

Chapter 476

A Damn Fine Way to Start Off a War

The Vitesse branch of the Adventure Society was bustling with activity. Miles Cotezee walked down a hallway towards one of the large briefing rooms with an unusual adventurer at his side. The man was an elf with reddish skin, stark white hair and golden eyes. His sand-coloured leather outfit had many tribal marking stitches into it forming beautiful patterns matched by the tattoos on his skin. The buckle of his belt depicted purple flames in the shape of a flower, the symbol of the Burning Violet guild.

He was lean and muscular, walking with an easy, languid grace. Nonetheless, Miles got the impression from him of a spring ready to launch. There was a quiet intensity to the man that reminded Miles of the man's father.

They entered the briefing room, which was set up like a lecture hall with a stage at the front and rows of chairs rising up a staggered floor. Humphrey Geller and his team were already waiting, Humphrey himself standing alert and watchful as they came in. Clive was fiddling with a recording crystal projector while Sophie, Belinda, Neil and Gary were sat around a table and chairs Belinda had made with her power to create simple objects. The cards they were playing with were not made by her power, following a number of wager-related incidents.

There was one member of the group absent, Jory, who had been summoned away by the church of the Healer. While Miles had been able to get travel dispensation to reunite Humphrey and Gary's teams, Jory was not a member of either. While neither he nor Belinda was happy about being separated again, especially in such uncertain times, they each had their own responsibilities.

Relationships amongst adventurers always had challenges. With travel frequent, those not in the same team could expect long periods of separation. For those that were on the same team, the logistics were easier but the dangers were far greater. Emotions overruling judgement could put the team in danger, while an acrimonious split could break teams apart.

Everyone looked up as Miles and the adventurer entered, looking over the stranger. Only Gary recognised him, the elf and the leonid exchanging a nod of greeting. Belinda started packing up the cards and dismissing her conjured furniture.

"I know that having an outsider made leader of your team, even temporarily, is not a situation anyone wants," Miles said. "Now that you've all been inducted into the Burning Violet, I was able to make sure it was someone from your guild."

“Hey, Ken,” Gary said. “You’ve been keeping busy, I see.”

“The hunt goes well,” the elf said. “I was sorry to hear your path was darkened when the light of your companion was cast from it.”

“There’ve been some dark days,” Gary said, “but the ones ahead are looking brighter. Farrah’s back.”

Ken stood up a little straighter.

“The lady of stone and fire has returned to the path? How did this come to be?”

“Not sure how, exactly. I’ve got this friend whose disregard for the rules apparently extends to the laws of life and death. I’d say it’d get him into trouble but, from what I hear, he’s running out of kinds of trouble to get into.”

“I think you might be underestimating him,” Neil said.

“It’s some secretive whatever but I don’t care,” Gary said. “So long as my friends are alive and I can go find them, the hows and whys don’t matter.”

“I am glad that your path has brightened, Gareth.”

“Ken, I told you to call me Gary.”

“Yet you persist in calling my aunt Sweet Buns,” Ken said.

“But she makes those really delicious sweet buns,” Gary said. “I’m not being lascivious.”

“Your words do not tell the same story as the tone in which you use them, Gareth.”

“You did sound a little creepy,” Belinda told Gary.

“Lindy...” Gary whined.

“How about we all introduce ourselves?” Miles interjected. “Well, not me and Gary. We already know everyone.”

The elf nodded.

“I am Kenneth, son of Brian,” he said.

“As in, Brian, son of Kevin?” Sophie asked.

“It is so,” Ken said. “You know my father?”

“No, but I’ve heard stories of his power and skill,” Sophie said. “And yours. You beat Rufus Remore.”

Gary burst out laughing.

“Yeah,” he said. “I wish I’d gotten to see that, but I didn’t know Rufus back then. Apparently, he was a one-man gang of assholes before Ken knocked the excess pride out.”

“Rufus was a Thadwick?” Clive asked.

“You shouldn’t speak ill of the dead,” Humphrey said.

“Why not?” Sophie asked. “That guy sold out his family, his world and his soul in that order. Now some monster is out there somewhere, using his body as a meat suit. There’s only ill to speak.”

“Then perhaps we should consider our team member who was once his companion and say nothing at all,” Humphrey said.

Sophie winced, turning to look at Neil.

“It’s fine,” Neil lied.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly.

“Sorry, Neil,” Clive said.

The team introduced themselves. They’d been worried about whom they’d be saddled with, but if at least Gary knew him, they were willing to at least give him a chance. Not long after, more teams came shuffling into the room and sitting down. There was another team of silver-rankers and six teams of bronze-rankers. Once they had all arrived, the room was quite full.

The team, plus Ken and Gary followed Humphrey’s lead in sitting down in the front row, the bronze attendees knowing to leave it for the silvers. Miles stood in front of the assemblage to make an address.

“I’m going to start with some background so that everyone is in the same place in regards to the operation you will be conducting,” he began. “Some of what I have to say you should all already know, while some of you will be learning for the first time.”

He paused, making sure he had everyone’s attention.

“Roughly three and a half years ago, we first discovered the presence of the Builder cult and their intentions. Their goal was to tear strips off of our world with no regard for the death and destruction doing so would bring about. The cultists started taking people and torturing their souls until they opened those souls up to be implanted with star seeds that controlled them and turned them into slaves.”

Miles paused, letting everyone dwell on the topic. Everyone in the room knew someone who had been affected by star seed implantation.

“What we thought was a distraction proved to be something far more insidious. As a world, we turned to our gods for help against this invader from beyond our world, and the gods answered. How could we know that one of them was a traitor? Purity stepped up to help purge the star seeds from the victims of the cult. This put them in a crucial position in the widespread response to the cult. It was only later that we realised that this was all part of a plan for the Purity church to serve as infiltrators, handing the cult our plans and secrets.”

Miles' eyes fell on Clive.

"All around the world," he continued, "good people fought. Sacrificed. They uncovered the cult's secrets. One of those secrets is the reason we are here today."

Taking a moment, Miles panned his gaze around the room.

"Many of you have taken the fight to the Builder, but over the last couple of years, the Builder's activities have reduced. The Ecumenical Council had declared the church of Purity a fallen church. The gods have declared Purity as a fallen god. The church has been banished from every place where civilisation flourishes and once its remnants are but dried, dead leaves on the wind, the god itself will be sanctioned by the other gods."

Miles shook his head.

"You may be wondering what 'sanctioned' means and why the church must go before the gods can act. To be honest, so am I. I'm just a small man and know not the ways of the gods. But those who do tell me that we need to eliminate the church, so that's what we're doing. Of course, most of the Purity church had no idea of what was happening in the dark corners of their faith and turned from their fallen on finding out. They suffered perhaps the greatest betrayal of all as their so-called god of Purity handed our world to a being that would taint our very souls."

For a man claiming to not know the ways of gods, the anger boiling up in Miles was making him sound rather like a preacher. He was tapping into the rage all of them felt, a rage born of ruined lands and fallen friends.

"But there are those who did not forsake their foul deity," Miles continued. "Even losing most, the number that remains loyal to their dark deity is great. We have been hunting them down, the Adventure Society, the Magic Society and the churches. Many of you have joined that very task, as you do again in joining this operation. Unexpectedly, we have had the greatest success in dealing with their gold-rankers. Their numbers were lower and every gold-ranker is a known quantity. With the churches and the Adventure Society working together, we have captured or eliminated many of them. Clive, if you would?"

Clive got up and moved to the recording crystal projector, getting ready to use it.

