbulence. Liara only allowed herself a brief pause before continuing and they reached the target zone undetected. They took out the device and set it up in accordance with the instructions they were given. Unlike the people given dummy devices, the directions were more involved than ‘push the big red button and run.’

“Now we go,” Liara said when the job was done.

“Not me,” Ledev said and his sister paled.

“Ledev, no.”

“There are still too many defenders roaming around,” Ledev insisted. “Of the three of us, I’m the only one with the power to hide this object from their senses now it’s out of its storage space and active.”

“Brother...”

Liara’s hand fell on Jana’s shoulder.

“He’s right, Jana. He can hide it for as long as it takes them to find him, buying everyone as much time to get out as possible before he sets it off.”

One of the functions added to the dummy devices was that they would signal when the real device was activated, letting the adventurers know to retreat. From the moment the device had been turned on, the Rimaros forces had been pulling out.

Jana clasped her brother in a death grip hug until he pushed her off.

“Time to go,” he told her, then turned to Liara. “Just make sure the statue of me looks good, yeah?”

The detonation didn't cause the flying city to explode. It trembled in the air, spiderweb cracks appearing on the underside of the disc. Geysers of force blasted out from the city above and the underside disc, blasting chunks of stone like giant cannonballs in every direction. The buildings of the city toppled as the interior of the floating city was annihilated by the nuclear bomb turned resonating-force device.

Even so, the main mass of the city held together, although the magic holding it aloft was gone. With incredible ponderousness, it started to fall from the sky.

Below the flying city, Soramir gathered up all the power at his disposal, ignoring the diamond-rank essence user who took the chance to land savage attacks. Gold rankers moved to defend Soramir as he conjured up a vast and powerful storm in an attempt to slow and shift the trajectory of the falling island that threatened to land atop Livaros.

More adventurers attempted to help, from telekinetic powers to just braving Soramir's storm to fly up to the falling city and push. Others dropped down, recognising that even if the fortress city missed the island, it would create a massive tsunami. Rimaros had no shortage of water essence users and they moved down to the island to prepare for what was about to come.

Two figures rose up from Livaros below, flying into the air. Both were garbed in the robes of clergy and their auras soared as they were filled with the power bestowed on them by their gods to protect the city. The Archbishop of Wind raised her arms and a great, focused and continual blast of wind started pushing on the falling city. Gold-rankers attempting to help were blasted away, but it didn't matter as the divine power shifted the trajectory of descent.

Seeing the power at hand, the diamond-rank cultist started fleeing, which many of the cult's airships were already doing.

The other clergywoman, the Archbishop of Ocean, became the vessel for her god's power and directed the sea to rise up. So vast was the quantity of water forming a rising column under the descending city that the sea level visibly dropped. The city struck the

column, triggering an explosion of water that immediately sent rain falling over Livaros. The watery pillar slowed the descent of the plummeting city, turning a plunge into a drop.

When it reached sea level, the city was still a massive falling object, displacing vast amounts of water to trigger a tsunami, but the Archbishop of Ocean was not done. She channelled more divine power, arresting the movement of the great wave and settling it back into the sea before it could strike Livaros or sweep out in search of other shores.

The fallen and collapsed city was too large to be entirely submerged, forming a new island off the coast of Livaros. Total disaster had been averted and Rimaros protected, but the death toll amongst adventurers was devastating. It would take time to fully count, but the royal family and their guard contingent had been ravaged, as had the other adventurers who fought for Rimaros instead of heading north.

Jason's team had come through intact, courtesy of their assigned role putting them in relative safety and giving them plenty of time to evacuate and help others to do the same. The moment they were certain they were safe, they found the Shade body Jason had left in the Livaros to inform him they had survived.

Chapter 526

The End of the World

Some of the neighbourhood kids watched from across the river as Rufus and Jason sparred. Stripped down to plain pants, they matched their swordsmanship furiously until even their silver-rank endurance was spent. The children observed with fascination, some trying to imitate them, others engaging in their own spars using sticks.

Jason lost repeatedly, despite all his advancements. Rufus had trained under what many considered to be the greatest swordsman in the world since he was a boy. For all of Jason's practical experience, it would take more than a few years and a few skill books to catch up. After exhausting themselves, they took a refreshing dip in the river.

"I'm sure it would be different if we were using our powers," Rufus reassured Jason.

