

Chapter 61

TRADE HALL

Jason looked at the various suits of cloth armour draped over the balcony. He had taken three with him on the field assessment, and each had come back covered in rents and tears. Gary was standing next to Jason, also looking them over.

“I’m going to need some new armour before I take any contracts,” Jason said.

“I told you that you needed something heavier,” Gary said.

The armour was all heavy fabric with a few reinforced sections. A combination of magical construction and alchemical treatment of the fabric made it tougher than it looked, but the effect was limited.

“I don’t want to lose the flexibility,” Jason said. “My powers are better suited to speed and mobility, healing up the occasional hit.”

“Then if you won’t increase the bulk,” Gary said, “you’ll need to increase the quality.”

“Meaning something more expensive,” Jason said.

“That’s right,” Gary said. “It’s not like you don’t have the money, and can you really put a price on not dying?”

“That’s certainly hard to argue against,” Jason said. “And I do still have a decent amount of money.”

“You should definitely buy something good,” Gary said, “but don’t take it too far with iron-rank armour. Just find something reasonably protective and save up for bronze rank. What you really want is something that has a self-repair enchantment, which will save you a good lot of money on repairs.”

“Do you know where to find something like that?” Jason asked. “I looked around at the guild district markets, and these were the best I found.”

He pointed out the bedraggled suits of armour.

“There’s only one place to go for the really good stuff,” Gary said. “You’re an adventurer, now, so you can start enjoying the perks.”

Jason hadn’t been allowed entry to the Adventure Society trade hall, but he had seen it from the outside. It was a huge complex of buildings just off the loop line station, with several annexed structures connecting off a massive central building.

It was a huge bazaar restricted to members of the Adventure Society, along with traders who received dispensation to operate there. It was where Adventurers could trade away any valuables, sell off old equipment and buy gear and supplies for their adventures.

Jason was yet to receive his Adventure Society badge, gaining entry with a temporary permit he received with the results of his assessment.

Inside the main hall, Gary led the way as they merged into a crowd as packed as any Old City street market. It was a vast, open room, three storeys high, with two mezzanine levels. Light poured in from a series of skylights that made up the bulk of the ceiling.

The ground level was a boisterous mix of stalls, ranging from the semi-permanent to the very temporary. Some were just an open tent with a few items laid out on a table. Others were essentially stores, constructed from artfully dyed and woven reed panels, complete with signage. Most fell somewhere in between, but all were swarmed with people almost shoulder to shoulder.

“I didn’t realise there were this many adventurers,” Jason said, speaking loudly over the din of people.

“A lot of them aren’t active adventurers,” Gary said. “Mostly they’re essence users from the aristocratic and wealthy families who joined the society for the benefits. Like the right to come here.”

“But they had to pass the field assessment, right?”

“Not all field assessments are alike,” Gary said. “Just ask Rufus if you want to hear him complain for an hour. The problem is worse here than in most places.”

“What about monster surges?” Jason asked. “They have to front up for those, right?”

“They do,” Gary said, “but most places have what’s called a reserve program.”

“Meaning they get to stand at the back?” Jason asked.

“That’s the one,” Gary said.

Gary led him to the side of the hall, where arcades led toward other buildings in the complex, but instead of leaving the main hall, they took one of the broad stairways leading up.

“The main floor is all iron rank stuff,” Gary said. “Next floor up is bronze.”

The second and third floor were mezzanine levels. Gary didn’t pause at the second, leading them up to the third.

“The third floor is silver rank?” Jason guessed.

“No, there isn’t the market for it here,” Gary said. “Apparently there’s only forty or so silver rankers in the whole city, and they aren’t very active. The magic level here is too low, so silver-rank monsters are rare. Any silver rankers here permanently are semi-retired at best. People like Danielle Geller and Thalia Mercer are only here in anticipation of the monster surge.”

“So what is the third floor for?” Jason asked.

“Brokerages,” Gary said. “Most adventurers can’t be bothered with the trouble of renting a stall and waiting around for people to buy whatever random pile of loot they have. Brokers buy almost anything of value and sort it more effectively for sale. For a percentage, of course.”

“That’s fair enough,” Jason said.

“Brokers also organise the auctions,” Gary said. “In a smaller city like this, they’ll usually hold on to the valuable stuff, like essences and awakening stones. Then the brokers will work together to hold a big auction event. Once we finish that shield, that’ll sell at auction.”

The most valuable item Jason looted during the field assessment was the shell of the rune tortoise. Finding an intact one was rare and lucrative, as they could be turned into magical shields. Gary and Farrah were going to work on it together, then split the profits three ways with Jason.

“Most brokers also do money-changing services,” Gary said. “If you want to split a coin, say bronze down to iron, they’ll do it for free. If you go the other way they charge ten percent. That’s standard everywhere, so if they ask for more, just go somewhere else.”

Gary led them into a brokerage office, where they were greeted by a receptionist. They were quickly led into a room where they were met by an item assessor, who would value the items so they could get paid. They just had to put out everything on a table for the assessor to go over.

Jason put out the various items he had looted from monsters. There was bark-lurker hide, monster cores and a variety of loose quintessence gems. On Gary’s advice, Jason kept certain items, but most of it was cleared out to make room in Jason’s increasingly full inventory. Even if many items stacked into a single slot, he was getting close to filling all forty spaces. Jason had a strange moment as he took out the magical robes he had taken from Landemere Vane.

Landemere was the very first person Jason met in his new world. He was also the first person Jason killed. It had been less than two months, but he felt like a completely different person from the concussed, panicked idiot in the Vane family basement.

“Something wrong?” Gary asked, and Jason realised he was staring into space, the robes held in his hands. The blood had long since been cleaned off of them.

“I’m fine,” Jason said, putting the folded robes on the table.

With fresh coins added to the currency counter in his inventory, they headed back downstairs and into the main hall. Making their way through the throng as they looked at the goods on offer, Jason spotted a familiar face. Jory’s stand wasn’t one of the permanent

stalls, but it was one of the larger ones. At the front was a glass counter lined with colourful bottles and vials, behind which stood Jory himself. Most of the stall was storage space, hidden behind a curtain. While Jory was selling a woman a bottle of perfume, Jason perused the chalkboard beside the counter listing the available products.

“Crystal wash,” he read out loud.

“Seriously?” Jory asked, as his customer rejoined the crowd. “I can only make so much of it, and there are other people who want to buy it. People who don’t get the friends discount.”

“You realise I had to trudge through a bog marsh, right? To protect the poor, innocent people of the delta?”

Jory groaned.

“I can give you one crate, but that’s it for the week.”

“Twelve bottles?” Jason said. “I can’t get by on twelve bottles.”

“You do know about showers and baths, right?” Jory asked.

“He cleans his teeth with it,” Gary said.

“What?” Jory said.

“It leaves my mouth feeling fresh,” Jason said.

“Well, if you want more,” Jory said, “I’m not the only alchemist here.”

“What about those assistants you were talking about getting from the Alchemy Association?” Jason asked.

“Expanding my operations isn’t something I can just do on a whim, you know. I have a lot of demands on my time.”

“I thought that’s why you wanted the assistants,” Jason said. “Someone to take over the grunt work.”

They paused for Jory to sell an adventurer a bundle of potions.

“It isn’t that simple,” Jory said, resuming their conversation. “If I’m going to do it properly I need to put together a whole new facility. Extra space, new equipment. Wages for the assistants. You know the kind of margins I work under.”

“That’s fair,” Jason said. “Have you considered investors?”

“You offering?” Jory asked.

Jason held up a hand, three gold coins stacked between his thumb and forefinger.

“Something like this get you started?”

The basic coin of the realm was the lesser spirit coin. Iron spirit coins were worth a hundred lesser coins, used by bulk traders, adventurers and other members of the wealthy elite. After that, it was ten iron to the bronze, ten bronze to the silver and ten silver to the

gold. The gold spirit coins in Jason's hand was worth three hundred thousand units of the basic currency.

