

Chapter 91: Life & Death

Jason let out a contented sigh.

“This is nice,” he said, then picked up a sandwich and bit into it.

The picnic at the Island’s park district had plenty of people. Danielle Geller was at a picnic table, which she was sharing with Thalia Mercer, Rufus and Vincent. Jory was sitting at another table with Clive and the brother-sister pair of Rick and Phoebe Geller. Gary was sitting in a folding chair with a sandwich the length of Jason’s arm.

“You know you could cut that into smaller pieces, right?” Farrah asked him.

“Then it wouldn’t be an enormous sandwich,” Gary said. “It would just be a bunch of sandwiches.”

Cassandra was sitting next to Jason on a blanket. Humphrey and Gabrielle had their own blanket, like Jason and Cassandra, but Humphrey kept shooting nervous glances at his mother watching over them.

“It feels like it’s been all work and no play lately,” Jason said. Sand pirates, underground lairs, sand pirates again.”

“There’s been a little play,” Cassandra said, lips curving in a tantalising arc.

“You are a beacon of luminous delight in a dark sea of obligation,” he said and gave her a gentle kiss.

“See?” Gabrielle said. “It isn’t that hard.”

Humphrey looked nervously at his mother again.

“Uh...”

Rufus stood up from his position at the picnic table, raising up a glass.

“Here’s to our iron-rankers and their first bronze-rank monster,” he said. “Not to mention two racial power evolutions.”

As the others raised their glasses, Jason smiled, Humphrey looked embarrassed and Clive looked surprised to be involved at all.

“Jason,” Rufus said. “You’ve come a long way from the confused, half-naked man we met in basement in a cannibal’s cage.”

“You say that like we weren’t in cages too,” Gary interjected.

“Thank you, Gary,” Rufus said, then turned back to Jason. “Even then, you were something special. Something strange, certainly, but also special. Some of us wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for your actions that day. Now, look at you. Taking down bronze-rank monsters; terrorising Danielle’s poor trainees. We’re all adventurers here and, I think,

rather good ones. You may have come to us from very far away, but you belong here, just as much as any of us.”

Jason rubbed a hand over his mouth, misty-eyed. He got up to his feet, glass in hand and looked over the assemblage of friends.

“Thank you, Rufus,” he said. “Thank you all. I’m a stranger in a strange land, and I know I can be... difficult, even at the best of times. You’ve all helped me, guided me, taught me, challenged me. Put up with me, more often than not.”

“No kidding,” Farrah called out.

“Quiet, you,” Jason admonished. “I’d just like to express how grateful I am to all of you. I’ve built a better life here in months than I did in my old world in years, and I have all of you to thank for that. I couldn’t ask for better people to be stuck down a hole with, which is lucky, because I recently was.”

He raised his glass.

“Here’s to all of you.”

“That’s right!” Gary yelled out, hoisting a goblet the size of Jason’s head. “We’re pretty great.”

“You haven’t regaled us with the story of fighting the marsh hydra yet,” Farrah said. “By the time we got back from our own contract, Cassandra had already whisked you away.”

“Fair enough,” Jason said. “Clive, Humphrey, get over here; we have a tale to tell.”

They left out the part about the skill books. Jason suspected it intersected with the confidential mission that brought Rufus, Gary and Farrah to Greenstone, and after some consideration, asked Humphrey and Clive to stay quiet. He decided not to put the adventurers in a position where they had to ask Jason to stop investigating, although it was Clive doing the actual investigating.

At the end of the tale, Jason pulled out the item they had looted from the hydra. It was a bronze-rank, five-tailed whip with biting mouths at the end of each tail. The whip tails seemed to have a life of their own, waving madly and snapping at people as Gary waved it around. Jason had handed it over to demonstrate, as he couldn’t use bronze-rank items himself.

Humphrey had his own news, having been promoted to two-star, which drew another round of toasting. By this point people were starting to get woozy, especially with Gary trying to get people to toast to day-drinking. Even Jason was in his cups, sharing the same bronze-rank liquor as his freinds to get past his resistances.

“Why didn’t we all get awakening stones?” Jason asked Vincent, the only Adventure Society official present. “Killing that hydra was super-hard. It almost ate my boy Hump!”

“As a rule,” Vincent said, “we don’t give out awakening stones to people for killing monsters above their rank. It would just incentivise people getting themselves killed trying to jump ranks.”

“That’s right,” Rufus said. “Jumping ranks isn’t something to take lightly. A good adventurer should be able to jump ranks, but only against the right monster.”

