

Chapter 924

A Thing That Makes the Car Work

Anna and Susan sat on a park bench. It was early evening, and parents from the surrounding houses were calling their kids in for dinner. A nearby picnic table had a blanket draped over it, with a mix of mechanical and magical tools laid out. A leonid was tinkering with what looked like a Rubik's cube, but with runes instead of colours on the sides. Anna had seen enough Leonids to mark him as a teenager, but he had the confidence of a professional as he worked.

A human woman walked over to stand by his table. She looked to be in her early twenties, but so did most of the population. An astounding number of Asano clan members were essence users, suggesting a staggering access to resources. Anna took a second look at the girl and her rank-polished features. It had been a lot of years, but she looked like—

“Emi,” the leonid said as she approached. “I told you that you should have let me look at these long ago. Your problem isn't the magic, it's the mechanics. The transitions aren't smooth enough, so when you switch configurations, it's causing wear on the... are you even listening?”

Emi had sensed Anna's attention and turned to look back at her observer. She narrowed her eyes for a moment, as if trying to recall an old memory. She nodded to Anna, then turned back to the leonid.

“Sorry, Gary, you were saying the transitions are causing wear?”

“Yeah. Who's that?”

Emi threw another glance Anna's way.

“Someone my uncle used to work with.”

“I thought all the outsiders were stuck in the mushroom farm.”

“Not all of them. Wait, mushroom farm? They're in the visitor dorms Uncle Jason made. That's practically a palace, not a farm.”

“Yeah, but it's still a place to keep them in the dark and feed them bullsh—”

“Just pack up and we'll go, Gary. Your mother told me to bring you home for dinner.”

“Are you and Vincent eating with us?”

“Yeah.”

Gary put his tools and blanket away in a large backpack and they wandered off.

“Is that Jason's niece?” Susan asked.

“Yes,” Anna said as they watched the pair walk away. “If the Asano clan’s isolation ends, there’s going to be a lot of attention on her.”

“And what about you? If you decide to become a part of all this, you’re going to be the clan’s diplomatic face to the world. Is that something you want?”

Anna leaned wearily into Susan’s shoulder.

“I don’t know where to even start considering it. Three days we’ve been going through it all. Three days of every new claim being crazier than the last. When you ask a guy if he thinks he’s a god, any answer but ‘no’ means he’s probably stockpiling weapons and trying to convince people to be sister wives.”

Susan laughed.

“How are you not blown away by all this?” Anna asked her. “I’ve been living in a world of magic my whole life and I don’t know how to take it. I can’t imagine what it’s like for you.”

“That’s the thing, love: this isn’t my first time.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like you said, you grew up with this. Your family have been Network insiders for generations. When you told me that magic was real, I thought it was some kind of prank. Then I thought you were crazy. Then you showed it to me, and I thought the world was crazy. Now, you finally know how I felt back then.”

“Okay, but the scale of it. How many times in the last three days did Asano say ‘I can show you once I’m there in person?’ Assuming that he isn’t lying — which is quite the assumption, given his claims — then we’re talking about a scope that dwarfs us. What is a country when he has his own solar system? A planet, when he’s rewriting the rules of the cosmos? If he’s lying about it all, that’s trouble, but trouble I can at least get my head around. If he’s telling the truth, then we’re nothing to him. He operates on a scale that makes everything we know a tiny speck of nothing.”

Susan nestled her head onto Anna’s shoulder.

“We’re not insignificant, love. Not you and me, and not the Earth. Not to him, or he wouldn’t have gone to all the trouble of bringing you here.”

“But doesn’t it make you feel small?”

Susan considered a moment before answering.

“From how he explained it,” she said, “all of these great magic bibbity bobs—”

“Great astral beings.”

“...are there to make the universe work. They’re the mechanisms by which everything works, right? Life, death, time, etc.”

“That’s how he explained it.”

“Okay,” Susan said. “Remember that road trip we took on the Great Ocean Road, right before we got married?”

“Sure. That was a good trip.”

“Remember the car? Your old MG?”

“Of course. I loved that car.”

“Yes, you did. Would you say that car was a significant part of the trip?”

“Absolutely. What does any of this have to do with Jason Asano fighting a magic bird that stops universes from breaking open?”

“Stick with me, love. Do you think that the concept of internal combustion was significant to our trip?”

“Uh, no.”

“Exactly. Internal combustion is extremely important to a petrol car, and that’s what we were driving, but it didn’t matter to us. On a larger scale, it was significant, but it didn’t matter to us at all. So, yes, if you’re looking at these great space jibber jobbers—”

“Great astral beings.”

“...then we are insignificant. But if you’re looking at us, they’re the insignificant ones. Just a thing that makes the car work.”

Anna looked at her wife, then drew her in for a lingering kiss.

“You are amazing, you know that?”

“Yes, but you could stand to say it more often.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want it to go to your head.”

Anna leaned back on the bench, feeling more relaxed than she had in a week.

“If Jason is really as powerful as he claims,” Susan said, “then he’s bending over backwards not to rub that power in everyone’s faces.”

“He had Rufus Remore fly across the planet to hold a meeting where he explained how powerful Jason is.”

“Did he? I wasn’t there for that. Did Rufus explain everything we’ve heard over the last few days? Or is that something he’s only telling you?”

Anna tapped her lips thoughtfully.

“No,” she realised. “Rufus as much as said Jason was coming back with a squad of gold-rank powerhouses. He made a few implications — how could he not, with Jason tied to the System — but nothing like what we’ve been hearing.”

She sat up straight, frowning as she gamed out Jason’s agenda.

“Jason is positioning himself as a power, but one the existing powers here can understand. Come to grips with. Enough that he’s someone they have to deal with, rather than exploit. If they genuinely believed that he was as powerful as he claims, I have no idea what would happen. The whole planet would go into crisis mode. Some very bad decisions would be made.”

She leaned back again.

“He doesn’t want to destroy the world just by arriving in it. That’s what he said. And if he’s that powerful, he probably would.”

“Then let’s hope he is,” Susan said.

“You don’t think it would be better if there wasn’t a demigod with a history of anger issues and recklessness descending upon the Earth?”