"You're not serious?" Jory said, to which Jason placed the coins down on the counter. Jory hesitantly picked them up, peering at them nestled in his palm.

"Do you know how many people I can help with this kind of money?" Jory asked.

"It doesn't matter how many people you help," Jason said. "What matters is if this gets me another crate of crystal wash."

"I still can't believe you gave him all that money," Gary said as they made their way through the crowd.

"It's an investment," Jason said.

"In what? That guy spends all his money on helping sick poor people."

"But imagine a world where everyone gave money for things like that," Jason said.

Gary thought it over for a moment.

"Then there'd be more healthy poor people?"

Jason allowed himself to be led by Gary's expertise as they looked at various armour for sale. They checked out large stalls selling armour in job lots and small stalls with expensive, handcrafted work. The main hall was only the beginning of the grand bazaar. Side corridors led to sprawling arcades lined with boutique shops. Jason spotted one with a sign so long it threatened to encroach on the abutting storefront.

GILBERT'S RESILIENT ATTIRE FOR THE DISCERNING GENTLEMAN

Jason walked inside, which was a large open space lined with armour of the lighter variety Jason preferred, largely cloth and leather. Most of the wares were draped over mannequins to demonstrate the hang of the garb. Several customers were perusing the wares, along with the proprietor in a frock coat that bulged heavily in the middle. Jason recognised middle-aged man's paunchy frame and balding head.

"Bert," Jason said.

"Indeed I am, sir. Gilbert, of Gilbert's Resilient Attire For the Discerning Gentleman. For fine men as yourselves, however, I invite and appeal upon you to call me Bert. I take it from that glint of recognition in your eye that you are familiar with one of my brothers? Please tell me it isn't Filbert, of Filbert's Fine Leather Emporium."

"Uh, no," Jason said. "I'm Jason, and this is Gary."

Gary waved vaguely from where he was already inspecting the merchandise.

"I've met Bertram and Albert and Robert, but not Filbert," Jason said. "You're quintuplets?"

“Actually, it’s octuplets,” Gilbert said.

“There’s eight of you?”

“Indeed there are,” Gilbert said. “There’s Herbert, who sells fruit with Robert, but on the Island instead of Old City.”

“Selling the same fruit, but charging three times as much?” Jason asked.

“I knew you for a gentleman of discernment,” Gilbert said. “There’s also Hubert, but we don’t really talk about him. Got caught up with a criminal element. That just leaves Bertrand. He’s the handsome one.”

“You aren’t all identical?”

“No, we are.”

Jason was about to inquire further when Gary jostled his arm.

“There’s some quality stuff here,” Gary said. “Take a look at this.”

“Ah,” Gilbert said. “Trap weaver silk, alchemically treated for maximum resiliency. Leather panels carefully placed to provide additional protection without compromising flexibility. The magic in is integrated right down to the weaving pattern of the cloth. Tricky and laborious work, but the results speak for themselves. It also allows for the loose, flowing design, which is quite unusual with protective wear.”

Just as Gilbert said, the armour was almost a robe, in shifting shades of dark grey. The more fitted parts around the torso, arms and legs had black leather panels, but the layered garment was also draped with flowing cloth. It was a strange combination of tactical armour from Jason’s world and some kind of wizard robe. Jason was immediately taken with it.

“There’s a mythological order of dark warrior mystics where I come from,” Jason said. “They dress like this. I don’t suppose you know where I can get a sword with a blade made of red light?”

“Not in this city,” Gary said. “I’ve seen some gold-rank weapons like that.”

“Nice,” Jason said. “I have to start ranking up.”

“You’re a long, long way from gold rank,” Gary said with a laugh. “You should keep your eyes on what’s in front of you, for now.”

Gilbert smelled a sale and continued his spiel.

“The mix of shades and the flowing lines are of value to clients who value stealth,” Gilbert said, continuing with his sales pitch. “While not assisted by magic, the drape of the fabric breaks up the lines of the body, making it harder to recognise in the dark.”

“That does actually work,” Gary said, “although it doesn’t really matter with that cloak of yours.”

Jason reached out to run his fingers over cloth, which felt smooth and sleek.

Item: [Trap Weaver Battle Robe] (iron rank, epic)

A full body armour, carefully hand-crafted from the silk and leather of trap weavers. (armour, cloth/leather).

- Effect: Increased resistance to damage. Highly effective against cutting and piercing damage, less effective against blunt damage.
 - Effect: Repairs damage over time. Extensive damage may require external repair.
 - Effect: Absorbs blood to prevent leaving a blood trail.
 - Effect: Increases resistance to bleed and poison effects.
 - Effect: Resistant to adhesive substances and abilities with adhesive effects.
 - Effect: Adapts fit to the wearer, within a certain range.
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“Well?” asked Gary, familiar with Jason’s ability to examine items.

“I like it,” Jason said. “I like it a lot.”

“It’ll probably cost more than you should really spend,” Gary said, “but you should always spend a little more than you want to on armour. It’ll keep you alive.”

“No wiser words have ever been spoken within the walls of my establishment,” Gilbert said.

Gary took on the job of haggling the price down, both he and Gilbert seeming satisfied with where the number landed. The price was in bronze coins, unusual for iron-rank equipment, but Jason had no issue for the quality of the product. He had only seen a handful of epic-quality armour in all their browsing, none of which met his needs so well as the one he finally purchased.

After paying for the armour, Jason placed it into his inventory. He pulled up the outfits tab, slotting the armour into a new outfit. He then tapped the equip button and obscuring smoke suddenly surrounded him. It cleared a moment later, his clothes gone and the armour in their place.

“Very impressive, sir,” Gilbert said, without apparent surprise. “And might I say, it suits you well. Please, do see for yourself.”

Gilbert pointed Jason to a standing mirror in the corner, where Jason admired himself in the dark combat attire.

“I think I’m having a chuunibyou moment,” Jason said.

“My apologies sir,” Gilbert said, “but I’m not sure I grasp your meaning.”

“We find it’s better not to ask,” Gary said.

Jason’s shadow cloak appeared around him, merging well with flowing lines of dark armour.

“I’m definitely having a chuunibyou moment.”

They left Gilbert’s Resilient Attire For the Discerning Gentleman with Jason back in his street attire.

“I like how loose it feels,” he said. “I wasn’t sure about all the really loose clothes they wear here, but once I started wearing armour I really missed it.”

Jason had long ago bought fresh clothes, discarding those he looted from the Vane Estate. Daywear in Greenstone wouldn’t look out of place at a tropical resort, with bright colours and loose fits. Eveningwear was more fitted and formal, with flaring frock coats in dark, sober colours.

“I like it too,” Gary said. “Finding clothes comfortable over fur can be a pain. You should see what they wear where I come from. It’s basically just underwear and a bunch of belts strapped over everything.”

They were making their way through the crowds in the direction of the exit when Jason stopped when he spotted a stall.

“What is it?” Gary asked.

It was a large stall selling recording crystals. Jason’s eyes fell on a box of crystals being sold in bulk, which he pointed out to the bored-looking woman behind the counter.

“How much?”

Chapter 62: Have Some Damn Adventures

“Hello,” Jason said, waving at the crystal floating in front of him. “I’m not sure if, or when you’ll be seeing this, but I didn’t die, or whatever you think happened to me. You probably know that, since the only way you’re likely to see this is if I give it to you.”

He let out a dissatisfied groan.

“Maybe I should have scripted this. Oh, well. Where should I start? It’s been about two months since I arrived here. Where is here? That’s complicated. I’ve made some friends. I just got a new job, although I haven’t started yet. They’re meant to be sending my ID over today. The application process involved sort of a week-long retreat, which I got back from a couple of days ago.”

He took a deep breath.

“I suppose I should start with that complicated question of where I am. Right now, as you can see, I’m in an expensive hotel suite. It isn’t actually mine; that’s across the hall. This one belongs to some of those friends I mentioned. They went three-bedroom, which came with this nice, open living area.”

