

Chapter 620

Bad at Crime

The small convoy carrying Jason and his friends turned east as soon as it hit the coast, hovering along the wide and well-maintained network of roadways. The immediate turn east was to Belinda's disappointment, as she was interested in heading further south. That way led to the famously sketchy nation of Girlano and all the opportunities it offered to an enterprising and open-minded young lady.

"I officially retract my endorsement of you and Humpy," she told Sophie. "This whole 'being a better person' thing has sucked the fun right out of you."

They sat on the cloud yacht's open lower foredeck. There wasn't much to see, with the wall of rain still running off the invisible cloud screen.

"And by fun, you mean elaborate schemes to steal things?" Sophie asked.

"Schemes? Now you're sounding like Jason. This whole team is a bad influence."

"In that, they are against robbery?"

"Exactly."

"Lindy, we're not street rats anymore. We've met the king of one of the most powerful nations in the world."

"But I never got close enough to lift his watch though, did we?" Belinda asked, taking out a pocket watch and turning it over in her hands.

"What's that?"

"It's a watch."

"Whose watch?"

"Remember that guy who tried to provoke us at the ball, not long before Gary bent a tray over some other guy's head?"

"Kind of. He wasn't exactly memorable. Wait, that's his watch?"

"Yep."

"Well, that's fine. Screw that prick."

"Exactly. I lifted his watch while he was busy being a turd."

"You didn't touch him. You didn't even get close."

"I know, right?"

"Damn, Lindy. That's a good lift."

"Is this rain ever going to let up?" Jason asked, looking out the window of the bar lounge.

“It is,” Humphrey told him.

“It doesn’t look like it. How long is it going to take?”

“About four months.”

“Bloody monsoon weather.”

“One of the reasons Rimaros is situated on those specific islands, instead of the larger ones, is that they see the least rain in the Sea of Storms.”

“I thought those windmill-looking things was meant to stop all this nonsense.”

“The storm accumulators only affect storms with a heightened ambient magic level. Regular weather is unaffected. Look at it this way, Jason: we picked a great time to get out of the tropics.”

“That’s why I like you, Humphrey. You look for the best in everyone, even this bloody rain.”

“My homeland is a bone-dry desert, remember?” Humphrey said. “If not for the magical river creating the delta, we wouldn’t get rain at all, so the goddess Rain is always welcome. She’s heavily worshipped in the delta.”

Belinda laughed at Humphrey’s words as she and Sophie came inside.

“Remember that time Sophie didn’t know what rain was?” she said.

“It doesn’t rain in the city!” Sophie exclaimed defensively.

“I knew what rain was.”

“You didn’t tell me.”

“Well, maybe if you actually talked to people instead of punching or porking them, you might have heard about things.”

“I talked to you.”

“Why would I tell you things? It’s hilarious when you don’t know about stuff that children do. Remember the whole woollen sweater debacle?”

“We grew up somewhere very hot! Why would I know about those?”

“Because you didn’t talk to people.”

“I talked to you!”

“You said that.”

“You’re a bad friend.”

Jason and Humphrey watched the pair go below decks.

“You did well, there,” Jason said.

“I was worried,” Humphrey said. “When we heard you were coming back, there was all these unresolved—”

“They’re resolved now,” Jason said. “She latched onto me because I was the first guy who wasn’t a piece of crap to her.”

“Except for Jory.”

“Yeah, well that guy was far gone for Lindy from the start. But Sophie didn’t just need just good, mate; she needed stable. I’ve been called a lot of things, Humphrey. I was called ‘a small tin of marrowbone jelly’ once, but I don’t recall ever being called stable. You’re the anchor on this team. You should have gotten a healing power set.”

“That’s what my mother said. The power set thing, to be clear; not about the tin of whatever that is you said. But she got a good deal on those two wing essences, and the idea of Henri and I getting the phoenix and dragon confluences appealed to her.”

“How is Henrietta?”