"The church of Purity as much as abandoned their iron-rankers," Miles said. "Over the last several years, though, the bulk of their bronze and silver-rank loyalists have managed to avoid the forces seeking them out. Like the Builder cult, their activities have diminished over time. Partly this has been from their infrastructure being systematically eradicated and their resources taken or destroyed."

A projection appeared behind Miles, showing footage of smoke rising from the gutted ruins of a once-beautiful temple.

“I know that many have hoped that the reduced activity from the cult and the church reflects an end to their activities, especially with a historic monster surge upon us. Unfortunately, this surge is what they have been waiting for and it will be more historic than most of you are aware. The highest levels of the Adventure Society have access to a source with information that this monster surge will come with an invasion from the Builder’s forces. This will not be more cultists, although have no doubt that the existing cultists will join in. These are forces from beyond our world, with power and numbers we don’t yet know. We do know that it will be bad.”

The image switched from the ruined church to a vast city island, sitting in the ocean. Then a sky city, floating in the clouds. Another was a mountain carved into a fortress city that descended from the air, crushing a forest underneath it as it settled on the ground.

“These appear to be staging platforms for the invasion,” Miles said. “They’re appearing around the world but, for now, are showing limited activity. Their scouts are attacking anything that comes close but otherwise remain passive. Our high-rankers are assessing the threat.”

At this point, there was a lot of consternation in the room. Miles waited for it to die down before continuing.

“At this stage, we are not asking you to engage the Builder invasion. Your role, in this mission, is to eliminate a potential threat before it emerges to strike our backs when we need it least. Mr Clive Standish will be filling you in on the specifics.”

Miles took Clive’s seat.

“The missing forces of the church of Purity are our concern for this operation,” Clive explained. “We believe that the church is hiding these forces in a series of magically hidden strongholds, awaiting the monster surge and the invasion. The reason we believe this is because we found one.”

Clive tapped the projector and the image changed to an idyllic valley, shrouded in mist.

“This,” Clive said, “Is beautiful and remote. It is also a lie. What you are looking at is an illusion on a grand scale, perpetuated by an illusion array so large they’d have had to invent new kinds of rituals to make it work. Which is exactly what they did.”

He tapped the projector and it showed an image of a river.

“Those of you versed in rudimentary magic theory will know that one of the ways in which ambient magic is most active is in the flow of water. Waterways, especially large ones, carry large amounts of ambient magic.”

The projection became a vast dam.

“At the head of the valley I just showed you is a dam. That dam is collecting the ambient magic, converting it and feeding it into the grand illusion and masking the expansive population of Purity clergy that have been hiding there. What we have determined is that the illusion is incapable of masking anything stronger than a silver-rank aura, so we believe this is where at least a portion of their missing bronze and silver adherents are. As best we can tell, no gold-rankers are amongst them, to avoid the expansive search methods the Magic Society has been employing. Their primary defence is secrecy.”

“Then how did we find them?” Someone called out.

“Several years ago, the Magic Society cracked the portal network that the cult and the church had been using,” Clive said. “Eventually they figured out that we could track them through it, which we believe to be one of several reasons for their reduction in activity. Someone in the Adventure Society has been studying use patterns over the time we were tracking their activity and noted a number of anomalies. Some were nothing, but one turned out to be something.”

Clive turned off the projector.

“You will be one wing of a series of groups forming a strike force that will hit the Purity stronghold and hit it hard. Mr Cotezee has marshalling instructions for your team leaders; to prevent information leaks, we leave in the morning.”

When the teams had all shuffled out, Miles, Ken, Gary, and Jason’s team were all that was left in the room.

“A few more of these briefings and there’s no way the Purity church or the cult doesn’t hear about it,” Miles said. “You’re a devious woman, Belinda Callahan.”

“Well,” she said. “You have all these bronze and silver-rankers sitting around before the fight with the Builder starts. Why not take the time to see which ones are playing for the other side?”

“They’re hardly sitting around, Miss Callahan,” Miles said. “Unless you forgot, there’s a monster surge going on.”

“How certain are you that no one will discover the trackers you placed on the chairs?” Humphrey asked.

“Almost completely,” Belinda said.

"It's quite brilliant," Clive said. "Belinda has a knack for using magic outside of its original purpose; this kind of tracking is normally used on pets and children, rather than enemies. The magic is faint, so as not to be obtrusive in a city full of essence users, but quite easily noticed by anyone with magic senses. At least, this is normally the case."

"The thing is," Belinda said, picking up the explanation, "there's a monster surge happening. The magic of the trackers will blend right into the abnormalities in all the ambient magic right now. Unless they know exactly what to look for and how, even a gold-ranker would almost certainly fail to notice it. It's just a substance we left on the chairs, not any kind of device they would find on themselves. The only way they would find it is if they had some tracking-protection powers."

"Which I filtered out when selecting teams for this," Miles said.

"Any anti-tracking items are already being confiscated on entering the building as part of the new security measures," Humphrey realised.

"What if they change pants?" Neil asked. "Won't they leave the tracking stuff behind?"

"That's one of the reasons we're setting a tight timeline," Miles said. "We want them acting in a hurry, surrendering caution for speed as any traitors rush to warn the church of the threat."

"It's not perfect," Belinda said, "but chasing perfect is how you miss out on the good."

"It's only to give our gold-rank investigators a hand," Miles said. "Our Builder-response team only has a few of them and we don't have more gold-rankers to spare for this operation. We need to save them for the end."

"Clive, Belinda," Humphrey said. "You've both done very well."

"Of course I did," Belinda said.

"Just because it's not a surprise," Humphrey said, "that doesn't mean your work is not appreciated."

"The hard part," Miles said, "was getting enough of the higher-ups to approve this without letting the others know the true purpose. Getting them to go along with this and involve so many teams was tricky."

"But worth it, right?" Sophie asked.

"Absolutely," Miles said. "If we can wipe out this stronghold and root out a bushel of traitors, that's a damn fine way to start off a war."

"Does this meant there won't truly be a battle?" Ken asked. "Why did no one speak to me of the stratagem before I bought so many extra spears?"

"Because you're the new guy," Sophie said.

"Be nice," Belinda chided. "You were the new guy, once."

Chapter 477

It Will Not Be Fine

Liara Rimaros made her way back to the royal sky island, half-asleep in the back of a flying carriage. She'd been working without rest as the city was overrun with adventurers that had to be filtered through for potential Builder cultists and was finally going home to sleep.

The carriage was forced to stop on a floating platform close to the sky island for security inspection. No chances were being taken of an attack on the palace. Royal guards carefully inspected the driver and the carriage itself before opening the door. Liara herself stepped out and both she and the carriage interior were swept with inspection devices.

"I'm sorry for the trouble, Lady Liara."

"That's fine, Jhalid," Liara said. "I completely understand."

"Thank you, milady."

"How's that boy of yours, Jhalid?"

"A bit too much like his father, milady. Always learning the hard way."

"You turned out alright. I'm sure he'll grow into a fine young man."

"Thank you, milady."

Liara was from one of the more remote branches of the royal family. She was not close enough to the main branch to be called a princess, although she was entitled to a home on the royal sky island and to participate in the contests for the throne in her youth. She had known she would not be a match for the advantages the Storm Prince's upbringing had given him and had instead set her sight on adventuring.

That Storm Prince had predictably become the Storm King and Liara had never regretted her own choices. After adventuring her way up to gold-rank in less than two decades, the Adventure Society had recruited her for special operations. After years hunting down people with restricted essences, she had been moved to the Builder response team.

After completing the inspection, Liara was allowed back into the carriage and it completed its journey to the royal sky island. The carriage flew towards one of the rings that allowed passage through the island's defences and set down in a carriage yard.