Jason had purchased recording crystals that gave him a lot of control about how they moved. He got up and led it out to the balcony, where he panned it over the ocean view.

“Nice, right? One of my new friends is kind of a big deal, so he got the best room in the house. We’re on an artificial island, which is pretty crazy, given the size. At some point I’ll do a tour video. The subways here are amazing.”

“Jason,” Farrah’s voice called out from inside. “Who are you talking to?”

Jason went back inside. Although he hadn’t been out on a job yet, having passed muster with the Adventure Society prompted Rufus to declare Jason ready to guide his own training. Although he and the others would provide occasional guidance, the hours of intensive oversight was a thing of the past, leaving the others with more time for their own pursuits. Farrah and Gary had been working on the rune tortoise shield they were going to sell off, while Rufus was preparing to expand his family’s interests into Greenstone.

“I’m talking to my family,” Jason said as he walked back inside. Farrah and Gary had just returned.

“Your family?” Farrah asked.

“It’s a recording stone,” Jason said. “I’ve decided to make a record of my time here. Something I can show them, if I ever get home. Family, this is Farrah and Gary.”

“Er, hello,” Farrah said, giving the awkward, home-movie wave that apparently transcended realities.

“Hey!” Gary said, waving enthusiastically. “Hello, Jason’s family!”

“Didn’t the goddess of knowledge tell you that you definitely would get home?” Farrah asked.

“I’m not wildly trusting of authority figures,” Jason said, deactivating the crystal. He took a carousel out of his inventory, full of recording crystals in little trays. He stowed the crystal away in an empty slot and returned the carousel to his inventory.

“You do realise the Adventure Society you just joined is a world-spanning organisation, right?” Farrah asked. “A global authority.”

“I’m anticipating the odd bit of friction,” Jason said. “I know I’m not to everyone’s taste, but coming to this world is a chance to be who I am, take it or leave it.”

“Even if it kills you,” Gary said cheerfully. “You decided to keep the thing that’ll randomly send you home, then?”

“I did,” Jason said. “I could always change my mind, but being here has given me some perspective on what’s really important. I hadn’t seen most of them in a long time.”

“What happened between you?” Farrah asked.

“The love of my life cheated on me with my brother, then they got married and my mother basically told me to shut up and take it like a man.”

“Harsh,” Gary said.

“We never really got along,” Jason said. “My brother is everything she ever wanted in a son. It was kind of the other way around with Dad. It was always him and me, but after the way things were, I didn’t see him so much.”

There was a knock on the door and Gary let in Vincent. They all sat down in the lounge area and Jason put out a tray of snacks he took from his inventory.

“You just had those ready?” Gary asked, picking up a candied grape.

“Turns out my storage space maintains freshness and temperature,” Jason said. “Which is lucky, because I had that tyrannical pheasant meat in there for almost two months.”

“You mean, the meat I had the other day?” Gary asked.

“That’s the one,” Jason said.

“Is that why you didn’t want any? Were you testing it out on me?”

“It wouldn’t worry me,” Jason said “I resist poison.”

“But I don’t,” Gary said.

“You’re bronze rank,” Jason said. “It’d be fine. If you’re worried about the food I make, you don’t need to eat any of these snacks,” Jason said.

Gary looked at the candied grape in his fingers, then put it into his mouth.

“We don’t have to go that far,” he mumbled.

Vincent watched the exchange with raised eyebrows.

“Are you two quite finished?”

“You sound like Rufus,” Gary said.

“I don’t think Rufus could pull off that moustache,” Jason said.

Jason liked Vincent. He was a very serious man with a very outrageous moustache, which Jason appreciated.

“There’s been a slight problem with your Society badge,” Vincent said.

After receiving confirmation that he had passed the assessment, Jason had undergone the final process of becoming an Adventure Society member. Each member had a badge that served various functions beyond proof of membership. It let members claim adventure notices and allowed the Society to track members in case they went missing. It also let the Society know immediately when a member died.

Badges were managed by the Adventure Society’s Member Logistics Department, of which Vincent was one of the chief officials. In addition to the assessment and induction of new members, their responsibilities included the dispensation and monitoring of membership badges.

Although the badges were managed by the Adventure Society, it was the Magic Society that created them. Jason had been sent to the Magic Society so they could take an aura imprint from which to make his badge. It was a simple process, just standing in the middle of a magic circle for about a minute.

“Every time a badge is made,” Vincent said, “it’s paired with a tracking stone. It tells us if your alive or dead, and lets us find you if you go missing or die. Yours doesn’t work, though. The stone can’t track your the aura imprint.”

“I’ve seen this before,” Farrah said. “Some people have abilities that block magical tracking.”

“That was the Magic Society’s assessment as well,” Vincent said.

Farrah turned to Jason.

“You have the dark essence, right?” she asked him. “A lot of hiding abilities can protect you from location effects.”

“It’s not the dark essence,” Jason said. “It’s one my other abilities. My, uh, out of town abilities.”

Ability: [Mysterious Stranger]

➤ Immunity to identification and tracking effects.

“It seems that I’m completely immune to tracking effects,” Jason said.

Vincent nodded.

“That’s fine,” he said. “Just as long as we know there isn’t someone messing with our membership systems.”

“So what does that mean about getting my badge?” Jason asked.

“There’s not much we can do,” Rufus said. “Your badge will still work fine for your adventuring activities. It just means we can’t track you if you go missing,” Vincent said. “Or find your body, if you die alone.”

“I can live with that,” Jason said. “Tracking everyone seems a little dystopian, anyway.”

Vincent plucked an object out of thin air. Many essence users had abilities to store objects in dimensional spaces, like Jason’s inventory, or Farrah’s bottomless stone chest. Vincent handed a square, leather object to Jason. It was a badge wallet, which Jason flipped open to see the badge inside. It was a circular medallion made of iron, embossed with a sword and rod crossed over a shield; the emblem of the Adventure Society.

“Congratulations,” Vincent said. “As of this moment, you are officially a member in good standing of the Adventure Society. That badge represents your membership, and the authority that represents.”

“I have authority?” Jason asked, flipping open the wallet like a TV cop flashing his badge.

“Not really,” Vincent said. “There is a certain level of prestige that comes from membership, but any actual authority comes from the contract you are carrying out. A common example is when the city puts out a contract to capture a wanted criminal. Whoever is assigned that contract has the power to investigate and arrest bestowed by the city, but only so long as they are on that contract. You don’t have the rank to take on a contract like that, however.”

“I have a rank?” Jason asked.

“Your rank can be seen on your medallion,” Vincent said. “One-star, iron rank.”

Jason looked down at his new badge. On the iron medallion, underneath the Adventure Society emblem, was a single star.

“The ranking system of the Adventure Society has two parts,” Vincent explained. “The first element is not assessed at all, being a reflection of your rank as an essence user. You’re iron rank, so you’re an iron rank member.”

“Simple enough,” Jason said.

“The second part is not an assessment of your power, but your judgement. That’s the star ranking, and is wholly determined by the Adventure Society. Everyone begins at one star, with the maximum number of stars being three. The number of stars determines the kinds of contracts you can take. One star contracts are pure monster hunts, with no complicated elements to deal with.”

“What’s your star rating?” Jason asked.

“Society officials operate outside the rating system,” Vincent said. “It helps us to work with members, irrespective of their rank.”

“Makes sense,” Jason said. “If you’ve got a two-star official running an operation with three-star members, they might start taking things into their own hands.”

“Precisely,” Vincent said.

“So what about you two?” Jason asked Gary and Farrah.

“Two star,” Farrah said. “Rufus, as well. We were kind of hoping to get bumped up to three after the Vane contract, but that didn’t work out.”

“Rufus gave an honest report,” Gary said. “We didn’t come out looking great.”

“Ironically, you did,” Vincent said to Jason. “I saw that report.”