“She was fine last I saw her in Vitesse. She made silver rank, but she’s never fallen into a permanent team. She ran around with Cassandra Mercer for a while.”

Humphrey frowned.

“I’m not sure how that turned out, now that I think about it. Henri always had kind of a crush on Cassandra.”

“I heard about Thadwick,” Jason said. “After the Builder possessed him, he turned into some weird vampire?”

“We’re fairly certain he devoured that loose soul around the sword we found. No one at the Magic Society was ever able to figure out what was going on with that whole sword and soul thing, since Thadwick made off with the sword as well. Not a lot left to study. Rufus’ parents were chasing Thadwick for a while, but the trail went cold.”

“I imagine he’ll pop up somewhere. Causing trouble for us, probably. Thadwick was always fixated on me. I think he might have had a sister complex.”

“I don’t know what that is, and I’m confident I don’t want you to tell me.”

“Fair enough,” Jason said with a chuckle.

“Mr Asano,” Shade said from Jason’s shadow. “We will be approaching Rajoras in around five minutes.”

“Thank you, Shade.”

Shade, along with piloting the cloud yacht, was using vehicle forms to scout the way ahead for trouble that might otherwise be hidden in the rain. Rajoras was one of the larger cities on the southern mainland coast, making it one of the southernmost centres in the Storm Kingdom’s territory.

In the wake of the monster surge, Rajoras was a major hub of activity. People needed to return home after far too long boxed-up in fortress towns and often found

destruction waiting for them. Every town and village needed repair, while some had to be rebuilt entirely. That was true in a normal surge, that lasted a fifth as long as this one. People and materials were already streaming through Rajoras like a river, and the road grew increasingly busy as the team drew near, despite the weather.

The massive vehicle that was the cloud yacht did not make for practical city travel, so the trio of vehicles in the convoy stopped. They needed to visit the city, as their sudden departure from Rimaros had left them somewhat undersupplied, and the guild team were hoping to find a vehicle of their own. The convoy pulled off the side of the road, with Shade floating the cloud yacht up and over the jungle so as not to obstruct the road with the giant vessel.

Jason's team and the Rimaros team assembled on the lower starboard deck, rain bouncing off an invisible dome overhead. That open deck was where the vessel would dock when acting as a boat, while doubling as a launch platform for the two skimmers in dimensional storage. Clive and Belinda pulled the skimmers out, each vehicle equipped for travel over land and water, with magical spray screens that would handle the rain. Each skimmer was a decent size, able to seat eight.

"I know that Belinda and I are the designated drivers," Clive said, "but we both need to go with the Rimaros team. Sorry, I didn't catch your team name."

"Team Storm Shredder," Kalif said.

"That's so much better than ours," Humphrey muttered, to the shaking heads disagreement of his teammates.

"Anyone can drive these skimmers, though, so long as we're not in a low-magic zone," Clive said. "They'll run on spirit coins, so you just need some of them. And a local driving permit, obviously."

"A what?" Belinda asked.

"The license I told you to get," Clive said turning to frown at her. "You did get that license, right?"

"Uh, yep."

"Can I see it?"

"I don't have it on me right now."

"You don't have it on you?"

"I do not."

"You have dimensional storage space where you keep all your worldly possessions."

"Not all of them. And I have a cabin. Some things are unpacked in there."

“Then you might want to go get it,” Clive said. “They may be checking them at the city gate. This soon after the surge, they’ll probably be doing extra monitoring.”

“Yeah?” Belinda asked, her voice only a slightly higher pitch than normal. “I’ll take that into consideration. On an unrelated note, does anyone know how local low-level officials respond to bribes?”

“Why do you two need to go with Team Storm Cutter?” Jason asked.

“It’s Storm *Shredder*,” Korinne corrected.

“Storm Cutter was already taken?” Jason asked.

“Yep,” Kalif said, earning him a sharp glance from Korinne.

“Anyway, Clive, why do you and Lindy need to go with them?”