The royal island was ostensibly a palace but was, in and of itself, a small city in the sky. In addition to the royal family, it held embassies from nations around the world and many of the oldest noble families kept townhouses on the island. By custom, the younger

members of the high aristocracy were raised there, allowing for diplomatic training and fostering potential future alliances by marriage.

Liara was no different. In her youth, she had been married to a local lordling to secure royal influence in that family's affairs. Although she and her husband lived largely separate lives, especially now their children were grown, it was a cordial union. They were more friends and occasional lovers than true companions but they were happy.

Rather than find transport, Liara used her gold-rank speed to flit through the streets, unnoticed by everyone but island security. She arrived at her townhouse to find her husband, Baseph, just leaving. He met her with a smile as she arrived.

"Hello Lee," he said. "I left you a note inside. Uncle wants me out managing the mines for the duration of the surge. I'm told that cousin Gibbie is having some problems and can't go."

Liara frowned.

"I think the problem might be your uncle telling Gibbie things he shouldn't. Gibbie's fruit basket was always missing a pair of firm plums but I can't blame him this time. I don't think you should go either."

"I'll be safe. You know how fortified that place is. Most of the fortress is completely under the sea bed."

"Alright, but don't take unnecessary chances. If you see anything that isn't just monsters, you contact the Adventure Society. Immediately."

"You mean like a fish?"

"Baseph, look at my face."

"Yes, dear."

"How well do you think charm is going to work on me right now?"

"Sorry, dear. It won't be that bad, will it? I've heard they're expecting activity from the Builder but they're saying it'll be fine."

"Of course they're telling people that," Liara said. "They don't want to cause a panic. I can't tell you specifics, Bas, but it will not be fine."

"Alright, Lee. I still have the signal stone you gave me, even if everything else fails."

"If everything else fails, you'll be stuck in a hole at the bottom of the sea. I love that you think I'll somehow be able to save you from that but we all have limits. I'm serious, Baseph. Anything strange, you send word to the Adventure Society. Even if you're almost sure it's nothing."

"Alright," he said with a smile. "I'm lucky to have a wife that cares about me so much." He caught her up in an embrace.

"Oh, and Vesper's inside."

"What's she doing here?" Liara wondered.

"Since when did Ves need a reason to come see you?" Baseph asked. "Did something happen?"

"Yes. There's a monster surge on."

"Dear, this is your sixth surge. I've never seen you like this."

"This isn't just another monster surge," she said.

"The Builder cult has been running around for years."

"Not like this," she said. "Promise me you'll be careful."

"I'm pretty sure I just did."

"Bas, you have to promise me."

"Alright," he said. "I promise."

Liara found Vesper in the parlour, plundering the drinks cabinet.

"Hello, Lee. It's been a little while. Want one?"

"Sure," Liara said as she flopped onto a couch. "Things have been rather busy, which makes me wonder what you're doing here. Not that you aren't welcome at any time."

Vesper walked over from the cabinet, handed Liara a glass and sat down next to her.

"You do look exhausted," Vesper said. "Did you see Bas on the way out?"

Liara nodded as she sipped at her drink. It made her eyes shoot wide open.

"Yes, I'm not looking to get *that* relaxed. Can you even drink this at silver-rank without it killing you?"

"Sorry," Vesper said. "Poison resistance, you know? It has to be the hard stuff."

"That's not hard; that's boat cleaner. Why are you here, Ves? I need sleep."

"I need your help with something delicate. It's about the family and it needs to stay as quiet as possible."

"What are you after?"

"I want you to pull the records of an Adventure Society member without anyone knowing about it."

"I can't do that if it's anyone sensitive. What's the name?"

"Jason Asano."

Liara blinked.

"I knew I recognised that name," she said. "Where do I know it from? It's been bothering me."

"You know about Asano?"

“He was assessed for potential cult affiliation,” Liara said. “Where did I hear that name from?”

“Zara,” Vesper said with a grimace.

“Zara? When would...?”

Liara took a folder from the dimensional pouch at her waist, set aside a picture of Jason from the folder and started flicking through papers inside. Vesper picked up the picture which showed Jason with an idiotic grin, holding up a sandwich.

“Why are you carrying Asano’s file around with you?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Is that the only picture you have?”

“It was the one the Magic Society had on file,” Liara said, still flicking through pages. “His abilities make him hard to track or record images of. You and Zara went off to the far side of nowhere and met Emir Bahadir. Was that place called Greenstone?”

“Yes,” Vesper confirmed.

“And then Zara came back and...”

“Yes.”

“And it was Asano?”

“Yes.”

“Did they really...?”

“No.”

“And now he’s alive again.”

“Which is why I’m here.”

“Well,” Liara said. “That’s a mess.”

She took another sip of boat cleaner.

“Is Asano making trouble?” she asked.

“Not yet. I only knew he was here because Aunt Pelli contacted me. He’s set up in a house on Arnote. The cloud house Zara failed to win because Bahadir rigged the contest.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Liara said, snapping the folder shut. “The more you dig into our Mr Asano, the more interesting nuggets fall out.”

“Can I see that?” Vesper asked, reaching for the folder.

“No,” Liara said. “The Builder response unit has access to Builder-related files that don’t appear in general Magic Society and Adventure Society records.”

“Lee, it’s me. And it’s about the family.”

“Being royalty means we should be more fastidious about the rules, Vesper, not less. We have to be examples.”

Vesper groaned.

"Lee, did you put the fun essence on the restricted list?"

"There's no such thing as a fun essence."

"Clearly. Maybe I should kill him after all. If anyone finds out, it would buy us another couple of years with a second period of formal mourning. I just need to make sure it looks like an accident. Or a monster. There is a monster surge happening. One more death won't be suspicious."

"Like your apparent desire to kill this man off, what Zara did is a violation of decency," Liara said. "You can't just pretend you secretly agreed to marry someone who is now conveniently dead to dodge a political marriage. Also, killing him would be a bad idea."

"I know. He's running around with Roland Remore's grandson. It's why I'll have to be careful."

"Please stop talking about murdering people."

"I'm not going to murder anyone," Vesper said. "I'll have him murdered. We have people for that, right? What about the Order of the Reaper? They're back, now."

"You stay away from them."

"You know something I don't?"

"I know a lot of things you don't, Vesper. Including morals, apparently. You shouldn't try killing Asano anyway. He probably won't stay dead."

"You know how he came back?"

"No, but I saw his certification from the church of Death and it said he's died four times. So far. It actually said so far on the certification. I've never seen that before."

"Four? You should ask the church of Death what's going on there."

"They never reveal details of resurrection, believe me. Especially since they announced that it would be harder a few years ago."

"Wasn't that right about the time Asano died?"

"He didn't have anything to do with that. He might have his secrets but he's hardly worth the gods changing the rules of magic over."

"Did you ask Asano how he came back?"

"All he would say is that coming back from the dead is kind of his thing. Once I saw his certification, that turned out to be not quite as facetious as I first thought."

"Zara's formal mourning period is almost up," Vesper said. "The timing of his arrival is suspicious."

"As I said: the boy has secrets," Liara conceded.

"Which are?"

"I don't know, Vesper. That's what makes them secret."

"Lee, this matters. This is not the time to provoke House Irios or to give them any more leverage than they already have. Zara's little lie could turn into big politics. We need to know Asano's intentions before we decide what to do with him."

"Then I recommend you talk to Aunt Zila. She is here for the surge, yes?"

"I've heard yes, although I haven't seen her."

"Then I suggest you change that and hope she's willing to listen."

Jason looked happily at the row of barbecues set up in front of his cloud house.

