

Chapter 521

A Lot More Steps

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“He can WHAT?” Humphrey yelled.

“Oh, calm down,” Sophie told him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Clive nodded to himself.

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

“Good luck, and come back alive.”

“We’ll do our best.”

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

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

“No.”

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

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

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

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

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

“I know.”

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

“I know.”

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

“Alright,” Jason said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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