“We’ll all be heading to the same part of the city for vehicle stuff,” Clive said. “They’re looking to buy a proper transport, and since we’ll be here a few days, Lindy and I need a dry dock to disassemble—”

Belinda slapped him on the arm.

“...we need to buy some skimmers,” Clive pivoted. “And that is all.”

Clive’s team all stared at him.

“We already have skimmers,” Sophie pointed out, gesturing at the two vehicles resting on the deck. “These skimmers.”

“We need different ones,” Clive said.

“You are so bad at crime,” Belinda muttered.

“We’re not meant to be good at crime!” Clive hissed at her.

“Speak for yourself,” Belinda hissed back.

“Whatever happened with that submarine Belinda stole?” Neil asked.

Clive opened his mouth and Belinda slapped his arm again.

“What submarine?” Clive asked unconvincingly.

“The one you took when you broke out of the Order of Redeeming Light’s hidden base,” Neil said.

“That sank,” Belinda said. “Or I lost it. Or both. I think it was both. Yeah, I told you that it sank and I don’t remember where, right?”

Kalif leaned closer to Orin.

“It’s your fault that we’re travelling with these people?”

Orin didn’t say anything.

Korinne’s team was with Clive and Belinda in a skimmer, in a queue waiting to move through the city gate checkpoint. The city walls loomed ahead, still bearing the scars of

monster attacks from the surge. Clive was in the driver's seat, with Belinda beside him at the front.

"Can I ask you something?" Kalif said, leaning forward to speak. "Do you find it unnerving that Asano's aura is everywhere in that vehicle? I mean, *everywhere*. It feels like he's watching your thoughts."

"Different auras feel different to different people," Clive said. "To me, it's benevolent. Overbearing, yes, but benevolent, which is very much Jason. It's reassuring, though, after having thought we'd lost him to the Reaper."

"You get used to it," Belinda said. "There's an assurance to his presence. Like a guard dog. You can feel how far he'd go if someone came for us, and we know that feeling is real. We've seen it."

"That's what it feels like to us," Kalif said. "Except that we're the ones the guard dog is watching. It's unsettling. Makes it hard to relax."

"I don't know," said Rosa Liselos, the scout from Korinne's team. "I don't think it's so bad. I can definitely live with it if it means cloud beds and giant dinner spreads. That lunch looked amazing. How often do you all eat like that?"

"That's just normal lunch when we aren't in the field," Belinda said. "Jason has always kind of been the auxiliary member in charge of food. Why didn't you all join in?"

"Korinne," Orin said, with no more explanation than that.

Korinne's five teammates all turned to look at her, to which she didn't react.

"Discipline," Korinne answered Belinda. "Indulgence dulls the wits. Sharp, efficient minds are what we need."

"Well, I need sandwiches the size of my forearm," Belinda said. "But whatever works for you, I guess."

Jason ended up staying behind when his team went into the city. Humphrey, Sophie and Neil went in search of supplies, but Jason gave them a food shopping list instead of going himself. Between the business and the weather, it wasn't an ideal time for sightseeing, and they were close enough to Rimaros that it wouldn't offer a fascinating new culture to interact with. It also meant that Jason knew enough about the local food that most, if not all of his list should be obtainable.

Arabelle came aboard the cloud yacht, still hovering over the jungle canopy beside the road. She found him brewing tea and they sat by the window, watching the traffic below trudge along the road, through the downpour.

“It’s past time we had a talk about Callum,” she told him. “I wanted to do this back in Rimaros, but you decided to leave very suddenly.”

“Where is Callum?”

“He took our vehicle and went into the city. It’s not the smallest, but it’s not that much bigger than a large skimmer. Nothing like this monstrosity.”

“I’m quite happy with this monstrosity, thank you very much.”

He sipped his tea, then set it down on a side table.

“You mentioned some time ago,” he said, “that you had figured out the real reason that Callum was so obsessed with Sophie’s mother.”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“He’s in love with her.”

“I’m sorry, what?”