“I don’t suppose that counts for my promotion chances?” Jason asked.

“Not directly,” Vincent said, “but it may be taken into account in the future. Once other achievements have the Society considering you for promotion. Achievements made while actually a member.”

“So what do two and three stars actually represent?” Jason asked.

“In short,” Vincent said, “two and three stars represent a level of confidence in your judgement on the part of the Adventure Society. Two stars means the Society recognises your ability to undertake at least some level of actual, unsupervised responsibility. You’ll be able to take different kinds of contracts, such as investigating potentially dangerous situations or unknown phenomena. It also means you can lead small expeditions of one-star members.”

“We never got to two star at iron rank,” Gary said. “In the high-magic areas there isn’t a lot of chance to shine. You spend the whole time following more powerful adventurers so as not to die.”

“Three stars is much the same as two, but more so,” Vincent said.

“Three stars means they trust you to handle yourself when things get political,” Farrah said.

“That’s a fair assessment,” Vincent said. “Three star members are expected to anticipate and manage consequences at a higher level than other adventurers.”

“How do you go for promotion?” Jason asked.

“You can apply,” Vincent said, “usually on the back of some accomplishment. The Society prefers to choose for themselves, however. When they think you’re operating at a higher level than your current rank, they’ll do an assessment. We don’t like to see useful assets wasting themselves on work any idiot could do.”

“I think he’s talking about you,” Farrah said to Gary.

“You’re not any higher rank than I am,” Gary shot back.

“There is one important thing to be aware of,” Vincent said, ignoring the pair. “The stringency with which promotions are considered scales upward with power. What is good enough for two stars at iron rank is not the same as at bronze or silver rank, where the stakes are higher. As such, you can expect to drop a star rank each time you increase a tier in power. Unless you’re still one-star, of course. No one really expects anything from you if you’re stuck at that level.”

“He’s still talking about you,” Farrah said.

“I have two stars,” Gary said. “We’re the same rank,” Gary said.

“So, what now?” Jason asked.

“That’s easy,” Gary said. “You’re an adventurer, now. Go to the jobs hall, get a contract and have some damn adventures.”

Chapter 63: Sunk-Cost Fallacy

Jason was trying something new on his morning run to Jory's clinic. With his cloak of shadows around him, he used its ability to reduce his weight to accelerate his progress. It required careful control, kicking off each step with his full weight, then reducing it to let the force propel him. At first it didn't work at all as he hopped into the air or tripped and fell.

Slowly getting a handle on it, he developed an unusual stride. His steps came less frequently, but with a lunging power that sent him skimming almost weightlessly over the ground. The disadvantage was that the weight-reduction slowly consumed his mana. By the time he arrived breathlessly at Jory's, the little mana bar at the edge of his vision was as empty as his stamina. He was as exhausted mentally as physically.

When Jason staggered through the back door of the clinic, Jory quickly brought in someone for Jason to use his power on. The patient looked worse than Jason, pale-skinned and walking strangely. He was accompanied into the room by a deeply unpleasant smell. Jason held out a weary hand, mumbling the incantation for the spell.

"Feed me your sins."

-
- You have cleansed all instances of disease [Dysentery] from [Human].
 - You have cleansed all instances of disease [Syphilis] from [Human].
 - Your stamina and mana have been replenished.
-

Both Jason and the patient let out sighs of relief.

"Thank you sir," the man said to Jason as Jory led him out. "I couldn't really make it here without soiling myself a little."

"Oh, we noticed," Jory said.

"Did I hear him say something about sins?" the man asked Jory.

"Don't worry about that," Jory said. "You just go home and get yourself cleaned up."

Jory came back to find Jason leaning against the wall. The few afflictions he had drained from the patient weren't enough to fully restore him.

"What happened to you?" Jory asked.

"I'm trying a new thing with one of my abilities. Something to help me travel faster. I'm going to pick up my first contract today, and most of them will be out in the delta."

"Why not hire a heidel from the livery stable? That's what most adventurers do."

"They creep me out," Jason said. "They're like a horse, except horribly, horribly wrong."

"I don't know what a horse is, but why do you think heidels are creepy?" Jory asked.

"They are creepy."

"There's a leech monster that lives inside you, and you think heidels are creepy?"

"Yeah, well... actually, that's a pretty good point. Still, I can think they're creepy if I want; it's a subjective position. Can you help me out with some cheap stamina and mana potions?"

"That's not a problem," Jory said. "Making those on the cheap were some of the earliest results of my experiments. They won't as strong as the more expensive sort, though."

"That's fine," Jason said. "I just need something to top me off a little. I'll save the high performance stuff for combat."

"I have crate-loads of the cheap stuff," Jory said. "You can have them at cost."

"Thanks," Jason said. "I'll be spending more time out in the delta now. I probably won't be able to make scheduled appearances so often."

"Don't worry," Jory said. "The clinic got along just fine before you came along."

"I'm not saying I won't be here," Jason said. "It's just the timing might get a little erratic."

"Any time you can spare, I'll appreciate," Jory said. "Things will be a bit hectic once the expansion starts, anyway."

"How's that going?" Jason asked.

"I bought the building next door," Jory said. "I'm going to have the two buildings connected, using this one as the clinic and putting a huge alchemy facility in the other. Construction starts in a few days."

"Best bring on the next patient," Jason said. "I want to get through them and head up to the jobs hall."

"Not a problem," Jory said, heading for the door, then pausing, looking back at Jason.

"Having you been passing weird spirit coins?" Jory asked.

"Those one I gave you should have been legitimate," Jason said.

"Not those," Jory said. "Iron rank stuff. Janice said some Magic Society guy came in looking for you."

"Is that bad?" Jason asked.

"Not unless you've been passing counterfeit coins," Jory said.

"I don't think they're counterfeit," Jason said. "Just personalised."

"What do you mean, personalised?" Jory asked.

Jason took out a coin checked it was one of his and tossed it to Jory, who looked it over.

“Is that a picture of you?” Jory asked, peering at it.

“Yep,” Jason said.

“Wait a second,” Jory said, heading for the stairs. He came back down with a stone plate, with six gems set into it. He sat it on a bench and placed Jason’s coin on it. The second gem immediately lit up with the blue-grey colour of an iron spirit coin.

“The coin’s fine,” Jory said. “They’re all like this one?”

“They are,” Jason said.

“Looting ability?” Jory asked.

“That’s right,” Jason said.

“No wonder you don’t mind healing people for free,” Jory said. “You can basically punch coins right out of monsters. I’m going to go get some more sick people for you.”

“Wait,” Jason said. “What do I do about the Magic Society guy?”

“The coins are the real deal,” Jory said, “so don’t worry about it. You’re an Adventure Society guy, now. There’s something of a friendly rivalry between the Magic Society and the Adventure Society, at least between people who aren’t members of both. If he shows up, feel free to stick it to him. Just do what you normally do to people.”

“What do I normally do to people?” Jason asked.

“Confuse them until they want to punch you in the face,” Jory said.

The jobs hall was an annex of the main administration building on the Adventure Society campus. Compared to the overbearing immensity of the trade hall, it was a small and discrete. Inside was a moderate sized room divided into rows by standing bulletin boards. There were a few adventurers amongst them, perusing the posted contracts. To the right of the entrance was a stairwell going up, while the left had a man behind a desk. The familiar looking man was leaning back in his chair, dozing lightly in the warmth of the afternoon.

“Afternoon, Bert,” Jason greeted.

He had learned that when it came to the Berts, the best way to identify them was to feel out their auras, which were almost, but not quite as identical as their faces. This was Albert, an Adventure Society functionary Jason had met before.

“Mr. Asano,” Albert greeted. “You’re not in for your first job, are you?”

“I am, as it happens.”

“You know, there’s another young fellow doing the same.”

“Oh?” Jason said, looking around. He spotted Humphrey emerging from behind a bulletin board.

“I thought I heard your voice,” Humphrey greeted.