“I think that bringing you here, telling you everything, shows us his intentions, one way or another. If he’s being honest about possessing all that power, it shows us that he wants to use it responsibly. To seek out sound advice, act with care and avoid mistakes when he can. But if he’s not as all-powerful as he claims, and this is all a ruse...”

“Then he’s running a game, with me in the middle of it,” Anna finished.

“Yes. But even if he’s lying, he’s still going to have a lot of power. This whole city is something he made and can change on a whim. If he comes to earth with ill-intent, he can cause immeasurable damage.”

“Which do you think it is? Honesty or lies?”

“He’s a lot like you, you know?”

“Like me?”

“I remember back when you were running the Network branch in Sydney. Not coming home for days. Arriving furious when you did. Frustrated that the people who should have been shielding the world from magic were playing politics. Isn’t that what happened to him, the last time he was on Earth? Trying to do the right thing, only to be undermined by the ambitious?”

“I suppose it was. This is you saying that you think he’s being straight with us?”

“This is me saying that if he really is like you, things have a chance of turning out alright. And if he’s not, you need to be here anyway, to ameliorate the damage of whatever he’s really up to. We both know that you won’t walk away and leave it to be someone else’s problem.”

Anna and Susan found Jason in the kitchen of the guest house they had been assigned. He was wearing an apron with pink flowers on it. As they entered the kitchen, his back was to them as he managed several pots on the stove.

“Come and check this sauce,” he said without turning around. “I can’t taste anything with this body, so I can’t manage the salt levels on my own.”

Anna looked at him from under raised eyebrows, but Susan moved forward. She tasted the offering from the end of a wooden spoon.

“Ooh, that’s nice. But yes, a little more salt.”

“Were you listening to us talk?” Anna asked.

“One of the most important things about power,” he said as he turned back to the stove, “is knowing when not to use it. If you have a hammer, it’s easy to look at every situation as a nail. But sometimes force, no matter how precisely applied, will only make things worse.”

“You’re good at that,” Anna said.

“Cooking?”

“Implying you answered a question that you did, in fact, not.”

Jason turned his head just long enough to flash her an impish grin.

“I think you and I could have fun together, Anna. I do hope you accept my job offer.”

“I am leaning that way, but I want a better understanding of what I’m walking into.”

“That’s fair,” Jason said. “And you will be forced to make certain concessions.”

“Such as?”

“No more supermarket bread. I know you and I have talked about this a long time ago, but a little bird told me that you did not heed my advice.”

Anna turned a glare on Susan, who did a reasonable job of looking innocent.

“We don’t have supermarkets here at all,” Jason continued. “It’s more of a permanent farmers’ market situation, plus bakers, cheesemongers and the like. It’s not as convenient, I’ll grant you, but it helps foster a sense of community. I leave management of the clan to my grandmother, for the most part, but this, I insisted on. The food is free, though. The staples, at least. Rufus has to import his jellybeans himself.”

“I was more talking about some verification of the claims you’ve made about the power at your command. If what you’re saying is true, you must be a legendary figure in the other world.”

“Farrah has been throwing the word ‘mythic’ around. But Pallimustus doesn’t have the same media saturation and mass communication Earth does. The powerful people know who I am, but the population at large doesn’t. My team is a lot more famous than me.

There are a few places they know my name, but I can get away with using a fake one. There aren't news reports and online videos to plaster my face everywhere."

"Do they know, there? Just how vast the span of your power is? You claim that it extends beyond not just Earth or their planet, but the entire universe. Every universe."

"It's more of a potentially vast span, at least until my mortal power grows. I have limited ability to manipulate the System, although I do have some. Around my avatar and here in my domains. But I can't just use it like it's my personal toy. There are rules I need to adhere to. I spent fifteen years fighting to see them enforced, after all. That includes on me."

"I know that I can't test your immortality, or see this universe of yours."

"It's quite small, as universes go."

"I would at least like to see one of the astral spaces, where your power is stronger. To get a taste of its full scope."

"That's easy enough to manage. There are portals in the admin tower."

"Even with all that, though, this cosmos level power is hard to acknowledge."

"Vast cosmic power is the term. I used to have it on a t-shirt, although I think Emi has it now."

"The assumption is that the System is connected to you, but it could just be some cosmic force that finally reached Earth. You could be leveraging your early access to it to make us think you are in control of it."

A window appeared in front of her.

➤ [System Administrator] notification: I'm being as open as I can, Anna.

"Cute," she said.

He turned around from his cooking to look at her.

"Can I take it that you are at least provisionally accepting my offer?"

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Yes."

"Good. Step one, you eat. Step two, an astral space tour. Step three, we figure out what to do with the minders you brought with you. They've been getting increasingly cranky, despite their accommodations being quite luxurious."

Chapter 925

A Long Time Coming

“This,” Anna said, “is not a professional environment.”

“What are you talking about?” Jason asked.

Anna gestured at her wife who was just then entering the cabana having changed into her new swimsuit. She also had grilled meat on a stick and a drink with a little umbrella in it.

“What?” Susan asked.

“Your wife doesn’t think we should have this meeting at a water park,” Jason told her.

“Well, I think it’s a great idea. But you can’t properly enjoy it right? With that avatar body?”

“Sadly, no,” Jason said.

“Because your real body is in the other universe.”

“That’s not technically my real body either, but for practical purposes, yes.”

“What are you doing over there right now?” Susan asked. She moved to the cushioned bench next to Anna, who was doing her best to treat a folding picnic table and chair as office furniture.

“I’m currently working with my new bartender to try and reproduce Earth cocktails using Pallimustus alcohol. We just made some dirty Shirleys, and there’s a princess who can’t get enough of them.”

Zara slammed her empty glass on the counter of the cloud ship’s rooftop bar.

“Another one,” she demanded, wobbling slightly on her barstool.

Jason arrived on the elevating platform just in time to overhear. The look Jamar threw Jason from behind the bar was a clear plea for help.

“Zara, we only have so much of each liquor in stock,” Jason told her. “We have a lot more drinks to try out, so maybe let Jamar try something else. We’ll restock once we know how much we want of which types of plonk.”