"Uh-huh," Jason said sceptically.

The Livaros mirage chamber had been shut down indefinitely. There were more important places to use the resources required to operate it.

Rufus emerged from the water first and went into the cloud house. Jason extricated himself more slowly, picking his sword up from the grass and meandering back to the house as he looked around. He stopped, spotting someone outside another house, further up the river.

Estella Warnock was standing outside the house that had belonged to her grandfather, staring at it blankly. Jason hadn't sensed her, one of the few people that could go unnoticed by his formidable senses. She didn't much bother with the polite restraint of aura, instead completely hiding it from everyone around her.

Jason shot a delicate and supporting tendril of aura her way and she turned. They shared a nod before she went into the house that was now hers. Jason looked at the house for a long time before Arabelle came out and stood beside him.

"We don't have long before you'll need to head off again," she told him. "No skipping sessions, remember?"

He nodded absently, still staring at the house that had belonged to Warwick Warnock.

"It's strange, being on the outside of events like this," he said.

"Outside?"

"I didn't fight. I didn't lose anyone. This isn't my kingdom and this isn't my home."

"And where is your home?"

“My home is people. They all came back safe. I’m told it wasn’t planned to keep them out of the city depths, but it was probably Dawn’s doing. I’m so used to being in the middle of these events and losing things to them. It’s strange to be on the periphery of someone else’s fight.”

As with Jason’s team, Arabelle had never been sent deeper into the city than the surface, due to her valuable role as a healer. When the signal to evacuate came, she was able to escape safely.

“You may not have fought the Builder cult,” she told him, “but you did your part. You took lives again, and I know you want to avoid that.”

“I know that it’s inevitable, with the choices I’ve made. The choices I’ll make again.”

He looked at the sword in his hand, gripped halfway down the scabbard.

“Maybe I could have crippled them with this, instead of dosing them with afflictions. The bronze-rankers. They might have lived long enough to get healing.”

He shook his head.

“Mercy is good when I can afford it,” he said. “I’m not going to take chances to save people like that.”

“It sounds like you’re starting to find your balance.”

“Maybe. People are dealing with a lot more than I am right now. It feels like so much is happening all at once. The people of this kingdom don’t even have time to grieve.”

It had been a month since what was variously being called the War of Four Cities or the One Day War. The history books would decide which one stuck. The Storm Kingdom and the Adventure Society were still scrambling to adjust to a new status quo. Between the Rimaros battle and the battles to the northwest, the adventurer population had suffered massive casualties amongst their mid and high rankers. This included more than a third of the royal family’s most powerful members, with the royal guard – the Sapphire Crown guild – suffering similar losses.

Despite their drop in numbers, both the royal family and the royal guard became more active in meat-and-potatoes adventuring in the wake of the battles. With their drop in numbers being reflected across the adventuring population, the Adventure Society was struggling to meet the requirements of monster surge activity. Once more, the royal family had stepped forward in the kingdom’s time of need.

Across all Adventure Society activity, minimum action quotas had been raised and safety standards lowered. Bronze-rankers had not had their number diminished, having been kept out of the war. They were now having their teams combined into larger groups,

and being sent on missions that would normally be tasked to silver-rankers. All of these measures were leading to more losses, but the results of not doing so would be worse. Reports were already coming in of fortress towns having their defences overrun as monster-clearing rates had dropped.

Jason and his allies were no exception to the increased activity. They had been worked to the bone since the battle but were holding up better than most. Their experience of spending months in an astral space in a ceaseless stream of battles, back when they were iron and bronze-rank, left them mentally better prepared than most for the revolving door of contracts.

For many Rimaros adventurers, the current adventuring climate was a very bad fit. The Rimaros adventuring ethos was predicated on turning situations into best-case scenarios, using their plentiful adventurer population and specialised teams to pick the right group for the right job. That was a rare luxury in current circumstances. While it was being done where possible, there were too many jobs and not enough adventurers. Many teams had lost members and been forced to amalgamate as best they could.

Many of the young Rimaros silver-rankers were unused to operating without high-rank backup. The guild forces yet to be properly seasoned were revealing themselves as greenhouse flowers, especially at the bronze and early-silver level, shrinking the gap between guild and non-guild adventurers. They might not have the depth of training enjoyed by their guild counterparts, but for most, this was not their first taste of desperation. Their mentality was holding up much better under adverse conditions.