“Don’t tell them that,” Vincent scolded.

“I think I should give it a try,” Rick said.

“This is exactly what I’m talking about,” Vincent said. “Iron-rankers rushing off to their deaths.”

“I’ll do it in the mirage chamber,” Rick said, getting unsteadily to his feet. “Come on, Jason, you can come to.”

“Sit back down,” Danielle told him. “How many times do I have to tell you children about using the mirage chamber while drunk?”

“I’m fine,” Rick said, unconvincingly.

“Such a lightweight,” Phoebe said, shaking her head at her brother.

“The mirage chamber is booked today anyway,” Danielle said. “The bronze-rankers are practising sandy terrain encounters.”

“They have a whole desert for that!” Rick complained.

The drink continued to flow and the conversation roamed. The wiser iron-rankers went easy on the drinks to try and catch any loose-lipped reveals from the bronze and silver-rankers.

“...a committee,” Danielle was saying. “All silver-rankers who spent decades buying up monster cores while they sat on their backsides. Thalia, do you remember when we were the age of these kids? Crazy, we were; knocking out contracts faster than they could post them. Now they’re all sitting around like fonts of wisdom, deciding what to do about pirates that they never would have gone out to catch in the first place!”

“Your Mum seems to like the sauce, Hump,” Jason said.

“She can get a bit boisterous when Father isn’t around,” Humphrey said. “Or when he is, for that matter.”

“Hump takes after his father,” Phoebe said to Jason. “His Dad is the straight line to his Mum’s squiggles. Kind of like Hump is for you.”

“There you go, Hump,” Jason said, throwing an arm around Humphrey’s broad shoulders. “Jeez, you’re a biggun.”

“Please stop saying Hump.”

Later, Rufus was addressing all the iron-rankers in a group.

“Don’t go rushing off to fill all your awaking stone slots. There’s an opportunity coming up. I can’t tell you about it, but in about a month there will be a... thing.”

“What kind of thing?” Jason asked.

Rufus drunkenly frowned at Jason.

“It’s a thing. Shut up.”

Drink and the soporific afternoon sun left most of the group aggressively lounging. Jason was laid out on a blanket with Cassandra, Humphrey and Gabrielle and the one next to them.

“It sounds like your problem is the butter,” Jason said to Gabrielle. “You want to take it out of the cooler box and let it stand for fifteen minutes; no more, no less. Oh, and get a stand mixer instead of creaming it by hand. You can get good ones from Artifice Association.”

“Maybe you can show me?” Gabrielle asked.

“Sure,” Jason said. “Madam Landry gives me free run of the kitchen, and learning about biscuits is very important. There’s this whole country where I come from that call scones biscuits. They’re all lunatics.”

The memorial service was held at the Adventure Society campus. The mausoleum occupied a portion of the campus abutting the north shore of the Island. The shore of the artificial island was raised up from the water, with lawn seeded atop. The service was held overlooking the water.

The adventurer’s remains had been cremated before the service and were stored in an urn kept by the family. The adventurer’s badge was presented to them by Humphrey, while the tracking stone they had followed to his remains were ceremonially placed within the Hall of Fallen Heroes. The mausoleum held not the remains of adventurers, but the stones held by the Adventure Society that marked their lives.

Jason and Clive stood by solemnly throughout the service. After it was done, the family thanked them for bringing their son home. It was widely known what Humphrey, Clive and Jason had faced to do so, and they were looked on with respect. They were invited to a private gathering, but Humphrey had warned them that it was correct etiquette to be asked, and correct etiquette to respectfully decline.

The gathered adventurers made their way to a bar where they took part in a traditional adventurer wake. It was an informal ceremony where a drink was shared in

silence to the fallen, then a drink was taken to Humphrey, Jason and Clive for brining him home. Then those who knew the dead adventurer shared stories as the mood shifted from mourning to a celebration of life.

The adventurer was not from a famous family, or well known for his accomplishments. Many were grateful that someone as well-known as Humphrey was willing to go out and find their friend. Even if the Adventure Society didn't have rules against sending an adventurer's friends and family to retrieve their body, they all knew they would have fallen too. Jason discovered even he was building something of a reputation among adventurers. It was no match for Humphrey's, but he took many a respectful handshake and offered drink.

As the night grew late, Humphrey, Jason and Clive left with most of the adventurers, only the dead man's closest friends remaining. The Island streets were brightly lit by street lamps as they walked side-by-side in silence.