Zara picked her glass up again and slammed it forcefully back down. The counter turned squishy so it didn’t break, and the glass became stuck. Zara glared at it for its rank betrayal before wheeling on her stool to glare at Jason, almost toppling off in the process.

“Portal off and get more!” she demanded.

“Zara, have you, by any chance, been talking to the Storm King again?”

“Stupid Emiliano,” she slurred. “Yes, I could have been more diplomatic with that stupid princeling, but he wanted to buy me like I was cattle at market.”

“Far be it from me to tell you to be more diplomatic,” Jason said. “Not with my history. And the guy did have it coming.”

“Exactly,” Zara said as she jabbed a finger in Jason’s direction. “Father has been so good about it. He’s says I did great. He’s much more relaxed, now that he’s not king anymore.”

Sophie flew onto the roof from a lower deck, not bothering with the elevating platform.

“Sophie!” Zara exclaimed. “Tell Mr Evil Stabby to go buy more... whatever it is I was just drinking.”

Sophie looked at her with an amused expression.

“You drank out the bar?”

“No. Yes. Maybe. Shut up.”

Sophie slowly coaxed the drunk princess towards the elevating platform and an inevitable nap. Jason sat down, giving Jamar a sympathetic look.

“How much of the gold-rank stock did she go through?”

“Enough that I could work for a year without being able to afford it. Before this job, anyway. Are you sure you’re happy paying me that much for kitchen and bar services?”

“It shouldn’t be a dangerous job, Jamar, but you might find yourself danger adjacent, from time to time. More than that, you’re probably going to see some things. Like a drunk princess whose brother is stuck with a diplomatic disaster after she inserted some outside magic into a draconian prince’s very inside place. This needs to be a place where my friends and I can relax without being worried what we say or do. When I interviewed you for this job, I told you that the most important parts of this job are loyalty and discretion.”

“Yes, sir, Mr Asano. No one will hear anything that goes on here from me.”

“And that is what your remuneration reflects, Jamar. It’s not about slinging the best drinks or managing food service efficiently, although you do need to do that. It’s the fact that you are going to be around powerful people who do very important things. Not just my people, but anyone we host here. Betraying our trust could be very lucrative, should you pick your moment well. In appreciation of that, I want to make sure that you don’t feel like your discretion is being undervalued.”

“I’m very grateful for the opportunity, sir.”

“Good. I should warn you, though, that you won’t need to go looking for someone to sell information too. You’re going to be approached more or less any time you’re away from the boat.”

“I would never—”

“I know. But not everyone will just come up and offer a bribe. You might find that an attractive young... lady?”

Jamar nodded.

“You might encounter an attractive woman who finds you more charming than you’re used to being found. Or someone who skips the money offer and goes straight to more physical means of compulsion. In preparation for such eventualities, we’ve taken precautions to secure your safety for when you aren’t on the ship. You won’t notice them, but you will be one of the most protected individuals in any place you visit. I want you to feel secure, and not worry about people targeting you for your connection to us.”

“To be honest, sir, I wasn’t really worried. Until just now, when I find myself quite worried. What exactly do you mean by ‘physical means of compulsion?’”

“Oh,” Jason said as he stood up. “Sorry. Still, I’m sure it’s going to be fine. Do you need me to portal off and pick up some more drinks?”

“Uh, yes, sir.”

“Make me a list.”

“This has been a long time coming,” Jason said.

The magic around Vitesse was more than strong enough to let the cloud ship fly, but Jason left it on the water. Most of his friends were with him on the rooftop bar, having just enjoyed a lunch under the hot equatorial sun, cooled by the fresh sea air. Nik and Jason stood at the front railing, Jason waiting for his first glimpse of the city.

For many of his friends, it was home. It wasn’t the capital of Estercost, but many considered it the adventuring capital of the continent. The high level of magic meant that monster manifestations were powerful and frequent, not just in the around the city but across the entire region. That was a critical threat when Estercost was filled with towns, villages and smaller cities, due to the idyllic climate and rich natural resources.

As with many high-magic zones, the local Adventure Society was much better at intercepting monster appearances than somewhere like Greenstone. Instead of leaving notes for wandering adventurers, they had something akin to the grid on Earth that detected magic across a wide area.

The grid on Earth was based on the same principles as natural arrays, using the geography of the planet for its structure. On Pallimustus, their detection networks were less advanced, requiring towers that were subject to weather and monster interference. They needed regular maintenance and replacement, but they also had advantages over

the Earth grid. Where the grid only gave the exact information it was designed to originally, the Pallimustus equivalent could be tuned and calibrated to a variety of purposes. That was how Jason's cloud ship had been detected on its first approach to Rimaros, and how it was again on its approach to Vitesse.

Nik pointed out the city's famous flowering towers, their tops just coming into view. Jason looked over at where he was pointing, but his real attention was on the essence user he sensed approaching. The same thing had happened on his approach to Rimaros, a local official heading out to greet — and check up on — approaching powerful visitors. It was a normal process, affecting every boat, sky ship and caravan emanating enough power to be a potential threat. In Rimaros, that was how Jason had first met Vidal Ladviv. That man's nephew was now one of Jason's growing entourage.

"Shade, would you ask Miguel to come up? It's time our new Adventure Society liaison made himself useful."

Jason's first visit to Vitesse quickly proved to be everything he had hoped for. The City of Flowers lived up to the name, with skyscrapers draped in flowering vines. Trees lined every street, heavy with blossoms. Social programs and labour laws meant that even the poorest sections of the city were safe and relatively prosperous. This was made possible by an economy thriving in multiple sectors, especially agriculture and the growth of alchemy supplies in the magic-rich soil.

Adventuring was likewise lucrative, with a steady stream of silver and gold-rank monsters to harvest with efficient looting protocols. Vitesse adventurers were also in high demand around the world, many places paying generous fees to have experts deal with intransigent problems. The Magic Society likewise offered lucrative services, such as portal travel and airship construction.

Jason's favourite aspect of the city was that it was full of extremely powerful adventurers. This meant that if some crazy monster or lunatic cult showed up, he could relax and hear about it all later, just like everyone else. The only sad undertone was that most of his companions had friends and connections in the city to catch up with, even Nik. Each new introduction, every fun anecdote, reminded him of all the time he had missed. The years of joy and trouble that he'd missed while supreme beings were using his soul as a battlefield.