After exchanging small talk, they started exploring the bulletin boards. It was the first visit for both of them, but Humphrey had been preparing to be an adventurer his entire life. He acted as a guide as he showed Jason through the various sections.

“This floor is all iron-rank contracts,” Humphrey explained. “It starts at one-star contracts down this end, with three-star on the far side of the room. That section is usually empty, though. Most iron-rank contracts are ordinary monster hunting.”

He pointed out the stairs.

“Upstairs is bronze rank. There isn’t a spot for silver rank, since there isn’t enough call for it.”

They started strolling through the rows, glancing over contracts.

“Contracts can be closed or open,” Humphrey explained. “A closed contract can only be taken by one person, on a first-come, first-serve basis. You take the notice, register it at the desk, and off you go. Open contracts are a lot less common, where any number of people can join in. Usually that’s a widespread infestation of lesser monsters, with rewards per kill.”

“I’ve killed a few lesser monsters.”

“They aren’t a big problem unless they come in numbers,” Humphrey said. “Any farmer with a pitchfork can handle most of them.”

“Not all of them, though,” Jason said. “Have you ever seen a malicious hedgehog? Shoots spikes out of its body.”

“I haven’t,” Humphrey said.

“I suppose you don’t get a lot of hedgerow omnivores in this climate.”

“When it comes to choosing a contract, not all are created equal,” Humphrey said, continuing his explanation. “Once a contract has languished for a couple of weeks, it gets assigned to members on a compulsory basis. As to who gets the assignments, that’s all internal politics. There have been some rumblings since the new director came in. There are a lot of nominal Adventure Society members who don’t take any contracts suddenly finding contracts assigned to them.”

“I’ve heard there’s been some internal conflict,” Jason said. “The new person in charge, trying to purge some of the corruption.”

“My perspective has been somewhat peripheral,” Humphrey said, “not being a member until now. My mother likes the new director, though.”

“That’s a good sign,” Jason said.

“The new director had been making a lot of changes,” Humphrey said, “even here in the jobs hall.”

“Such as?”

“Contracts come from the general population,” Humphrey said. “From people who have a problem, usually a monster problem, that requires an adventurer. People of means can offer incentives, so that their contract is taken up more quickly. As you might imagine, there’s a lot of competition for the more lucrative contracts.”

“The new director banned incentives?” Jason asked.

“No, they’re still there,” Humphrey said. “It’s just that there used to be a special notice board up the front with all the incentivised contracts, because they were the ones people were most interested in. The new director put an end to that and had the incentivised contracts posted with all the rest. I’m not really sure what that accomplishes, other than taking up people’s time.”

“It’s actually a smart move,” Jason said. “Once people have put in a certain amount of effort into something, they feel like they need to follow through, or their effort was wasted. They call it the sunk-cost fallacy, where I come from.”

“Sunk cost?” Humphrey asked.

“Think about that board you described,” Jason said. “The one with all the most lucrative contracts on it, sitting up the front. I bet you’d get a lot of people who come in, saw that board was empty, and walked away. Now think about if they have to comb through all the boards to find those high-paying contracts. After having spent that much time looking, at least some of those people will take a contract, even if they don’t find one with bonuses. Otherwise, they feel like they’ve wasted all the time they spent looking.”

Humphrey frowned as he looked at Jason.

“Does it ever bother you?” Humphrey asked. “Manipulating people, I mean. Like with Thadwick Mercer. If you were actually arguing with him would be one thing, but provoking him because a public argument helps your social standing?”

“Manipulation isn’t bad, in and of itself,” Jason said. “Look at it this way: if you have the choice between manipulating someone into doing the right thing, or punishing them for doing the wrong thing, which is more moral? Pushing someone onto a better path and having the right thing done, or having the wrong thing done and hurting the person for doing it? Righteous honesty says to be upright and put the moral decision onto the other person. But what is more important? Feeling righteous, or putting a little more good into the world?”

“You have to give people the chance to make their own mistakes,” Humphrey said. “Otherwise, you’re just trying to control everything, even what’s right and wrong.”

“There is always someone controlling what’s right and wrong,” Jason said. “Look at you, for example. How do you feel about benefiting from a society where the vast majority of the population are exploited for the benefit of you and people like you? The same people who govern the structure of society are the one who benefit the most. That’s true everywhere, your world or mine.”

“I was brought up to believe that nobility is as much duty as privilege,” Humphrey said. “That the advantages we have come with a lifelong responsibility to earn the everything we’ve been given.”

“That’s commendable,” Jason said. “But Thadwick Mercer received every opportunity you did, and he doesn’t strike me as the lifelong responsibility type. How many of your peers are like you, and how many are like him? How is that fair to the people of Old City or the delta? Do you think someone living in a hovel would turn down a mansion because they would have to live up to the responsibility that came with it? Someone like Thadwick isn’t inherently evil, but he’s part of a system that tells him he deserves more than other people, just for being born. Do you think he’s right to think that?”

“Of course not,” Humphrey said.

“But you’re the same,” Jason said. “That responsibility you were talking about? That is you, striving to be better because the world tells you that you’re better and you feel responsible for living up to that. I respect that choice, but it is a choice. If you wanted to slack off and exploit people, there’s very little to stop you. Not everyone gets the chance to live up to that privilege.”

Farrah, had she been present, would have recognised Jason ramping up into full-blown, morally superior proselytising. Not being there to stop him with a sharp punch to the face, Jason’s rant continued.

“You think criminals just woke up one day and thought, ‘gee, I sure would like to take other people’s stuff?’ They turn to crime because it’s that or they go hungry. Their children go hungry. That’s something you and I never had to deal with. We get to choose to be good or bad, because we don’t have to spend our time breaking our backs just to eat or have a roof over our heads. People live their whole lives with nothing but that struggle, birth to death. But we never had to deal with that, and it’s not likely we ever will.”

Humphrey shook his head.

“So what are you suggesting?” he asked. “Revolution? Bring everything crashing down? It’s easy to point at the injustices of the world and use that as an excuse for whatever behaviour you’re trying to get away with.”

“I don’t have an answer,” Jason said, deflating from his self-righteous high. “I’m like you, Humphrey. I’m trying to do my best with what I have. In your case, that’s talent, wealth, looks and privilege. As for me, I’m good at people.”

“You mean good *with* people,” Humphrey said.

“No,” Jason said. “I meant what I said.”

Clarissa Ventress’ bodyguard Darnell led Sophie into the garden, where Ventress was enjoying tea on a terrace.

“Sophie, dear,” Ventress said. “It’s been so long since I’ve heard from you.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“With that little request of mine, yes. But as I recall, what I instructed were high-profile thefts in the midst of public events. It’s been weeks, and I haven’t heard about a thing. If you were doing as you were told, I really should have.”

“Your part in planning this operation,” Sophie said, “was to tell us to do something breathtakingly idiotic. Our part was to figure out how to do that without being caught immediately. Our part is harder, so it takes longer. Unless your intention was for us to march over to the Island and mug the first rich-looking person we see.”

Darnell moved forward threateningly as Sophie raised her voice, but Ventress waved him back.

“But I don’t think that’s what you wanted,” Sophie said. “That might get you out of our deal when I’m hauled away by the guard, but everyone will know that you sold me out. Where would your precious reputation be then? Stop sending your goons to drag me back here, Ventress. You’re only slowing me down.”

“Two weeks,” Ventress said. “I want to hear about your first bold caper within two weeks, or I will consider you as having failed to live up to your side of our little pact. At which point, I will throw you to whichever wolf leaves the thickest slab of meat at my door. And if I hear you try to run out on me...”

She gave Sophie her best serpentine grin.

“...there are men in this city with tastes that would make someone even as hard as you turn soft, Sophie dear.”

Sophie looked ready to spit venom, but kept her lips pressed tightly together. She stared daggers at Ventress, who smiled back as if Sophie’s glare was good for the skin.