"I think you might need some more," Argy said, standing next to him.

"Argy, how many people did you invite?"

"About this many grills again should do it."

Jason looked at Argy, then back to the barbecues.

"I'm going to need more food."

An hour later, Jason was unloading more tables, more barbecues and a couple of spit roasters from his storage space, with Argy helping him set up. Farrah and Rufus came out of the cloud house to look everything over.

"Is this a barbecue or a festival?" Rufus asked.

"Good thing there's a lot of nice, open grass," Jason said. "Views are nice, too. This is going to be great."

"Yep," Farrah agreed. "Everybody is going to Wang Chung tonight."

Rufus turned from Farrah to Jason.

"What does your world do to people?"

"Rufus, you need to get over it," Jason said. "Farrah has joined the church of Airwolf and there's nothing you can do about it."

"Just to be clear," Farrah said, "I have absolutely not joined the church of Airwolf."

"It was the fourth season, wasn't it? The reused footage wasn't that bad."

"It was not the reused footage."

"You're more of a Greatest American Hero girl. I can get behind that."

"I am, actually, yeah."

"I hope the others find us soon," Rufus said. "I can't take being outnumbered like this."

"Oh, did you get in touch with your parents?" Jason asked Farrah.

"No," Farrah said. "The water link chambers are booked solid. The Adventure Society said they'd be notified along with our teams."

"That's good," Jason said. "We need to get you to them as soon as we're done in Rimaros."

"You should try the church of Death again," Rufus said. "I was so caught up in seeing you that day that I didn't think while you were there. They won't be as busy as the Adventure Society. They may be willing to pass along word of your resurrection without it getting lost in the monster surge shuffle."

"That's a great idea," Jason said.

"Tomorrow," Farrah said. "Tonight we're having a barbie."

"I am not liking how alike you two are starting to sound," Rufus said.

"We know, Rufus," Jason said. "You've mentioned."

"It's time to add a new rule to the drinking game," Farrah said. "I can't wait to tell Gary."

She called out to Argy, still moving picnic tables.

"Hey, Argy. Did you know Rufus' family runs a school?"

"Yeah," Argy called back. "He mentioned it to me yesterday."

Jason and Farrah erupted with laughter.

Chapter 478

A Story of War

Jason's barbecue was in full swing, with people crowded along the cliff top and kids splashing in the river, letting it carry them into the magic barrier that stopped them from going over the waterfall and bounced them back. Jason had a steak sandwich in one hand and a drink in a hollowed-out coconut in the other.

"This is nice," Rufus said as he, Jason and Farrah wandered about, meeting the locals. "Tomorrow is the Adventure Society and work, so it's good to relax and go in fresh. It's a monster surge, so things are going to be hectic."

Jason and Farrah, who had been through proto-spaces and monster waves, shared a look. Compared to those, a monster surge was relaxing. The surge was on a much grander scale than the localised events the pair had been through but the individual experience was much less intense.

"I have to say," Jason said, "silver-rank senses are great for cooking. Having enhanced taste really helps get a handle on new ingredients. Speaking of which..."

He waved at a local and wandered over, a woman of around thirty with no magic in her aura.

"Gwendi, you are an absolute princess," Jason said. "That sauce recipe... I have no words."

"Which is quite something, believe me," Rufus added.

"It's always been a favourite," Gwendi said. "Did Mitras and Gelli say hello?"

"I got a wave as they ran for the river," Jason said with a chuckle and Gwendi shook her head.

"No manners, those two. Oh, Jasil and Mr Walsh were looking for you as well."

"I'm sure I'll bump into them," Jason said.

Rufus contemplated Jason as they continued to circulate.

"How do you know so many of these people already?" he asked.

"All this didn't just happen, you know," Jason said, waved his arm broadly at the picnic tables, grills, chairs, kegs of booze and everything else. "You think I had time to do this much cooking? Look at that salad table. Little communities like this; they're great at coming together. Nicest people you'll ever meet."

The afternoon turned to evening with a glorious sunset descending past the western hills. Rather than put out glow stones, Jason conjured his cloak which looked a bit silly over his floral shirt and shorts, even with the hood pushed back. Motes of starlight

emerged from his cloak and drifted over the area, adding to the starlight from the sky overhead.

"Show off," Rufus accused him.

"Every time," Jason told him with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Somewhere along the way, I forgot that magic wasn't all misery, danger and death. It's good to be home."

Jason dodged off to say hello to yet more locals, plastering on a smile as he waved at them. Rufus watched him go with concern.

"How bad was it really?" he asked Farrah softly.

"He wanted to bring his family with him," she said. "They didn't come because they were scared of him."

"Because of the way his abilities are?"

"No. Just make sure Gary doesn't make any jokes about evil powers, alright?"

Jason immediately got along with the local gold-ranker, Warwick Warnock. Despite having the name of a mid-tier supervillain he was friendly and humble, heavily dialling down his aura so as to not make anyone uncomfortable.

While everyone with an aura followed the etiquette of keeping it restrained, there were different ways of going about it. There were ways of holding back power while still making sure people knew it was there. Warnock, kept his locked away tight, just as Jason had since his efforts at an aura disguise went awry with the Adventure Society official they had met on Jason's yacht.

Jason sensed three more gold-rank auras approaching, one of which belonged to Pelli, the mayor. He quietly vanished into the shadows, leaving his sparkling lights behind and met them before they reached the gathering.

Pelli was walking up the path from town with two more celestines. They both had emerald hair and matching eyes, neither with monster cores evident in their auras. Looking at them, especially the man, Jason noticed a number of incongruities. There was something odd about the way they carried themselves and how their auras were a little too perfect, even for gold rank. It reminded him of Dawn when she was stuck below her actual diamond rank.

His suspicions were all but confirmed when he sensed the slightest whiff of the woman's aura brushing over his own before vanishing from his senses again. It did not reveal a diamond-rank power but he was certain they were reading his aura all but unnoticed, despite his power and control. Jason knew he could not shut out a sufficiently

determined and powerful gold-ranker but he doubted that even the strongest could plumb the depths of his aura unnoticed. That would take a diamond-ranker.

Shade emerged from Jason's shadow, with three hands each holding out a drink for the new visitors.

"Shadow of the Reaper?" the man asked as he took the offered drink.

"Indeed, sir. My name is Shade."

"Are you attached to the Order of the Reaper?"

"Previously, sir. I am satisfied that my service to that organisation has been sufficient and I have quite vehemently moved on."

"They left him in a hole under a lake for half a millennium," Jason said. "As you're no doubt aware, the more politically ambitious faction threw the rest under the bus. Oh, a bus is—"

"I know what a bus is, Mr Asano," the man said. "I should have been more fastidious with my aura and body language, I see."

"I know that story," Jason said. "You have me at a disadvantage, sir, which I can see becoming an unfortunate theme."

Jason then turned to Pelli.

"You do realise that this was meant to be a low-key gathering, Ms Rimaros? Or is it Mrs Rimaros?"

"It is Pelli, thank you, young man. This is Zila and—"

"Soramir," the man said.

"Oh," Jason said, looking at Soramir. One of the things Jason discovered in the last few days was that in the local culture, palindromic first and last names were assigned in adulthood rather than at birth and denoted important members of a given family. It was most common in small families where it might be a prominent adventurer or high-ranking civic official. The more prominent the family, the less common the practice.

"Are you sure you should have told him that?" Pelli asked.

"We've already been careless," Soramir told her, "which has made our intentions and our rudeness plain. We should at least refrain from compounding our discourtesy."