He forced himself not to dwell on a past he couldn't change, and instead focused on making new memories. He finally got to see the Remore Academy, finally proving that Rufus' family did, in fact run a school. He met Kenneth, son of Brian, now one of the most

celebrated adventurers in Vitesse. While Jason was more than happy to hear all about the famous duel where he defeated a young Rufus, Jason was more interested in having him speak with Nik.

Kenneth's monster-tracking skills were highly vaunted. Rather than have a permanent team of his own, the Adventure Society regularly attached him to teams in need of his specific skills. Nik's ability to coordinate teams had put him in a similar situation, but Jason knew that he had some insecurities around not having a team of his own. Nik had confessed as much as he watched Jason and his own tight-knit team during their travels.

Jason hoped that spending time with Kenneth and discussing their experiences would help Nik come to terms with his adventuring career. If not, he would make sure Nik found an excellent team, regardless of what the Adventure Society wanted. If nothing else, Rufus had been training up the Asano clan youth, and had several excellent silver-rank prospects.

While Jason spent time with all of his friends, most of it was spent touring around the city with Nik. Jason enjoyed the anonymity, and Nik likewise luxuriated in not being the centre of attention. He did get looks because of his inescapable cuteness, but Vitesse was the most metropolitan and multicultural place Jason had ever encountered. There were all manner of people, from every essence-using species and some that weren't.

The brighthearts weren't the only people with enough inherent magic to have their own unique powers, many of which were visibly apparent. Jason and Nik spotted a variety of them, from a group of nine-foot humanoids with green skin and red tattoos to elves with wings who would likely be mistaken for short messengers.

All that was without even counting the adventurers with their exotic magic devices, wonderous familiars and flashy powers. During their days in Vitesse, Jason and Nik spotted all manner of strange and wonderous people. One woman had fire for hair and rode a bat made of crystal, with a visible skeleton inside. Another man was in a constant state of shape-shifting. His hair was always in flux, changing length, colour and style. His skin was pale one moment and red the next before turning into iridescent fish scales.

Countless different transport methods were also on display, from flying carpets to a giant hamster wheel making short teleport hops. The familiars were of such frequency and variety that places close to the Adventure Society campus felt like they were under monster invasion. Jason, with glowing eyes and an adorable companion didn't warrant a second glance.

Jason carefully avoided any entanglements with the various societies and associations, but he did have a few appointments to keep. One was to join the same guild as most of his companions, the Burning Violet guild. Another was an invitation to afternoon tea from what was arguably the most famous and prestigious citizen of Vitesse, Roland Remore. The last was to pick up his new wardrobe from the shop of Gilbert Bertinelli, now operating out of Vitesse.

Jason had taken a day all to himself to go and visit Bert. They had lunch together and discussed all they had been through since their Greenstone days. In the end, Jason left behind an exorbitant amount of money, and took with him an extensive wardrobe.

The Burning Violet guild house was a large but unassuming building, directly across from the Remore Academy. This was the location it had moved to following the takeover of the guild by Roland Remore long ago, and while the diamond-ranker no longer managed it, his presence loomed large.

The building was centuries old, but the magical reinforced stone was barely weathered. Like most buildings in Vitesse, it was decorated with living plants, although more sparingly than most. There were a few balconies with planters from which vines draped, and ivy climbing sections of the walls. Most of the greenery was around the sides on the building, expanding into what looked like gardens around the back, only partially visible from the street.

There were no less than four sets of double doors in the front, all of which were busy with messengers and functionaries coming in and out. There were quite a few adventurers as well, the others giving them a respectfully wide berth. This included Jason, who modulated his aura to a polite expression of his genuine rank. It was not an occasion to be deceptive and, while gold rankers always stood out, they did so less in Vitesse. Wearing one of his new suits, he entered the cavernous lobby.

Several staff members were approaching people as they entered and directing them variously to different reception desks, any of the several stairs or internal doorways, or occasionally sending them back out entirely. Jason, being gold rank, was attended to immediately. He was approached by an immaculately dressed young bronze ranker before he had a chance to get anywhere near a queue.

The man had no trace of cores in his aura, so Jason assumed he was an adventurer in training. Unlike Greenstone, the more dangerous Vitesse environment meant that no adventurers below silver operated unsupervised. Rufus, Gary and Farrah had roamed abroad in search of adventure without minders watching over them.

“What can I do for you, sir?”

“I was hoping to apply to your guild.”

“An excellent choice, sir. Are you looking to transfer from an existing guild?”

“No, I’ve never been in a guild before.”

“That should simplify the application process, then. I will warn you in advance that rank is no guarantee of acceptance, however.”

“Understood.”

“Then please go through that door over there and the receptionist inside will take your details.”

“Thank you.”

Chapter 926

A Big Juicy Hole

Jason entered the room just off the lobby. It was a smaller reception area with just one desk. It was well appointed, rich but tasteful, with dark wood and earthy colours. Another door led deeper into the building. A receptionist sat behind the desk, greeting him with a smile.

She was human and a bronze ranker with no sign of core use, which seemed to be standard for the guild's functionaries. She had the dark skin of a Vitesse native, and long hair tied into thin braids. Her smile was genuine, which Jason found interesting, but realised would be a necessity. Bronze-rankers hiding spite behind a customer service smile would be seen through by the high-rankers they met on a daily basis.

"Good day, sir. You're looking to apply to the guild for membership?"

"I am."

"Please sit."

She tapped a crystal on her desk and a cloud of dust emerged from the floor and coalesced into a chair near Jason. There was a click as the door locked.

"So we won't be disturbed," the receptionist said, seeing Jason glance in that direction. "Please take a seat."

She waited for him to sit before she did the same. The chair wasn't cloud furniture comfortable, but it was close. She took a form from the drawer and a pencil.

"Might I begin with your name, sir?"

"Jason Asano. And yours?"

"It's Monica."

He registered the mild surprise in her aura that didn't make it to her face.

"Do people normally not ask?"

"Not gold rankers, sir."

"You don't need to keep calling me sir."

"Is there a manner in which you would prefer to be addressed?"