“Can I go now?” Sophie asked, biting off every word.

“Of course, dear,” Ventress said. “Two weeks; don’t forget, now.”

Chapter 64: Take My Wife, Please

Luckily for Jason, most of the contracts in the jobs hall were for areas close to the city. Unless the threat was urgent, those further afield were posted on each town or village's noticeboard. Every month, the Adventure Society would send out a number of people to patrol those areas and resolve those notices. It was not a popular task, as it meant a full month away from the city and any opportunities that might arise.

Jason started taking one or two contracts a day, depending on the location. He would then try and clear a notice or two off the local boards while he was out, even if it meant spending the night out in the delta. People were more than welcoming, especially as he took the time to help any sick locals.

In the jobs hall, Jason placed a notice on the desk. Albert was on duty again today, making a record of the contract.

"Badge, please," Albert said.

Jason took out his Adventure Society badge and touched it to the contract. There was a shimmer as the badge touched the magic paper and Albert filed it in one of the desk drawers.

New Quest: [Contract: Bog Shambler]

A bog shambler has appeared close to the village of Hule. You have accepted a contract to eliminate the creature.

- Objective: Eliminate [Bog Shambler] 0/1.
- Reward: Spirit coins.

The Adventure Society rewarded iron spirit coins for an iron-rank monster-slaying contract. The amount depended on number of monsters, travel time and perceived difficulty, from ten, anywhere up to a hundred. If the contract proved more difficult than was originally assessed, bonuses would be given. They went from extra coins, all the way up to an awakening stone, although such a reward was extremely rare.

Jason himself could loot coins from each monster, while the quests that appeared for each contract would give more coins again, and sometimes other valuables. He was effectively being paid three times for each contract.

"Your armour is looking a big ragged," Albert observed. "That thorny-tongue frog from yesterday?"

"It certainly was as thorny-tongued as advertised," Jason said. "The armour self-repairs, but it got torn-up pretty well. It'll be fine in a few days."

"I imagine you got torn-up as well," Albert said.

"I self-repair too," Jason said. "You on tomorrow, Bert?"

"Nah, they've got me on the admin desk, tomorrow."

"I'll see you in a few, then."

Jason made to leave, but found someone standing in his path. It was a tall, gangly fellow who looked a few years older than Jason. He had an iron-rank aura, so he was probably the age he looked. He was wearing robes that were a size too big, with the emblem of the Magic Society prominently placed.

"Mr Asano?" the man asked.

"And you are?" Jason asked.

"Standish," the man said. "Clive Standish, of the Magic Society. To be precise, I am Adjunct Assistant to the Deputy Director of the Magic Society, Greenstone branch."

"That must make for a long desk plate. Is there a reason you're standing in my way, Standish?"

"Actually, Mr Asano, I've been looking for you for some time," Clive said.

"Well it isn't my fault," Jason said. "I had no idea she was your wife, so you can't blame me."

"What?" Clive asked. "I'm not married."

"She told me the same thing," Jason said, shaking his head ruefully. "I wouldn't worry about it."

Clive's brow creased into a frown.

"I'm not entirely sure what's going on here," he said.

Jason patted him consolingly on the arm.

"Welcome to my life," Jason said, then walked past Clive and out the door.

Left standing inside the jobs hall, Clive stood on the spot, confused.

"What just happened?" he asked.

"That's Jason," Albert said. "Nice enough guy. A bit odd."

"Bert?" Clive said, turning to the man behind the desk. "I thought you sold fruit?"

"You're probably thinking of my brother, sir."

In the delta, Jason had been given a room at the only inn in the village. After clearing out a monster and healing some of the sick, the innkeeper refused to take payment. The room was humble, but clean, and Jason sat on the floor performing his evening meditation.

Jason had yet to arrive in Greenstone when Rufus told him the three foundations of building his power as an essence user. Training, to prepare himself; danger, to push his limits; and meditation, to consolidate his efforts. For months, Jason worked on two of the three pillars, under the guidance of Rufus Farrah and Gary. Without all three, however, his abilities made little progress.

Jason was driven to take contract after contract, fighting monster after monster. He was caught up in the heady rush of danger, his skills and powers the line between life and death. It was one of the three pillars Rufus scribed as the foundations of power advancement, and Jason was starting to see results.

The fastest was his vision power, which Farrah told him was normal. After all, it was constantly in use. The next fastest was the spell he used to cleanse sickness and poison, feast of absolution. It had been crawling slowly but surely upwards as he used it over and over at the clinic. Once he started using it in combat, the slow climb turned into a regular upwards tick.

Feast of absolution was more useful in combat than he anticipated, as many monsters spawned in groups. He could use it on a monster right before finishing it off, replenishing himself on the afflictions he had placed on it himself. The injection of mana and stamina gave him the endurance to go full-bore through an extended fight, instead of needing to pace himself.

-
- Ability [Feast of Blood] (Blood) has reached Iron 1 (100%).
 - Ability [Feast of Blood] (Blood) has advanced to Iron 2 (00%).
-

It was usually during meditation that Jason's abilities broke through. He smiled with satisfaction, breaking his meditation and taking a sandwich from his inventory to munch on.

His abilities grew stronger with each rank, although it was easier to see with some than others. His vision power, for example, not only increased his ability to see through darkness, but also his normal visual acuity. Colours were brighter, distant objects clearer. It was a concrete reminder of what all his efforts were for.

He decided that after pushing himself so hard, he would take a few days to rest on returning to the city. He also wanted to look into obtaining more awakening stones. Until he awakened all of his abilities, he couldn't make any true progress toward bronze rank.

Jason Asano

- Race: Outworlder.
- Current rank: iron
- Progression to bronze rank: 0% (0/4 essences complete)

Attributes

- [Power] (Blood): [Iron 0].
- [Speed] (Dark): [Iron 0].
- [Spirit] (Doom): [Iron 0].
- [Recovery] (Sin): [Iron 0].

Racial Abilities (Outworlder)

- [Interface].
- [Quest System].
- [Inventory].
- [Map].
- [Astral Affinity].
- [Mysterious Stranger].

Essences (4/4)

Dark [Speed] (3/5)

- [Midnight Eyes] (special ability): [Iron 4] 39%.
- [Cloak of Night] (special ability): [Iron 3] 08%.
- [Path of Shadows] (special ability): [Iron 3] 21%.

Blood [Power] (4/5)

- [Blood Harvest] (spell): [Iron 3] 04%.
- [Leech Bite] (special attack): [Iron 2] 89%.
- [Feast of Blood] (spell): [Iron 2] 00%.
- [Sanguine Horror] (familiar): [Iron 2] 16%.

Sin [Recovery] (4/5)

- [Punish] (special attack): [Iron 2] 85%.
- [Feast of Absolution] (spell): [Iron 3] 96%.
- [Sin Eater] (special ability): [Iron 3] 21%.
- [Hegemony] (spell): [Iron 2] 67%.

Doom [Spirit] (1/5)

- [Inexorable Doom] (spell): [Iron 2] 67%.

He would only start down the path to bronze rank once all his essence abilities were awakened. Jason didn't feel put upon by his lack of awakening stones, as even Humphrey

didn't have his full set of powers yet. According to Humphrey, it was Geller family tradition to supply their scions with enough awakening stones to get started, while the rest had to be earned.

The Adventure Society was known to give out awakening stones for exceptional service, although rarely. Usually it was for unexpected success when a contract proved more difficult than expected. Some open contracts also offered stones as rewards for those with the greatest contributions. The competition would strongly drive performance.

Otherwise, awakening stones could be purchased through brokers, almost always at auction. They came up semi-regularly, but the prices were exorbitant. Rufus advised him to be patient and work hard. The Adventure Society made sure stones found their way into the hands of good adventurers.

Returning to the city in the morning, Jason stopped in at Jory's clinic before returning to his lodgings on the Island. Jason's inn was expensive, closer to a luxury hotel than the inns and hostels of the delta towns. Downstairs was a sumptuous lounge, dining hall and bar. When Jason entered the lounge from outside, he spotted the landlady, Madam Landry, berating a tall man in scholar's robes.