"Mate," Jason said, "the last diamond-ranker I met killed me, so my standards of courtesy operate on bit of a different curve. Also, I've been known to be a bit rude myself, from time to time, so no worries. It's lovely to meet you both. Let's all go take a sausage in the mouth."

In the dark of night, everyone had gone home. Shade was picking up rubbish while Jason was cleaning the barbecues. Rufus and Farrah had offered to help but Jason told them not to, knowing that he needed to be alone. One of Shade's bodies was holding up a dirty hotplate while Jason applied an alchemical cleanser and started scrubbing.

"Why," he asked the empty air. "I'm just some guy."

"We both know that isn't true," Soramir said, suddenly next to Jason. "I sensed your arrival in this world several days ago. I've seen the things lurking inside you and even I don't know what all of them are. Your familiars alone are terrifying."

Still scrubbing a hotplate, Jason looked sideways at Soramir. The emerald hair and eyes the man had shown at the party had returned to their natural blue.

"I'm no threat to you," Jason said. "I'm no threat to your family. What do you care about me?"

"You're angry."

"OH, YOU THINK?"

Jason snatched the hotplate from Shade and flung it off the cliff. It struck the invisible barrier and bounced back, landing on the grass as Jason wheeled on the diamond-ranker.

"I was meant to be done with high-rankers," he snarled. "You have enough of your own to play with here. Why bother me?"

"My family has done you a disservice, Mr Asano. Brought you into something you neither asked for nor deserve. Because of that, you are a threat to us. Not a grave one, perhaps, but potentially an embarrassing one."

Jason closed his eyes, getting himself under control. For all his rage, his aura hadn't so much as twitched. After it had inadvertently spooked his family, Jason had resolved to never let it out of his control again, whatever his emotional state. Soramir was one of the few that could see right through him, however, seeing the pain and rage burning his insides like a furnace.

"I assume this is something to do with Zara," Jason asked in a calm, soft voice.

"Yes. I would not normally involve myself in the affairs of the family like this but one of our descendants came to us because the family needed to take your measure. This is not such an easy thing to do."

"Take my measure. You mean pry out my secrets."

"I do. I was curious when the person my family wished to investigate was the same one who arrived in this world in such spectacular fashion. You were lucky to land in that storm or I wouldn't have been the only one to take notice."

"That doesn't seem to matter anymore, does it?"

“I suppose not. You were meant to think we were just another pair of gold rankers.”

“Just another pair of gold rankers,” Jason said in a muttered echo, running a hand over his exasperated face before meeting Soramir’s eyes again. “I’m a silver-ranker. Gold rankers shouldn’t know my name, let alone you. How long until one of you kills me in a way that sticks?”

“You’re still here. That says something.”

“I’ve got something to say too, but I won’t. It wouldn’t be diplomatic.”

Jason gestured at Shade, who had retrieved the hotplate, and started cleaning off the dirt it picked up after being thrown.

“I’ve been dead and gone and you aren’t slapping me around,” Jason said, calm once more. “That means whatever problems you’re having aren’t from something I did. What did Zara do, and how bad is this for me?”

“Are you familiar with the practice of political marriage?”

“The basic concept, sure.”

“Zara was matched with a formidable young man from a very powerful and important family. Their union would have created political stability leading into the monster surge which we now face.”

“Made all the worse by the Builder using it to jump in.”

“You jumped in as well.”

“All I’m invading is the local crystal wash supply. I’m not that hard to deal with.”

“Your soul says otherwise, Mr Asano. It tells a story of war.”

Jason washed off the hotplate and set it back onto the barbecue while Shade pulled out the next one.

“So,” Jason said. “What did she do to mess up this marriage arrangement? More importantly, what does that have to do with me?”

“In our culture, it is common to enter a two-year period of formal mourning after the loss of a spouse. Or prospective spouse.”

Jason’s hand stopped scrubbing.

“She didn’t.”

“I’m afraid she did. Too publicly for the family to stop or rescind without making the political mess she made even worse. Which, of course, was her intention.”

“That is not an acceptable thing to do,” Jason said and went back to scrubbing.

“No,” Soramir agreed. “It is not.”

“A little flirting and a plate of gem berry milk nut squares do not constitute a proposal.”

“I’ve seen cultures where that could be argued, but I take your point.”

Jason let out a laugh that sounded like a sob as it trailed off and he hung his head.

"It wasn't meant to be like this," he muttered.

"This is an issue that needs to be resolved," Soramir said. "If we had realised what had happened before you registered with the Adventure Society here, we could have sent you away quietly without anything coming of it."

"You can still do that," Jason said. "You have the power to get me out of here, Adventure Society be damned."

"Your absence is no longer enough. Even gone, it will only be a matter of time before your resurrection is noticed. Trying to cover it up now would only draw attention to it."

"Too many fingers in the Adventure Society pie?"

"Just so."

"What, then?"

"For now, continue as you have been. Be an overlooked adventurer. There is a grace period before you will be discovered by others in which the family will formulate a response. Pelli and Liara Rimaros will be your contact points going forward. The family will likely need your cooperation for whatever comes after."

"And what do I get for my cooperation?"

"I'm certain they can compensate you to your satisfaction."

"I'm not."

"I'm not here to negotiate, Mr Asano."

"Neither am I. I'm here to clean barbecues, so pitch in or sod off."

"This is not going well, is it?"

"I used to be better at hiding my emotions," Jason said. "I guess they used to be smaller. Not that there's any hiding from you."

"What do you want, Mr Asano?"

"You won't send me away?"

"It's too late for that."

"Then bring my team to me. They're in Vitesse. Rufus and Farrah's teammate, too. And Farrah's parents"

"That is manageable, although it will have to be after everything has come out. If you get special treatment before then, your anonymity will not hold. What else?"

"All I want is to meet my friends and be left alone. I don't want anything else from you or your family."

Chapter 479

Any Help They Can Get

Farrah looked at Jason with concern as they sat around a table with Rufus, eating the breakfast Jason had just cooked. After leaving his own world, Jason had immediately undergone a shift in temperament. The dark clouds that had accumulated over the past few years had finally parted, only for their late-night visitor to summon them back. Jason was sitting sullenly, idly poking at a fried sausage with his fork.

"I never met this Hurricane Princess," Farrah muttered, "but I might just have to slap her into the goddamned ocean."

"Jason, you just need to play along and ride this out," Rufus said. "From what you told us last night, they aren't trying to put you in a tough spot. If anything, they want you extricated from the situation as quickly as possible. You should let them do that."

"Maybe," Jason said. "I don't like putting my trust in powerful people whose objectives aren't the same as mine."

"But they are," Rufus told him. "You both want you out of this situation."

Jason tossed his fork down on the table and turned on Rufus.

"No, Rufus, that isn't what they want. They want to resolve the political mess their princess has stirred up by doing whatever gets them the most and costs them the least. Yes, that might mean getting me out of town as quickly and quietly as possible but it looks like that ship has sailed. Even if it hasn't, what if the best way to get me out of town is to kill me, burn me and sprinkle my ashes across the ocean? What if they decide to lean in and marry me off to their damn princess? Captain Diamond Pants took a rummage through my soul and seemed to like what he saw, so I'm not ruling that out!"

Jason was half out of his seat as he ran out of steam and fell back into the chair, his shoulders slumping. He ran both hands over his tired face.

"I'm sorry, Rufus," he said. "You didn't deserve that."

Jason got up and left the room.

"See?" Farrah said to Rufus as she got up to follow Jason out. She found him on the upper balcony of the cloud house, dangling his legs over the side as his head rested on the railing. She sat down and joined him but didn't say anything, waiting for him to talk. It took a while.