"Jason is fine. Mr Asano, if you must."

"Very well, Mr Asano. Speaking of your rank, it means that your application will be assessed by a guild executive, including an in-depth interview. I'll be asking you some preliminary questions to help the process go smoothly. Is that acceptable to you?"

"Does anyone ever say no?"

"You would be surprised, Mr Asano."

“Go ahead and ask; I have nothing to hide. Well, that’s a lie. I have many, many things to hide, but what gold ranker doesn’t? I just don’t think they’ll come up in a guild application unless this guild is involved in some extremely unusual affairs.”

“The guild is definitely involved in some extremely unusual affairs, Mr Asano.”

He laughed and she smiled.

“It’s normal to be nervous, Mr Asano. Applying to any guild on this level is no small thing for anyone. Burning Violet are elite amongst elites.”

“You think I’m nervous? Oh, because of the rambling. No, that’s just me. I always feel that when you’re asking someone to involve themselves with you, it’s only fair to give them a genuine sense of what they’re getting into.”

“That attitude will do you very well when the executive is interviewing you, Mr Asano. Their questions will be rather more probing than mine, and they will be more expectant of thorough answers. I’m just looking for some foundational information. Basic background details, your current adventuring status. You are entirely free to decline answering at this stage and defer your answers to later. I can tell you that openness now will work in your favour with the executive interview.”

“Understood.”

“Let’s start with some background. Your identity will be confirmed later, using your Adventure Society badge.”

“Has anyone actually tried to enter the guild under a false identity?”

“It happens. There was one woman who actually had three different memberships. A shape-shifter, obviously.”

“She was kicked out?”

“No, if you can believe it. She revealed the truth herself and then helped improve the security protocols. That was before my time, though. She ended up teaching at the Remore Academy, which is how I heard about it. I took her Introduction to Improvisational Rituals course. Barely passed, but I loved it. She always had the best stories. She used to be a thief, if you can believe it.”

“Oh, I can believe it.”

“Sorry, I’m getting off track. Lord Bassingthwaite is always criticising me for being too personal, but I think you can be personal and professional at the same time.”

“I completely agree, but I don’t have ‘lord’ at the start of my name.”

“I know, right? That does bring us to the next question, though. Do you hold any royal or noble title, or position within a recognised governmental authority?”

“No. Would that help with my application?”

“Not at all. It can even be an impediment in some cases. Nobility and sovereignty often involve complications the guild would prefer to avoid.”

“I’ve noticed those complications myself, from time to time.”

“Oh, I bet you have. Gold rankers have the best stories, but most don’t give a bronze ranker a second glance, you know? If you don’t mind me saying, Mr Asano, you are a very approachable man.”

She made a circular gesture in his direction.

“You’ve got, I don’t know, kind of a weird presence. Most gold rankers are all imposing, but you have that tamped right down. It’s there, in the background, but there’s something casual and inviting about you. Are you doing that with your aura on purpose?”

“I like to be friendly with people.”

“Well, I appreciate it. I would never normally be this open with the people who come in here...”

Jason sensed a lie in her aura for the first time.

“...but sitting across from you is like having tea with a friend.”

“I appreciate you saying that, Monica. Perhaps, though, we should move on to the next question.”

“Oh, you’re right. I get to chatting, then some silver ranker gets held up waiting and he thinks he’s all important because his dad’s friend’s uncle killed a dragon once. He throws a fit, and then who ends up getting an earful from Lord Bassingthwaite? Me, that’s who.”

“Then, maybe we try and avoid that?”

“Well, I could hide, but I work here. He’d find me eventually.”

“Uh, I was more thinking that getting through those questions might be a better approach than hide and seek with your boss.”

“That does make sense. Keep it practical.”

She looked down at her form.

“Right, we’re up to... species. You appear human, but not of an ethnicity I recognise, and I can’t read it from your aura. Again, I will remind you that you can decline to answer any of these questions, although they will be asked again, later in the process.”

“Then I might exercise my right to decline. I will say that I was born human, but the adventuring life found me, rather than the other way around. There’s quite a story to it.”

“Oh, I bet there is. You’re sure you can’t... no, we need to get through this. Do you mind answering where you’re from originally?”

“A little town you won’t have heard of, called Casselton Beach. Lovely beaches, as you’d expect from the name. No adventurers, very low magic levels. I did my training in Greenstone, though.”

“Oh, wow. The shape-shifter lady I told you about is from there. The one whose course I took in—”

“I remember, yes.”

“The magic there is so low, but the Geller-Remore facility they built has produced some exceptional adventurers over the last decade. I applied to the program there myself, while I was at the Remore Academy.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yeah. Intensive program, independent monster hunting. Getting a slot is really competitive.”

“Like joining this guild.”

“Exactly! You know, the Gellers train their best prospects down there in Greenstone.”

“So I’ve heard. About those questions—”

“Did you train at the Geller-Remore facility? I haven’t heard about any of the graduates reaching gold rank yet.”

“It was just after my time. They were just starting some pilot programs at the end of my time in Greenstone. I was actually part of the very first course on aura control.”

“Oh, that must have been amazing. Did you get to meet any of the famous Gellers?”

“I did, as it happens.”

“You know, most of the Gellers operating out of Vitesse are members of the guild here.”

“I was told that, yes.”

“Do you think any of them would remember you?” she asked, then leaned forward conspiratorially. “I’m not being strictly professional by telling you this...”

Jason awkwardly cleared his throat.

“...but if they did remember you, that would give a nice bump to your chances of being accepted.”

“I think some of them might recall me,” Jason said. “Do you need to write that down, or do we just move on to the next question?”

“We cover that at the end, so we can keep going,” she said and checked her form again. “I mentioned that we’d do the bits about your connections and associates later, and that’s now. I don’t see the point of some of these questions, if I’m being honest, but they make us do the whole form. As if anyone would admit to being in a cult or trafficking

restricted essences. Anyway, are you currently or have you previously been a member of any magic, adventuring or craft related guilds, societies or associations?"

"Just the Adventure Society. Standard membership."

"Star rating?"

"That's... less standard."