The good news in all the mess was that while the adventurers of the Storm Kingdom had seen their darkest hour, they had fought through and won. The lower-rank adventurers and the population at large had been almost entirely shielded from the battles with the Builder. The region around the rolling land city had been burned into desolation and covered in molten metal and stone, but it was mostly empty desert. The nearest cities had already been evacuated before the land city rolled right through them, keeping casualties low. That made for a lot of refugees, but it was the territory of the kingdom to the north, saving the Storm Kingdom from needing to deal with them.

As for the other two cities, the construct kraken city had sunk to the bottom of the ocean after the most straightforward of the city battles. With the flying city that fell from the sky, the intervention of the gods had managed to shield Livaros. The most that had happened was some minor coastal flooding on the islands of Provo and Arnote, as well as the south coast. The water essence users and the Archbishop of Ocean had protected

Livaros entirely, despite being the closest landfall. The flying city was now a stony island just southwest of Livaros, having fallen into relatively shallow waters.

Jason didn't know a lot of Rimaros adventurers, but he nonetheless went through casualty listings as they came out, along with most adventurers. The young he-who-would-be-Thadwick who Jason had encountered during his first supply contract had died. Although Jason didn't have the details, he liked to imagine that the young adventurer fell heroically, unlike his Greenstone counterpart.

There was no question that Ledev and Vesper had both died saving the city. Jeni Kavaloa had died fighting alongside Vesper as well. She might not have wanted to work with Jason again, after their expedition together, but Jason had respected her a lot. He couldn't help but feel that his own sacrifices seemed hollow in comparison, given that he kept coming back from them. The World-Phoenix wouldn't let Jason go until it was done with him, which was how he ended up safely on Arnote while the rest of the Kingdom was fighting for their lives.

"It feels a little odd," Jason told Arabelle as they sat inside the cloud house. "I'm used to being in the middle of these events. Of being the one to struggle and sacrifice. I've complained about it being me so much, but now I'm at the periphery, it feels wrong somehow. I don't want any part of that, yet I'm somehow frustrated that I'm not. Am I lying to myself? Am I some kind of misery junkie?"

"You're not addicted to misery, Jason. You've become used to having an influence on affairs of a magnitude that you shouldn't even be involved with. Your frustration is from feeling a lack of control."

"I never have control. I'm always dancing to someone else's tune. Always too weak; always desperately leveraging someone else's power just to survive the path someone else put me on."

"I don't believe that," Arabelle said. "And neither do you."

"Excuse me?"

"You have been making choices all this time. You and Farrah have both told me about Earth. You chose to step in, time and again. No one forced you to work with people who betrayed you over and over again. You chose to do that because of what would happen to innocent people if you didn't."

"If it's between letting people die and working with people who suck, that isn't a choice."

“Yes, Jason, it is. It’s just an unpleasant one. And for all that you were kept from the battle, your influence was undeniably felt. It was your intervention that convinced Dawn to move, and you brought Travis into the fold to produce the weapon that destroyed the flying city. You were critical in felling two of those cities.”

“By leveraging other people’s power,” he said. “Again.”

Arabelle gave him a sad, tired smile.

“Jason, we have a long way to go, you and I. A very long way.”

Jason didn’t spend any more time than necessary on Livaros, just picking up and handing in contracts. Events had made his position in Rimaros politics fairly pointless. Anyone playing political games at the moment was being directly and savagely slapped down by Soramir. Even if he didn’t, the Irios family had stepped up in a big way during the defence of Rimaros. Many of their members had fought and died, and their defence infrastructure had been critical. Petty games of young people and marriage no longer mattered.

What little downtime Jason had was spent in training or working with Arabelle, starting the long road to getting his head straight. He spent a lot of his training time working on his swordsmanship with Rufus, who praised Jason’s improvement while trouncing him repeatedly.

Only remnants of the Builder cult remained in the Sea of Storms, and one of the most regular contracts Jason’s team was given was rooting them out whenever they were found. In case they encountered a clockwork king or other gold-rank minion, they usually did so in the company of Liara or Keel from the Builder-response unit.