"My first instinct was to do something a little drastic," Jason said finally. "To resolve this my own way, on my own terms. But every time I do that, the solution has always caused more problems and it's never me that ends up paying the price."

“What kind of solution were you thinking of?”

“Writing a song called ‘I’m Jason Asano and I love Prostitutes,’ getting blind drunk and then painting the lyrics on the market boulevard in giant letters until someone arrests me.”

She laughed.

“Disgrace yourself out of eligibility?” she asked. “I’m afraid you’re underestimating the degeneracy of the aristocratic class. That’s the kind of thing they brush under the rug all the time. They have their own rules for what is and isn’t acceptable and there aren’t many that you’re qualified to break.”

“I don’t have a noble lineage to disgrace?”

“Exactly. There’s an expectation that adventurers, even ones raised to the nobility, will have a certain lack of decorum. There’s only two real ways for someone like you to become truly untouchable. One is to be a pathetic adventurer.”

“Aren’t I already a dirty generalist?”

“That a prejudice of fools. If you want to write yourself off, you need to tank some missions, badly and very visibly. Which you aren’t going to do.”

“No,” Jason said. “I’m not going to get out from under the bus by throwing the people I’m meant to be protecting under it. That diamond-ranker knew what a bus was, by the way. I’m pretty sure that he’s done some dimensional travel.”

“Your world?”

“I doubt it. Mine isn’t the most advanced one out there and I doubt we were the only ones to invent the bus. Shade based most of his vehicle forms on some other world with better tech.”

“You think the diamond-ranker knows about Dawn?”

“Maybe. We didn’t have a lot of time to discuss exactly what she’d be doing here.”

“At least she didn’t tell people about your role in... probably shouldn’t say. Who knows if a diamond-ranker is listening?”

“It should be fine,” Jason said. “Unless they’re just *listening* listening, rather than using some kind of observation power. The balcony is still part of my spirit domain and I’m not sure if even gods can peek at us here.”

“Really?”

“Can’t be sure, but maybe.”

“Maybe is a big enough deal as it is. Wouldn’t that make this house a throbbing great dead spot in the senses of those diamond-rankers?”

“Yep.”

“There was no real chance of dodging their attention, was there?”

“Nope. I was hoping they just wouldn’t care because I’m a silver-ranker. Then Princess Pain-in-the-Arse buggered that right up. You said there was something else I could do to turn myself into Mr Wrong?”

“Act above your station. This one is more in your area and you’re already bumping into royalty.”

“No,” Jason said. “If I do that, then whatever inclination the royal family have to shield me from this evaporates and I still have no sense of the players and agendas involved. What happens when the family of whoever Zara was supposed to marry decides that I’m an intolerable stain on the reputation of their house? What if the jilted fiancé decides the best way to hurt me is to send a couple of gold-rank uncles looking for you? They won’t be stupid enough to touch Rufus, but it’ll be open season on you and me.”

“Then what’s our move?”

“What Rufus said. We play the game, for now. We need to learn more and keep an eye out for opportunities to get some control. It’s boldness to act in the right moment and recklessness to act in the wrong one. I need to stop being the latter and aim for the former.”

“I’m sorry we ended up waist-deep all over again.”

Jason flashed her a tired but genuine grin.

“At least it’s not neck-deep. No one’s asked me to save the world yet.”

He pulled his legs in from the railing and hopped lightly to his feet.

“As much of a pain as all this is,” he said, “it’s just noise and nonsense. I say we let the politicians play politics while we just go be adventurers. At least for now.”

Farrah also got to her feet.

“I hate that they’re making you run around alone,” she said. “You should be with us.”

“You’re happy with the guild they’ve attached you to?”

“It’s a sister guild to our own. They help us when our members are in this part of the world and we do the same when they’re in ours. They’ll be good to us. It’s you I’m worried about.”

“You don’t need to worry,” Jason assured her. “It’s me. What could possibly go wrong?”

“You’re really going to tempt fate like that?”

“Fate tempted me first. If I can fight the Builder, I can bloody well fight her.”

“You realise there’s no actual god of fate, right? It’s just a metaphor.”

“Good, because I’m pretty sure I couldn’t actually fight her.”

Jason's portal arch opened in the teleportation square of the Adventure Society campus, which was still thronging with people. Jason, Farrah and Rufus made their way to the jobs hall that had as many people swarming it as had surrounded the administration building a couple of days before.

"Maybe we shouldn't have taken those days to relax before coming here," Rufus said. "I'm not feeling very relaxed all of a sudden."

"I don't think there was any dodging this particular bullet," Jason said.

"What's a bullet?" Rufus asked.

"It's like an arrow but you don't need magic to make it not crap," Jason said.

"Let's just get in there," Farrah said. "The longer we put it off, the more people wind up in front of us."

Once they got far enough into the crowd to join actual queues, Jason was separated from Rufus and Farrah. They got into the fast-moving line of guild members and associates while Jason was lumped in with the general populace. He at least got to skip ahead of the bronze and iron-rankers, so the wait was frustrating but not interminable.

There was a lot of bravado on display, from peacocking auras to pride erupting into childish scuffles. The overworked Adventure Society officials were herding the adventurers like overworked school teachers, only stepping in when the scraps got out of hand. There seemed to be an unofficial rule that so long as no one pulled out powers, they'd be left to settle their differences.

Unsurprisingly, the jobs hall was much larger than the one in Greenstone, spread out over four five-storey buildings. Each one had a large leaderboard set up showing the top hundred contributors by action quota. Inside, the normal contract posting boards had been removed and replaced with tables where officials were sat, handing out contracts and sending people off as quickly as they could. Each table had a thick book of contracts that was magically linked to a central archive, marking off which adventurer was assigned which task.

Jason was sent to the fourth floor of the second building, where he found himself sitting before a harried-looking official who looked more exhausted than Jason had ever seen another essence user. He'd seen people come out of monster waves looking fresher.

"Papers," the man said and Jason handed them over. The man checked them against his records, and then looked up at Jason.

"You've been demarcated for resource and supply delivery contracts."

“That’s my understanding,” Jason confirmed.

“You confident going out alone?”

“It’s the monster surge. We do the job and we don’t get picky about it.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised. You’ll only be assigned low-priority contracts because you’re only a one star.”

“That’s fine,” Jason said. “I imagine those people are tired of being overlooked and would welcome any help they can get.”

“Just remember that that help means delivering supplies, not killing monsters. Even if you try it and don’t die, they won’t count towards your action quota or leaderboard status. Speaking of which, normal rewards are suspended and will instead be handed out weekly, based on the aforementioned leaderboard status. Is that understood?”

“Seems clear enough,” Jason said. “How many contracts can I take at once?”

“You looking to clear your weekly quota in a couple of days?”

“I figured it would be easier if I could do some kind of circuit rather than soak up time coming back here over and over. I don’t much care about the quota.”

“Uh-huh. I don’t care if you’re leaderboard-chasing or whatever. Just don’t get yourself killed or half-ass the jobs chasing points.”

“I’ll do my best.”

The official went through his book and eventually assigned Jason four contracts. He did this by scrawling Jason’s name on a page and then plucking it from the book, where it was magically reconstituted. He laid the pages out in front of Jason.

“You should be able to do these at a run,” he said. “Do them in the order I’ve laid out for the best efficiency. You’ll need to pick up the supplies here in the city first; it’ll mostly be from the supply depots that have been set up. Addresses are on the contracts. Use your membership badge to confirm that you’ve accepted.”

Jason took out his silver badge with its single star and touched it to the first contract.