"Oh, don't worry about that. Having one star at gold rank is more common than people think, and certainly not a disqualifying factor. Burning Violet is exclusive, but it's also really big. You don't have to be some tricky politician or expert ritualist. They need some good head-breakers just like everyone else. Look, so long as you can assure us of your good standing with the Adventure Society, we can leave the details of your ranking to the later interview with the executive. No one is going to make an issue of it until they do the full identity check, before the interview."

"That's probably for the best, thank you. Why don't they check identity until that late in the process?"

"It's part of the protocols. If we catch people too early, they haven't done anything shonky enough, we have to just kick them out. Once they've been properly shady, though, we can take them out back and deal with them ourselves. They call it the 'enough rope' protocol."

"I do have connections within other groups and associations, I should perhaps point out. No memberships with any of them."

"That's fine. It would be a little strange if you reach gold rank without making connections. If you don't mind me asking, if you got to gold rank without ever joining a guild, why now?"

"I have friends in the Burning Violet guild. The rest of my team, in fact. I've wanted to come to Vitesse for a very long time, but circumstances have always conspired to keep me away. Now, I'm finally here."

"Oh, I know a big juicy hole where a story goes when I hear one. You couldn't get here in all the years it took to get to gold rank?"

Jason let out a chuckle.

"I will confess that the story might have a little juice."

"Aah, you're not going to tell me, are you?"

"We do need to avoid you getting yelled at by Lord Bassingthwaite."

"He doesn't yell. He does that 'I'm not mad, I'm disappointed' thing. He's actually a pretty good boss, all said and done. But yeah, we're almost done."

She read directly from the form.

“Have you ever, at any stage, faced reprimand from the Adventure Society, Magic Society, any government authority or church over your association with...”

She looked up from the form.

“Look, have you ever got caught doing bad stuff with bad people?”

“I did get demoted once, at iron rank. There was a corruption enquiry at the Greenstone branch and they blanket demoted everyone at two or three stars at the beginning of the investigation. They bumped people back up afterwards.”

“Oh, that doesn’t count. Those isolated branches always go dirty and need a clean out every few years. My friend Denise works for the Adventure Society and got roped into a Continental Council. She had to live on this archipelago in the middle of nowhere for half a year.”

She looked down at the form.

“Okay, the rest is basically just a list of known associates. It’s not a dealbreaker, unless your mum is a rival guild master or in the Red Table or something. Really, this is a chance to list any existing guild members you know, or can get away with saying you kind of know, like the Gellers we were talking about. You said your team were all in the guild, right?”

“I did.”

“Well, that about as close to a guarantee as you’ll get, so let’s start there. What’s your team name?”

Monica was looking down at the form, her pencil poised to write down names. When Jason told her the name of her team, she froze. Then, moving like the first thaw of spring, her head rose to stare at him.

“Did you just say—”

“You sent a gold ranker to Monica without checking who they were?” A voice boomed through the door that led further into the building. “Do you have any idea who is in the city this week?”

The door was flung open, revealing a harried man with a coal black face and snow-white beard. He was one of the older-looking gold rankers Jason had seen, and would have passed for being in his sixties on Earth.

“I’m terribly sorry, sir,” he said, stepping forward. Jason rose from his chair to shake the offered hand.

“Not at all,” Jason said. “Monica has been excellent. A consummate professional.”

The man threw a suspicious glance at Monica, still staring bug-eyed at Jason, before turning back to Jason as well.

“My name is Neiman Bassingthwaite, and I’m the chief membership officer here at the guild. May I ask your name?”

“Jason Asano.”

The hand holding Jason’s went dead still.

“The, ah, Jason Asano who... did all of the things?”

“Yep.”

“Well, it’s an honour to meet you sir. We were wondering if you were going to call by, but were expecting something more of an entourage.”

“I was hoping to take care of things quietly.”

“Yes, well that was never going to happen, I’m afraid, through no fault of your own. You and I should have a chat.”

Chapter 927

A Sense of Responsibility

Jason followed Neiman Bassingthwaite deeper into the guild building. It had the feel of an ancient estate, appointed in rich fabrics and old, dark wood. The tapestries, sculptures and decorations held the weight of centuries and would not have looked out of place in a museum.

“I apologise for your reception, Mr Asano. I’m not sure how Monica ended up on membership intake today, I’m sorry.”

“She was not what I was expecting.”

“Monica excels in her role here, but is best used judiciously. The Burning Violet guild is not prejudicial as to the background of our members, which makes our roster rather eclectic. They come from cultures across the world, some born with every advantage while others fought their way up from nothing. Those of a more aristocratic bent have an expectation of detached professionalism from our staff. Those who are more down to earth, however, often find this approach elitist and exclusionary. Monica excels with the guild’s more rough-and-tumble adventurers, but should not have been screening unvetted applicants. I’m not sure who assigned her today, but I will look into it. I suspect it may be related to larger issues within the guild.”

“Issues?”

“There is a long-standing contention within the guild that is at a dangerous apex right now. I am hoping that no one was foolish enough to try and use you as a game piece in our internal politics. It’s through here, Mr Asano.”

He opened the door to his office for Jason to enter.

“Can I offer you a cup of tea?”

Jason leaned back in the comfortable leather chair, one of several in Neiman’s spacious domain. He sipped at a cup of tea with a splash of liquor in it. Neiman, looking more dishevelled by the moment, was on his third cup of liquor with a splash of tea in it.

“If I understand what you’re saying,” Jason said, “there are two factions within the executive members of the guild. One wants to excise the guild from what they see as the oversized influence of the Remore family. The other faction opposes this, either through loyalty or fear the guild will collapse without them.”

Neiman nodded as he took another gulp.

“Yes. And I’m afraid that your membership threatens to be the flashpoint that could set the whole guild ablaze. We are well aware of you and your history, Mr Asano. That the Adventure Society is essentially treating you as a diamond ranker, and of your close ties to the Remore family. Roland Remore already looms large over those who are against his family’s control of the guild, and adding you would likely spell the doom of their intentions.”

“So, the anti-Remore faction would see my joining the guild as a second diamond-ranker joining the opposing group.”

“Precisely. It’s no secret that your team and many other friends of yours are already on the guild’s books, and there has long been an expectation that you will join them. Your arrival in Vitesse may have been low-key, but it has not gone unnoticed.”