Despite this task, the Builder cult was gone from the region for most practical purposes. The same could not be said for the rest of the world as news rolled in of other battles with the Builder’s terrible fortresses. The results were never great, with even victory coming at a heavy price while defeat brought cataclysmic disaster. Stories came in of major cities annihilated, leaving the region’s astral spaces ripe for seizure. That led to even more destruction as those astral spaces were plucked from the world.

There were only a few small mercies in all the destruction and chaos. One was that with the current state of the world’s dimensional membrane, the loss of astral spaces was less destructive than it had been in the past. With the dimensional barrier already weakened and damaged, the removal of astral spaces didn’t create the same level of dimensional disturbance.

The other good news was that the Builder cult was forced to accept the same limits as everyone else. The same low levels of magic in Greenstone that had prevented Emir's cloud ship from flying restricted the power of other things. The fortress cities in the sea of Storms would have fallen out of the sky, sunken to the ocean or even collapsed under their own weight in Greenstone. Each region was only faced with power commensurate with the power already there, making the Builder cult a challenge, but one that could be met on all fronts. They weren't always successful in stopping the Builder's ambitions, but more often than not, they were.

Even in the other high-magic zones, the Storm Kingdom successfully repelling three cities at once was a remarkable feat. Their success buoyed other nations around the world, rejuvenating morale that was continuously being chipped away. If one of the world's great adventuring cities had fallen, the news could easily have led to a dangerous collapse of morale that fed the Builder cult's success.

A month after the Builder's cities in the Storm Kingdom were destroyed, things were getting into some manner of tentative order. Mass memorials had been happening regularly; the fallen deserved better than to be sent off in job lots but there wasn't time for anything more. The jobs hall had adventurers streaming in and out, grabbing fresh contracts the moment they handed in the one they just completed. The old biases between guild and non-guild fell away in the scramble to meet the challenges of the monster surge. Guild elitism fell by the wayside as need and the shortcomings of training only in high-magic zones highlighted the importance of experience.

These were the shortcomings that the Geller family had understood for centuries; the very reason they had maintained Greenstone as their family seat even as their power and influence spread across the world, generation after generation. Rufus had recognised this and had spent most of the last few years working to incorporate this practice into his family's academic institution.

Stories abounded of people stepping up; unknown individuals shining even as young adventurers vaunted for their potential cracked under pressure. This caused problems from both the higher and lower ends of society. In the upper echelons, some noble scions fell short after years of training and countless resources had been poured into them. Most aristocratic families were wise enough to brush the issue aside and quietly work on getting their young people the experience they needed to live up to their potential. The Geller family in Rimaros quietly made it known that they would help in this regard.

A few houses took a different tack, however. In the rush to clean what they saw as stains to their pride, they made bold, short-sighted moves. Some casting out young people

like lizards dropping their tails, while others staged pre-emptive political smears in an attempt to maintain the very reputation their actions were tainting.

That small minority of aristocratic houses that made those decisions were mostly minor ones, panicked by their relatively limited power bases being harmed by the One Day War and its aftermath. Fearful of losing their influence in the royal court, they made moves that only cast that influence away as other houses and the royal family came down on them like a hammer.

Titles were stripped and assets seized from any family that too openly defied the royal family's edict that politics would be set aside through the current crisis. There were always those who thought the rules did not apply to them, or they were too clever to be caught out in their ambitions. In the case of one minor family, their entire sky island was seized by the royal family. The aristocratic house in question mounted protests until Soramir and Zila Rimaros came to the island, smashed through the defences and threw anyone who would survive directly off the side of the island. The rest of the family departed very swiftly.

Adventurers shining bright during dark days were welcomed into guilds hungry to replenish their numbers and add experienced adventurers to their roster. Families whose members had stepped up in the battle or the aftermath, either as adventurers or through more logistical contributions were raised to the status of minor nobility.

At the lower end of the social spectrum were those who saw this and viewed the current conditions as a prime chance to move up in the world. While most realised that those being recognised were doing so through earnest effort, many couldn't see past selfish ambitions or that the old ways were changing.

As with the noble families who had shot themselves in the foot, many failed to see that a fundamental shift was taking place in both the adventuring and aristocratic realms of Rimaros society. They stuck to the old ways of backroom influence-trading and putting more effort into looking like they were contributing than actually doing it. They tried to move up by pulling others down, sowing mistrust at a time when unity was critical. The royal family did what they could to stamp it out but, being less prominent, the lowly and ambitious were harder to notice and identify.