"...think you can sleep in my lounge area like it's a common flop house!"

Clive was profusely apologising. Somehow his gangly height seemed lesser than the tiny woman scolding him.

"I fell asleep while awaiting an acquaintance," Clive said. "I'm happy to pay the fee for a night," he said.

"So you do think it's a flophouse!"

"No, good lady I can assure you that..."

Clive continued struggling until he spotted Jason, his eyes lighting up.

"Mr Asano!" he called out.

Clive fled Madam Landry in Jason's direction.

"Here, good lady," Clive said. "This is my acquaintance, Mr Jason Asano."

"Who's your acquaintance?" Jason said, voice and expression full of offence. "After you slept with my wife?"

"What?" Clive said, flustered, head swivelling between Jason and Madam Landry.

"Wait, you're not doing that to me again."

He jabbed a finger in Jason's direction.

"You don't even have a wife."

"Not anymore," Jason said. "She ran off with this tall bloke from the Magic Society."

“You absconded with Mr Asano’s wife and have the nerve to use my inn like some cheap tavern!” Madam Landry said.

“I never touched his wife!”

“I’m off upstairs for a rest, Madam Landry.” Jason said. “Probably best if you showed him the door.”

“You have a good rest, Jason dear,” she said. “I know you’ve been working hard.”

Clive watched Jason disappear up the stairs, and was shuffled outside by Madam Landry. He stood out on the street, looking at the door that had been closed in his face.

“What in the world is going on?”

Chapter 65: Curious Urges

Jason tugged his bowtie into shape in a large standing mirror.

"That's an unusual outfit," Gary said. "A bit more snug than I like. I think the locals have it right, fashion-wise."

They were in the lounge room of the suite shared by Rufus, Gary and Farrah. Gary was wearing evening wear that showed off all the colourful drapery favoured by Greenstone high society.

"I had Gilbert make it up," Jason said. "It's called a tuxedo."

Jason enjoyed the hang of a well-tailored suit, but he found himself missing his armour. He had been wearing it almost constantly, through battles and danger until it felt like a part of him. Still, a night at the symphony involved neither battles nor danger, so perhaps it was best to feel a little different. And even if it did, his tuxedo had some strengthening treatments and a few enchantment tricks to facilitate a quick escape, if necessary.

"Not enough colours," Gary said, still eyeing off Jason's clothes.

"I like it," Farrah said, emerging from her own room. "Simple and elegant."

"Why does Rufus always take the longest to get ready?" Gary asked. "He doesn't even have hair. I'm ready, I'm pretty much all hair."

"I remember not having hair," Jason said. "Didn't care for it."

"It's nice to be going out again," Farrah said. Jason moved so she could take his place to check her outfit in the mirror.

"Agreed," Jason said. "The program was in three parts, right? A nice, long evening at the symphony will be just the thing, I think."

"Danielle said she invited us because she thought you would enjoy it," Farrah said. "She knows you've been working hard."

"I ran into Humphrey out in the delta, yesterday," Jason said. "We did a job off a noticeboard together."

"How was that?" Farrah asked.

"Well, I stood there while and he killed the monster immediately, so... straightforward."

"Everyone's ready?" Rufus asked, stepping out of his room.

"Of course we're ready," Farrah said. "You're always the last one out."

"Did you wax your head?" Gary asked Rufus.

“No,” Rufus said. “I did not wax my head.”

“Really?” Gary asked. “Because it looks like you waxed your head.”

“There is something of a sheen to it,” Jason observed.

“Maybe I rubbed in a little moisturising treatment,” Rufus admitted.

“You did,” Gary said. “You waxed your head.”

“I did not wax my head.”

“I think it looks nice,” Farrah said. “Very shiny.”

Unlike the theatre district, which was located in Old City, the Grand Concert Hall was very close to their lodgings in the guild district. They walked the short distance through the wide streets, the sun low, but still hanging in the summer sky. The concert hall was a magnificent, circular building that Jason walked past every day on his way to the Adventure Society campus. With two lengthy intermissions scheduled, Jason intended to take a look around between performances.

They joined Danielle Geller and her son Humphrey in their private box. When the first interval arrived, the rest of the group headed in the direction of the drinking lounge restricted to private box holders. As they left, Danielle discreetly stopped Jason.

“I have a friend I would like you to meet,” she said quietly, handing him a piece of paper. “I said you would find her during the first intermission. You won’t make a liar of me, will you?”

“You aren’t pushing me into a box are you, Lady Geller?”

“I wouldn’t dare,” she said with a sly smile.

As Danielle left him behind, Jason glanced at the piece of paper. It listed directions to a room on the second floor, one down from the Geller’s third-floor private box. Walking through the hallways was like walking through an art gallery, with paintings and recessed sculptures carefully lit with delicate magical lighting.

He found the room listed on the paper, where a plaque declared it the Edith Vane Memorial Conference Room. He frowned at the name. There was one aura that he could sense within, with the overpowering strength of silver rank. He considered knocking but just went in instead.

The conference room looked like just that, with a long table surrounded by chairs. Soft lamps hung from the ceiling, filling the room with warm light. Along one wall, windows looked out over the city. The guild district was mostly low buildings, with the Adventure and Magic Society campuses looming large, along with the concert hall itself. The sun had set

during the first performance and street lamps lit thoroughfares below, lighting up the bustling nightlife.

The room's single occupant had her back to him as she looked out over the city. She wore a formal dress in the local style; a loose draping of layered colours, cinched with flattering strategy. Chestnut hair spilled down her back, with a pair of tapered ears poking out to reveal her as an elf. Jason couldn't have hidden his presence if he wanted to, but she gave no reaction to his entrance at all.

Jason took a bottle and a glass from his inventory, pouring out a measure of sweet, green liqueur.

"Drink?" he offered.

She held out a hand without turning around. The glass tugged itself from Jason's grip and flew across the room into hers, without so much as spilling a drop.

"Thank you," she said and took a sip. "This is one of Mr Norwich's private concoctions. He's a friend of a friend, yes?"

"He is," Jason said. Norwich was an alchemist friend of Jory's who had been trying to brew a drink that would get through Jason's poison resistance. Norwich didn't want to turn to bronze-rank ingredients, partly as a challenge and partly to prevent a bronze-rank hangover.

Jason took out another glass and poured a drink for himself, then wandered over to stand next to the woman. He looked out at the city instead of at her.

"Do you know who I am, Mr Asano?"

"I only really know the one elf. We don't get along."

"The priestess of purity."

"That's the one," Jason said. "Very severe woman. Powerful, Aryan vibe. Sexy, but you know you really shouldn't. Like an evil lady torturer."

"You think speaking a little nonsense is going to put me off kilter?"

"You think bringing me to a room named after a family I killed half of will do the same to me?"

She turned to look at him, then back to the window.

"Forty-one contracts in eighteen days, if we count adventure board notices," she said. "You've been a busy man."

"It feels like I have a lot of catching up to do."

"Can you keep this pace up?"

"Not unless someone makes me a magical scooter."

"Is that some manner of transport from your world?"

"It is," Jason said. "I think it would be nice. Riding along the embankment roads, the wind in my face."

"I did hear about your distaste for heidels. Quite unusual, for an adventurer."

"Eccentricity is the prerogative of the wealthy and powerful. I barely qualify for either, but I'm working on it."

"Then you should make more lucrative investments than in a man who has dedicated his life to healing the poor."

"I'll muddle through," Jason said. "Did you want anything more than to point out how much attention you're paying, Director? This intermission won't last forever."

Elsbeth Arella was director of the Greenstone Branch of the Adventure Society. Rufus had pointed her out, along with any number of other local notables, during their spate of social outings the month previous.

"You'll find, Mr Asano, that these intermissions last as long as certain people want them to."