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- **Point of interest: [Livaros Supply Depot #3] has been added to [Tactical Map].**
 - **Point of interest: [Mecilados Fortress Town] has been added to [Tactical Map].**
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“Alright,” Jason said. “I can work with this.”

The Storm Kingdom held within its territories the coastal regions of the continents that bordered the Sea of Storms. One of the kingdom's most outlying fortress towns was located in the northeast corner of the southern mainland.

The coastal fort was caught up in a magical storm sweeping in from the sea, battering against the magical dome that capped the high walls of the fort. Normally the barrier was invisible but the magically-infused wind and rain made it plain to see, even as anything beyond it was obscured.

As the storm raged, monsters emerged from the sea. Storm shabs were large abominations with shark bodies and crab legs, all covered in hard shell. More dangerous than the weaker shab variants, these silver-rank monsters fired arcs of lightning from protrusions on their shells.

The typical approach of these monsters was to begin with electricity attacks, paralysing or killing their victims outright before them devouring them, alive or dead. With all their potential victims were behind secure walls, however, the monsters had to do things differently.

More intelligent than lower-rank shabs, the monsters had waited for all of their number to emerge from the ocean before approaching the fort. Dozens of the shabs approached at the fort's weakest point, which was the main gates, then began their siege together. Rather than the weak but quick blasts of electricity they used on their victims, they took the time to build up their magic. When they had gathered as much as they could, they unleashed it in powerful bolts of lightning that blasted the magically reinforced gates. Despite all that power, the gates held.

The fort town was far from defenceless. Ritual circles became visible on the walls, sending out large bolts of fire and conjured force spears in retaliation, while essence users fired spells and ranged special attacks from the battlements, safe behind the barrier dome. Many of the essence users without ranged attacks fed their mana into turrets that were essentially oversized magic wands, blasting out magic from giant crystal tips.

No essence users went out to face the enemies. These were not adventurers and would not survive diving into a sea of monsters. While the adventurers of the Sea of Storms might be powerful, these were craftspeople, merchants and minor nobility. Raised on monster cores, they were no more capable in battle than the aristocracy of Greenstone.

The fort's problem was not one of defences but resources as the protections incorporated into the walls consumed a lot of magic. While portions of that could be provided by essence users feeding in their own mana, not all of it could. Spirit coins and other sources of magic power were consumed not just to repel the attacks but to shield the fortress town from the power of the storm.

The town had been promised additional mana accumulators that could concentrate ambient magic, along with new storm accumulators to harness the power of the storms. The outlying fort had been a low priority in a busy time, so those supplies had yet to arrive.

This group of shabs weren't an existential threat to the fort, which would be able to hold them off. The danger was that killing the resilient monsters was consuming more and more of the fort's dwindling resources. These monsters would not breach the fortress town but their attack meant that the next group just might.

The commander of the fort was Merrick Harlowe, a minor local lord and silver-rank core user. He watched unhappily from the walls while the defenders cheered as the town's defences took down the first shab. All he saw in the dead monster was the expenditure it had taken to kill it.

Harlowe's head came up as he saw a flash of golden light, distinct from the electric arcs thrown out by the monsters. It was hard to see through the storm slapping against the dome barrier but he saw something moving out amongst the monsters. There were more flashes of gold and pain was added to the high-pitched shrieks of the monsters, loud enough to be heard over the storm.

The attacks against the fort slowed and then stopped as the monsters started shooting lightning at something in their midst. The storm was picking up and the defenders lost sight of the monsters altogether, seeing only the flashes of the lightning and the bursts of gold light amongst them.

The lord ordered the defences to be stilled, preserving their resources. Even if whatever was out there didn't kill the monsters, there was a good chance it would drive them off. He also didn't want to harm whoever or whatever had come to their aid, given that it was almost certainly an adventurer. Over time, the lightning amidst the monsters diminished and the screams of the monsters fell away. The gold flashes stopped and only the sound of the storm remained.

A woman came close enough to the gates to be seen through the driving rain. She was a human with dark skin, her white hair and white clothes drenched in monster blood and rainwater. She looked exhausted, a bloody but beautiful white sword dangling from one hand.

"What are you waiting for?" the lord bellowed. "Open the gates."

Chapter 480

Supplies

Supply depot number three was in the same warehouse district where Jason had carried out his big trade, not far from the main markets of Livaros. He portalled to the destination square in the market and made his way on a black horse with glowing white mane and hooves.

There were plenty of different means of transport in the city, from floating platforms to flying carriages to adventurers riding familiars, like Jason. One of the things Jason had learned was that permits were required for air travel in the city, so he stayed on the ground.

Riding past the warehouse belonging to Lord Casowich, Jason thought back to his expensive deal. He had no idea how much attention it had garnered but he now had the royal family looking squarely at him. He hoped the diamond-rank coin and all the crystal wash drew attention from the other materials he acquired as part of the deal. Now more than when he conceived it on the journey between worlds, his personal project could prove important should he need to flee the Storm Kingdom.

The supply depot was a city block worth of warehouses commandeered as a distribution centre for critical resources. Carts and wagons were rolling in or out the gates or taking to the air and flying away. It looked like everything was going to crash together any moment but Jason knew there was some pattern to the chaos as everyone and everything managed to careen around each other with no more incident than some angry shouts.

Jason had Shade dissolve his horse form, the familiar vanishing back into Jason's shadow as Jason observed the activity. Standing out of the way, outside the depot yards, he closed his eyes and used his other senses to track the comings of the depot. He felt there was something to learn from the seemingly chaotic yet somehow organised tumult of activity and entered an almost meditative state as he studied it for several minutes.

"You lost, friend?"

One of the depot workers had noticed Jason and come to see if he was alright. Jason's eyes snapped open and he gave the man a friendly smile.

"No, I'm fine, thank you."

Jason set off into the depot. Especially after having studied the patterns by which the place operated, Jason found his aura manipulation skills extremely handy for navigating. The same skills he could use to blend into a crowd let him subconsciously alert rushing

depot workers to his presence, while their focus allowed him to read their intentions from their auras. Despite moving at a measured pace as people rushed around him, Jason was always where the workers weren't in any given moment, despite neither himself nor the people around him needing to move from each other's way. Like a languid fish swimming beneath a boat, he passed through the depot unnoticed and unremarked.

Making his way into a warehouse, he saw essence users employing their powers to load supplies to or from wagons and carts. He saw telekinesis, superhuman strength and even someone teleporting crates. In a corner of the warehouse, someone summoned a golem and directed it to start loading goods.

Jason's goal was a cluster of silver-rank auras with enough magical items on their persons that they had to be adventurers, although there were also core users amongst them. Most of them were smothering the magic items with their auras, a typical habit of stealth-focused adventurers, but that wasn't an obstacle to Jason's powerful senses.

Guild elites were too valuable to turn into delivery workers, so these were most likely disregarded adventurers like Jason. He wasn't sure about the core users, as they seemed more like ordinary people mixed in with actual adventurers, based on their mediocre aura control and lack of magic items.

Jason went through the warehouse to a small distribution area where the adventurers were gathered in several queues. They were waiting to be handed off goods for transport and it quickly became evident that they all had dimensional storage spaces. Jason joined the end of the shortest queue.

The adventurer in front of him was an elf with tawny, lightly-freckled skin. Her hair was cut short and practical, showing off a mix of autumn leaf colours. Like Jason, the beautification of silver rank had been immensely flattering without turning her into a Rufus or Sophie, who were absurdly attractive even at lower rank. There was a cute green frog with big eyes sitting on her shoulder.

She turned to give Jason an assessing glance as he approached.

"G'day," Jason said. "Is this where we pick up goods for transport contracts?"