"How long before you're back on a contract?" Arabelle asked Jason.

"We're going in this evening," Jason told her, looking out the cloud house window at the early afternoon sun.

“Not much of a break. You only got back this morning. You won’t even spend a night at home.”

“There’s not a lot of Builder cult left to mop up,” Jason said. “We’ve been getting a lot of missions to reinforce Fortress towns, now that I have a lot of them as portal destinations. I’m guessing they’re keeping you busy too.”

“Yes. With greater risks being taken, the need for healers has risen commensurately. That’s not an excuse to avoid these sessions.”

“It kind of is.”

“We have the rest of the day, then.”

“All day? Arabelle, I need rest and relaxation too, you know.”

“Just a little longer, then, but it has to be about something I want to go back to.”

“What?” Jason asked warily.

“You told me that your family stayed in the cloud house after you lost control of your aura during a flashback nightmare.”

“That’s old news,” Jason said. “They’re back on Earth.”

“Did they ever go back into your spirit vault after that?”

“That takes trust,” Jason said. “We just... we never talked about it again. We all knew they wouldn’t be able to go in anymore.”

“How did that make you feel?”

“Alone. That was when I knew they weren’t coming back with me. It took longer to admit to myself, but that was when I knew.”

“And what about your team?” Arabelle asked.

“What about them?”

“Have they gone into your spirit vault?”

“I haven’t told them about it.”

“Why not?”

“You know why not.”

“Tell me.”

“You’re going to make me say it?”

“Some things you have to go through to get to the other side, Jason.”

He stood up and paced around the room. Arabelle remained seated, patiently waiting. More than once he paused to glower at her before he resumed his angry pacing. Finally, he leaned up against the wall, pressing into it with both hands as he glared out the window.

“Jason,” Arabelle said.

"Because if they can't go in, I'm done!" Jason yelled, wheeling on her. "If, after everything I went through to get here, they can't trust me, I won't have anything left. Nothing to go towards and nothing to go back to. Is that what you want to hear?"

"Yes," Arabelle said calmly. "This fear is what's stopping you from moving forward. But you already know that."

"You're saying I have to do it?"

"Jason, you need to understand that just because something is one way in any given moment, that doesn't mean it's that way forever. My understanding is that your spirit vault requires a deep and unreserved trust in you before someone can enter."

"Yes."

"Then do you genuinely believe it's strange that your team might have some reservations about you coming back from the dead, so very different than you were before? That trust you once had was built over time. Strengthened in fire, like a pot in a kiln. If they don't have that full and absolute trust today, you need to understand that it's not the end. You have the time and the chance to build that trust again. So, yes, I'm saying that you have to tell them about your spirit vault and let them in. You don't have to tell them about the trust component. You can see how it goes."

"You think it's that easy?"

"No. But you're in a place where you have to confront what is, in your mind, the worst possible outcome, before you can see that it isn't the end of the world and you do have a path forward. You've faced the literal end of the world, Jason. Are you going to let a metaphorical one stop you?"

"So, it's not a portal," Neil said. "It's a personal storage space except that people can go in?"

"Something like that," Jason said.

Jason and his team, along with Rufus, Gary and Farrah, were standing in the waterfall room, looking at a portal arch. Rufus looked at Jason, who seemed normal and light-hearted, but saw that Farrah was watching him with concern. He knew there was something about the arch that they weren't telling the rest of them.

Clive was the most eager, curiosity driving him to vanish through the portal first. Gary quickly followed. Farrah nodded at Rufus and he followed suit. Humphrey was next, Sophie right on his heels. Belinda followed right behind, Jason's inner tension loosening just a little. Belinda was one he'd been unsure of, but that just left Farrah and Neil. Neil shrugged, bit into his sandwich and walked through the portal.

Left alone with Farrah, Jason staggered, as if a cord that had been pulled tight within him had suddenly loosened. Farrah flashed him a grin and grabbed him up in a hug. Tears Jason's magical body shouldn't have been able to shed welled in his eyes. Farrah was almost holding him up when Neil came back out of the portal.

"Are you two coming or..."

He saw them holding one another.

"Ha, I knew it. Lindy, you owe me a... oh, she probably can't hear me."

Neil turned to go back through the archway when Jason rushed over and bundled him into a huge hug.

"Uh...?"