"I see."

"I'm satisfied with how you have been conducting yourself since joining the Adventure Society."

"Awakening stone satisfied?"

"I would not take your self-satisfaction as a reasonable measure of mine, Mr Asano. I especially do not care for some mid-level Magic Society functionary contacting my office to request a meeting with a member of my society, one not even a month clear of assessment."

"Couldn't they just come and find me directly?" Jason asked innocently.

She turned to give him a withering glare, her aura crushing his into the floor. He nonchalantly sipped at his drink, still looking out the window.

"Take a break from contracts for a little while, Mr Asano. You've been clearing out the backlog I use to prod some of our members who don't share your work ethic. I will see you are assigned appropriate contracts; just check the desk at the jobs hall. If you do well, you can expect to see a second star in the near future."

"You're the boss," Jason said.

"You don't strike me as a man who pays much heed to authority," she told him.

"I'm not big on abdicating moral responsibility," he said.

She drained the glass and handed it back to him.

"You have a taste for the sweet things, Mr Asano. You drink like an elf."

"You can knock back the plonk pretty well," Jason said. "You drink like an Aussie."

"I have no idea what an 'Aussie' is," she said.

"I am, Director. I am."

"A friend of yours," Jason whispered to Danielle as he took a seat back in the viewing box.

"A new friend," Danielle said, "but I think, a good one."

The art-lined public corridors of the concert hall worked their way around the circular building. There were plenty of concert goers taking in the art during the second intermission, Jason included. Drink in hand, he meandered down a hallway, alone. He stopped to consider a painting of a barren desert wasteland. It was impressionistic in style, reminding Jason of his earliest days in his new world. A woman joined him in examining it. He spared her a glance before turning back to the picture.

He sensed no aura from her at all. His aura senses weren't the sharpest, but to hide it completely meant she was probably higher rank than he was. She looked to be in her early twenties, by which point any decent adventurer hit bronze rank. Not many got a late start like Jason. She had the olive skin of a local, her delicate features an effortless, dangerous beauty. Dark hair cascaded over her shoulders to a gown that was elegance in cream silk.

"Mediocre," the woman critiqued the painting in front of them. "They hang the superior works in the restricted lounges."

"I like it," Jason said. "It looks how the desert feels."

"You've spent some time there?" she asked.

"A little," Jason said. "It reminds me of parts of my homeland."

"And where is that?" she asked.

"Very far from here," he said wistfully.

She turned her head towards him.

"You're Jason Asano."

Jason kept his eyes on the painting.

"I'm not sure you understand how introductions work," he said. "I already know who I am."

She frowned, and he felt a bronze-rank aura blaze out to suppress his own. He had been told that was the very height of rudeness, but he kept being subjected to it. He thought there might be a lesson there, but he had no interest in learning it. Absently, he wondered if he was becoming a masochist.

“A beautiful woman invading my personal space,” he said, unconcerned. “Should I be scared or delighted?”

The corners of his mouth turned up in a sly smile.

“Perhaps,” he mused, “the most delicious choice would be both.”

“Do you want to get slapped?” the woman asked him.

He turned his head to face her.

“Would you think less of me if I said yes?” he asked.

She arched an eyebrow.

“My name is Cassandra Mercer,” she said.

“Ah,” Jason said, turning back to the painting. “Now I see.”

“See what?” she asked.

“Everything.”

“Oh really?”

“If Thadwick had sent you,” Jason said, “then this would be an alley and you would be much less pretty. I imagine you are here at your mother’s behest. You strike me as someone very good at satiating urges of curiosity.”

“If I struck you, Mr Asano, you’d know all about it. And speaking of my mother, I’ve heard you said some unkind things in her regard.”

Jason turned again from the painting to give her a sheepish smile.

“For that,” he said, “please convey my unreserved apologies. I didn’t know who your brother was at the time, and he actually asked me if I knew who his father was. You don’t walk away from a line like that.”

“A man of dignity would.”

Jason let out a sinister chuckle.

“Yes, I imagine one would.”

“I did make some discreet inquiries about you,” Cassandra acknowledged. “There was enticingly little to find. You have me at a disadvantage.”

Jason raised his eyebrows at that claim.

“Miss Mercer, you have power, influence, connections, wealth and knowledge. What possible advantage could I have over you?”

“Mystery,” she said. “Isn’t that the greatest advantage?”

“Mystery is an illusory shield,” Jason said. “The moment the veil is pierced, your vulnerabilities become exposed. And there is only one arena in which vulnerability becomes a weapon.”

“And what arena is that?” she asked.

His face showed disappointment.

"It's truly a shame you have to ask," he said. "If you'll excuse me, I believe the intermission will end soon."

He left without looking back. She watched him walk away, a contemplative expression on her face. She left in the other direction.

In their family's private booth, Cassandra sat down next to her mother. Thalia Mercer looked more like her daughter's sister than her parent, the age-defying power of her silver-rank essences.

"Well?" Thalia asked.

"He's dangerous," Cassandra said. "Don't let Thadwick anywhere near him."

"Thadwick isn't the problem," Thalia said. "The problem is how much trouble your father will cause to salve your brother's pride. You know how he is about his male heir."

"That could be a concern given Asano's connection to Rufus Remore," Cassandra said. "Have you found out any more about his background?"

"I have confirmed that Remore is training him," Thalia said, "with no small amount of dedication. As for where Asano came from, it's like he fell out of the sky."

"I've heard something else," Cassandra said. "I wasn't going to say anything until I confirmed it."

"Oh?"

"You'll recall that Remore and his companions undertook an expedition out of the city," Cassandra said.

"The Vane problem," Thalia said. "I always disliked Cressida."

"They went at the behest of the Church of Purity. Took one of the church's healers along with them. A girl from the Lasalle family."

"You know her?"

"I do. Anisa. Zealous girl. Dangerously committed."

"What does she have to say?"

"I can't approach her directly," Cassandra said. "She thinks I comport myself in a sinful manner."

"I should hope so," Thalia said. "That's where all the fun is."

"What I'm hearing from my sources in the church of purity," Cassandra said, "is that Anisa left Remore's group after some stranger with dark powers joined them."

“Interesting,” Thalia said. “That fits with something I heard about Remore believing he bungled the contract. That he would have failed if not for the intervention of someone else.”

“I heard much the same,” Cassandra said, “but how could that be Asano? I’ve already confirmed that he came to the city with no skills at all. Remore and his companions trained Asano for weeks just to get him to a minimum standard.”

“You said dark powers,” Thalia said. “Asano is an affliction specialist.”

“Certainly enough to put a priestess of Purity right off,” Cassandra said, “but there are still incongruities. My instincts tell me there’s more to this.”

“Trust your instincts, dear,” Thalia said. “Find out what you can.”

“Of course. Steps have already been taken.”

“For the moment,” Thalia said, “is it worth you taking the time to beguile him?”

“It might be worth the effort,” Cassandra said, “but not worth the risk.”

“Oh?” Thalia prompted.

“He treated the full suppression of my aura like it was the pleasant cool of the evening.”

“That’s certainly unusual,” Thalia said. “And you aren’t normally so crude as to use your aura like that.”

“I was trying to throw him off-balance,” Cassandra said, “but there’s something strange about him. It’s like he lives off-balance. Talking with him feels like teetering on the edge of something I don’t understand.”

Thalia glanced at her daughter from under an arched eyebrow.

“What?” Cassandra asked.

“Nothing, dear,” Thalia said, turning her gaze to the stage, a slight smile playing across her lips. They sat in silence for a few moments before Cassandra spoke again.

“Mother?”

“Yes, dear?”

“When does vulnerability become a weapon?”

Thalia chuckled, quietly, prompting an irritated look from Cassandra.

“Vulnerability is a weapon of seduction, dear,” Thalia said. “Tricky to use, but devastating, if wielded well. Perhaps Thadwick isn’t the only one I should keep away from this young man.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Mother.”