“Are you a part of the group against Remore influence on the guild?”

“I am not. Nor am I an advocate for it.”

“But you are asking me to refrain from joining the guild, are you not?”

“Defer, rather than refrain entirely. Until the current tensions have been diffused, one way or another. My agenda is to keep the guild from tearing itself apart.”

“You think my entry to the guild would cause people to take drastic measures.”

“That is exactly my concern. There are enough people on both sides of this that the guild could fragment, and that’s just one potential outcome. There’s no predicting what a group of powerful adventurers will do if they think their backs are to the wall.”

“That’s certainly true,” Jason agreed.

Neiman gave up the pretence of drinking tea and refilled his cup directly from the liquor bottle. He shook his head before taking a swig.

“The most infuriating part is that only a small fragment of guild leadership has any investment in this. Most of our members don’t care who controls the guild, so long as it’s run smoothly. The guild is meant to be an asset for them to use, not a problem for them to bother with. If the conflict escalates and the members are forced to choose sides, they’ll choose neither, and go find a guild that works the way it’s supposed to.”

“You paint a bleak picture.”

Neiman nodded.

“It’s not so dire as I make out — not yet, at least. I’m far from the only one attempting to settle this before it escalates. My fear is that you could be what triggers that escalation.”

“Then why am I only hearing about this now? Why didn’t anyone tell me about this before I came anywhere near the building?”

“That decision was not mine to make. It was ultimately decided that an active approach on our part would put flame to the kindling. Having you come on your own terms,

in your own time, was better. We did ask the Remores not to involve themselves, but we were expecting your team to accompany you. Arriving quietly alone caught us unawares, or I would have attempted to intercept you earlier. Our information is that you are rather fond of a spectacle. As is Gabriel Remore, with whom I know you to be travelling.”

“Rufus’ dad? He never seemed like that much of a showboat to me.”

“I suppose it’s a matter of perspective. Not all of us blow up cities everywhere we go.”

“I don’t—”

Jason cut himself off, leaned forward and placed his teacup on its saucer.

“Lord Bassingthwaite, I hope you’ll understand if I don’t take everything you say at face value. All I have on this is your word, and we’ve only just met.”

“Of course, Mr Asano. Naturally, you would be an asset to any major guild, but the timing right now is the opposite of ideal. I wouldn’t blame you for running for the hills and having nothing to do with any of it.”

“That’s my inclination, Lord Bassingthwaite. I have more than enough to deal with, without adding guild strife on top of it. Shade, what are Gabriel and Arabelle doing?”

“Shopping,” Shade said from Jason’s shadow, surprising Neiman.

“Your familiar is here?”

“He is,” Jason said.

“He wasn’t detected.”

“That’s kind of his thing, Lord Bassingthwaite.”

“Yes, but the guild hall has measures in place to keep track of such things.”

“I’m aware.”

A look of realisation crossed Neiman’s face.

“Miss Callahan is on your team, isn’t she?”

“She is. Shade, would you ask if Gabriel and Arabelle would join us?”

“I have already informed them, Mr Asano. They are awaiting your portal.”

“Portals won’t work in…”

Neiman trailed off as Jason’s portal arch opened.

“I didn’t realise that you were a portal specialist, Mr Asano.”

“More of an enthusiastic amateur, Lord Bassingthwaite.”

Arabelle and her husband came through the portal.

“Bassingthwaite,” Gabriel said gruffly and headed straight for the liquor cabinet.

“Lord Bassingthwaite,” Arabelle said more cordially as she sat down. “I am distressed to hear that internal guild politics have reached such a precarious point.”

"It's Dad," Gabriel said from where he was mixing a drink. "He's always treated the guild like it's his own little fiefdom. The Queen would be happy to give him an actual fiefdom, if he just asked, but not Roland Remore. He's too good for aristocracy. Our family works for what we get, as if we weren't a de facto bloody noble house. Our son grew up playing with the crown princess!"

"I suspect it's more than just your father, dear," Arabelle said. "As I married into the family, my perspective is a little more detached. The Remores more involved in administration than adventuring can lose sight of what the guild is actually for. As for your father, he's a diamond ranker. They have a habit of just assuming that everything around them will move to their will."

Jason sipped at his tea rather than meet Arabelle's eyes as she looked in his direction.

"Have things truly reached the boiling point, Lord Basingthwaite?" she asked.

"I am afraid so, Mrs Remore."

Jason let out a sigh.

"The question," he said, "is what do I do? I have no interest in getting involved, but the fact that I didn't hear any of this until now suggests that someone wanted me involved."

"These tensions have been simmering for a long time," Gabriel said as he walked over and handed his wife a glass before sitting down with his own. "The debate over Remore influence on the guild is older than I am. I would have warned you if I'd realised things had gotten this bad."

"You said that the decision not to warn me wasn't yours," Jason said to Neiman. "Whose was it?"

"The guild master's," Neiman said. "It was not universally endorsed by those of us trying to keep the peace."

"And he's neutral in this?" Jason asked.

"Famously so," Arabelle said. "Perhaps we should talk with him."

"No," Jason said. "I came in here because I wanted to join the guild with my friends, not to get involved with guild politics. I asked you and Gabriel here to give me some context of what I'm dealing with. Now that you've done that, I'm walking away."

"If someone is determined to get you involved, that might not be so easy," Gabriel said.

Jason got to his feet.

"When I'm on Earth, I'll deal with politics like I'm on Earth. While I'm here, I'll deal with things the way they do here."

Neiman also got to his feet.

“Meaning what, exactly?”

“Meaning power rules,” Arabelle said. “Jason, things aren’t that simple. You know this.”

“They are with enough power,” he said darkly.

“Jason—”

“No, Arabelle. I won’t hear it. I am done with letting people sidetrack me with whatever they have going on. Lord Bassingthwaite, I don’t care about your guild politics and, if I’m being honest, I don’t care if the whole guild collapses. I’m going to go now, and get back to enjoying my time in your lovely city. Thank you for the tea.”

He strode to the still-open portal and vanished through it. Arabelle pinched the bridge of her nose and let out a long, calming breath.