"That's right," she said.

"Jason Asano," he said, offering his hand and she shook it.

"Autumn Leal," she introduced herself. Jason's eyes flicked back to her hair but he didn't say anything about it.

"Is everyone here a portal user?" he asked instead.

"Don't I wish," she said. "If you can portal, these contracts are worth way more contribution points. Most portal users are on rapid-response duty, so most of us just have

storage spaces and are here to be walking cargo holds. Some of us aren't even adventurers and do storage space transport for a living."

"I was wondering about the core users. You're an adventurer, though, with that gear."

Autumn had the typical load-out of a spellcaster. Her clothes were magically reinforced cloth, loose enough to be unrestrictive but not so much as Jason's preferred combat robes. The colours were brown and green; not exactly camouflage but they would blend well into the local wilderness areas. She had wands strapped to each thigh and he could sense enchanted amulets, bracelets and anklets hidden under her clothes. Her boots were magical and practical. Around her waist was the magically shielded potion belt that was the most obvious giveaway for adventurers. Many wealthy citizens carried them as well, but they usually chose ones that were lower in capacity and higher in fashion.

"What about you?" she asked, looking Jason up and down. He was wearing tan shorts, a floral shirt, sandals and a straw hat.

"What?" Jason asked. "Don't I look ready to spring into action?"

"If by action you mean a pitcher of ice tea, then sure."

"Oh, that's a good idea."

Jason plucked a coconut shell cup out of the air, fruit leaves and a straw sticking out from the top. He took a long sip, letting out a happy moan.

"Oh, that's the good stuff. You don't know where a bloke can get little paper umbrellas, do you?"

"You're one of those people that never takes things seriously, aren't you?"

"Things take me seriously," Jason said with a smile not quite as light-hearted as he intended. "I try not to encourage them."

He put his drink away and pointed at the front of the line they'd been inching closer to as they talked.

"I think you're about to be up."

She turned her head to glance at the person in front of her. He was casually tossing crates into a black void on the floor as depot workers brought them to him and a supervisor checked them off a list.

"You know," Autumn said, turning back to Jason, "you'll never catch the attention of a guild like this."

"I'm going to join a guild some friends are already in. It operates a long way from here, so I'm just looking to ride out the monster surge without getting killed or marrying a princess before I skip town."

"Marrying a princess."

“Yep.”

“You see that as a particular danger?”

“Admittedly, I’ve only done one of those things before, but you can never be too careful.”

“There is some easygoing charm happening here but I’m not sure it’s enough to lure any princesses in.”

“Fingers crossed,” Jason said, pointing to the front of the line once more. The man in front had just left and the supervisor was looking at her. The frog hopped off her shoulder, growing to the size of a Saint Bernard as it dropped to the ground. It opened its mouth and Autumn took out the contract manifest, which she handed to the supervisor. Despite having been inside a frog, the papers were dry and unwrinkled.

The supervisor went over the documents quickly before giving directions to his depot worker subordinates. Shortly after, pallets of supplies were arriving and the frog started whipping out its tongue to take them into its body.

“That’s an interesting familiar you’ve got there,” Jason said.

“Dimension frog,” Autumn said. “I may not have the rarest essences in the world but I was lucky enough to find this guy and that’s enough for me.”

She patted the frog affectionately on the back.

“You’re a good boy, aren’t you Neil?”

“That,” Jason said with a grin, “is a superb choice of name.”

The first depot was only Jason’s first stop before he was ready to leave the city. He had three more stops to pick up additional goods before he’d be ready to head out. The next stop was a second distribution centre, followed by a dock where he had to wait for the goods to be unloaded from a ship. The last pickup point was a temple.

Jason had heard things about the temples of Fertility, although he’d never seen one himself. Despite being a major deity, Fertility’s temples were always tucked away in the far reaches of any temple district. The reason for this was that their decorations leaned heavily on murals depicting the process of fertility in action.

The design of the temple was quite plain, fronted by a flat wall containing the main doors. Side walls moved back at forty-five-degree angles, allowing three walls of murals to be seen from the street. As Jason approached the temple he spotted a priest running off a trio of gawking teenage boys.

“Save it for the church of Lust you sweaty little mongrels!” he snarled after them as they fled, laughing loudly. Jason walked up to the priest, approaching with a casual wave.

“Uh, g’day?”

The priest turned to Jason with a smile, his anger evaporating like mist.

“Good day, sir. How can Fertility help you? Is it problems with your little man? We have pills that can solve that problem. For a modest donation, of course.”

“Hey, my eyes are up here, cobber,” Jason said as the priest stared at Jason’s shorts. “Why is that the first thing you assume?”

“It’s what most men come here for.”

“It’s not what I came for.”

“Don’t be so hasty, friend. If you’d like to add a little pep to your—”

“My little man’s pep is entirely adequate, thank you very much.”

The priest gave Jason a sympathetic look.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it? We can help with that you too. For a modest donation, of course. Naturally, you’ll be absolved of all parental responsibilities. And rights, of course. Our clergy have to come from somewhere.”

“You have prostitutes breeding little priests?”

“We’ll need to run you through some tests first, obviously. You don’t seem to be human, despite appearances...”

Jason held up his hands.

“Okay, mate, just stop. I’m an adventurer, here to pick up supplies for a delivery contract.”

“Well, why didn’t you say so?”

“Because you wouldn’t stop talking about my little man!”

“So, you do want the pills? There is a modest donation, of course...”

“There’s nothing wrong with my little man!”

Confines were tight in the fortress town of Carazela, with space at a premium both in the building and on the streets to accommodate all the people taking shelter. A woman emerged from the stone communal shower building into a narrow street. The blood and rain had been washed from her white hair and dark skin. She was wearing fresh clothes from her dimensional bag; simple pants, shirt and shoes. It was all made of high-quality white fabric with gold trim.

Merrick Harlowe had been waiting for her to come out. Merrick was only minor nobility from an outlying region, with less prestige than even a wealthy commoner in Rimaros but he was neither ignorant nor a fool. The woman might not have any markings on her outfit

but he had seen her sword and armour and he saw her clothes now. He knew the garb of Purity's faithful when it was right in front of him.

This left him in a difficult position. He should, by all accounts, press her on it. If she was a former member of the faith who had discarded the symbols but not the valuable clothes and tools, that was one thing. If her faith remained true, then she was an enemy.

Merrick could not afford to look at her that way. Not only had she come to their aid in a moment of need but she was unquestionably strong. The fort had men that could match her silver rank but they were not the equal of this demonstrably powerful woman. The fort's silver rankers were both core users; a mason and a farmer who rarely ever used their abilities for combat. Now that she was inside the walls, she could take the fort apart single-handed.

"My presence makes you uneasy," she said, her voice calm and strong. "I'll leave."

"No," Merrick said, holding up his hands. "Please. The storm still rages and you gave us desperately needed assistance. Without your timely intervention, our circumstances would have become far more dire."

"You exaggerate. Your walls are strong and high."

"But our supplies are low. Our mana and storm accumulators are burning out. Our spirit coin supply dwindles and our food is running short. Many people are sheltering here and we're running on a ragged edge. Your arrival could not have come at a more fortuitous time."

As he spoke, Merrick realised that he wasn't just spinning a tale. He didn't care what god she worshipped if it meant keeping his people safe.

"Please," he said. "We don't have much in the way of hospitality to offer, but allow me to show you what gratitude I can. My name is Merrick Harlowe, the local lord and commander of the militia here."

She gave him a smile that was like the sun coming out from behind a cloud.

"My name is Melody Jain. It's very nice to meet you, Merrick Harlowe."