“I need to talk to Danielle,” she said, also getting to her feet. Rather than use the portal, she left through the door.

Neiman fell back into his seat and poured himself another drink.

“How bad is this?” he asked.

“Depends,” Gabriel said. “Do you know who is trying to bring Jason into this?”

“Best guess? Your father. His thinking is long-term enough that he can accept harming the guild if he thinks he’s amputating rotten meat. He’s also one of the few people that could genuinely push the guild master.”

Jason was sitting alone at a bakery café, a parasol shielding him from the hot sun. In front of him was a pitcher of chilled milk and a large tray of miniature cakes. A dark-skinned man with a bald head took the seat opposite. Jason understood a little better why so many expectations had fallen on Rufus when he looked so much like his diamond-rank grandfather.

“It was you, then,” Jason said coldly.

“Yes.”

“I think I’m going to cancel our scheduled meeting.”

“You’re angry.”

“Yes.”

“That’s because you’re young.”

“Is that what it is to be old? Only seeing tools instead of people?”

“Sometimes,” Roland admitted. “If you want to move in our circles, Jason, you’ll need to move with consideration rather than emotion.”

“I think that emotion has its place. Which is fine, because I have no interest in your diamond-rank clique. And I won’t let you ruin my experience here, so leave me out of your guild politics.”

“You don’t get to declare what you are and are not embroiled in. It’s not that simple, as my daughter in law has already reminded you.”

A portal opened next to their table. The runes around the aperture marked it as belonging to Clive, but it was Humphrey who stepped through. He tossed a pouch on the table in front of Roland, who opened it to find a clutch of guild membership pins.

“Team Biscuit withdraws from the Burning Violet guild,” Humphrey told him. “Are you coming, Jason?”

“Let me get these in a box to go,” Jason said, then got up and went inside.

“He was looking forward to meeting you, you know,” Humphrey said. “Not the great Roland Remore, but the grandfather who means so much to his friend.”

“He’s not someone who can afford to be sentimental.”

“Trust me, Mr Remore: we should all be very thankful he is.”

Jason returned from inside.

“Let’s go,” he said and followed Humphrey through the portal. It closed behind them and Victor Volaire, the Mirror King, was suddenly sitting at the table.

“Are you sure about antagonising him?” Victor asked.

“Asano has a habit of picking up powerful allies like they’re fruit at a market stall. I had to make it clear that I wasn’t one of them. He doesn’t want to share my enemies right now, and I certainly can’t afford his.”

“Your grandson won’t be happy.”

“No, but I’m not going to burden his friends with my battles when they have enough of their own. I’ve made enough mistakes with Rufus already. Too much pressure, too many expectations. He’ll understand, in time.”

“You know they’ll be part of this eventually. Asano has been on a course to clash with the order for a long time. He uses their combat arts.”

“They don’t care about things like that. They left those skill books scattered over half the planet.”

“You know it’s more than that.”

“What about your son? He’s back in Asano’s circle, now. You want him involved?”

“Of course not.”

“There you are, then.”

“Did you have to do it this way, though? Couldn’t you have just explained things to them?”

“Asano has a sense of responsibility. The Geller boy, too; he’s a good lad. Once they know, they’ll involve themselves. They deserve a break.”

Chapter 928

Trouble Always Knows Where to Find Me

Cassandra Mercer wandered out of the jobs hall with two members of her team after dropping off a completed contract. Jiralla was the team frontliner, standing head and shoulders above the other two women. Henrietta Geller was another adventurer from back home. After bouncing around a few different teams without success, she'd filled a hole in Cassandra's after they lost a member in the last monster surge. Her many summons and familiars made her a versatile addition to the group.

Cassandra wanted nothing more than a hot shower to sluice away the muck of combat. The bog monsters they'd been contracted to hunt reminded her of similar creatures common to the delta back home, although these had been silver rank, rather than iron or bronze. Some crystal wash would have been ideal to flush out the sticky mud that wormed its way into every crevice, but her normal suppliers had been sold out. Apparently the trade hall had been swept clean a week earlier, while they were still out on the hunt.

She was quiet as the other two chatted away, her mind elsewhere. She knew that they'd arrived in Vitesse, and maybe that was why she'd picked the contract she had. Normally the team would avoid a mission that meant trudging through bog mud for days on end, although it did come with a nice bonus. No one else wanted the mission either, so the jobs hall had added some nice incentives.

She hadn't heard much since their arrival. A few people discussing the return of Team Biscuit to Vitesse. Their involvement in some city in the middle of nowhere being wiped off the map. They hadn't sought her out, and maybe they weren't going to. Perhaps she was a memory they had no interest in revisiting.

It was just as she was resolving to put them out of her head when she spotted him. He ambled across the park-like grounds of the campus as if he'd stepped right out of her memories. The ridiculous shirt. Gazing around like a tourist as he munched on a meat wrap, dripping sauce onto the grass. He ambled towards them like someone without a care in the world.

Her friends saw that she'd stopped walking and followed her gaze.

"Who's that?" Jiralla asked.

"Her ex," said Henrietta.

"That Neil guy she's always talking about?"

"Not always," Cassandra said. "And no. This was from before that."

“Jason Asano,” Henrietta said.

“You know him, Henri?”

“He’s on my brother’s team. Been away a long time, though. Haven’t seen him in twenty years.”

“Isn’t that Neil guy on your brother’s team as well?”

“Yep.”

“Cassie, you should really consider expanding your dating pool. Are you going to go for Henri’s brother, next?”

“I’ll catch up with you later,” Cassandra said, then set off to intercept Jason. He threw a wave in Henrietta’s direction and she returned it before leading Jiralla firmly away.

Cassandra arrived in front of Jason. He looked different, yet the same. The eyes sparkling with amusement. The beard that failed to hide his jutting chin as well as he thought it did. His features were sharper and less boyish. He had the smooth, almost artificially perfect skin that came with high rank.

“Hey, Cassie.”

“Hello, Jason.”

“I thought we could catch up. If you would like.”

“How did you find me?”

“Your aura. The city isn’t that big.”

“Yes, it is.”

“I suppose. They get a lot bigger, where I come from.”

“You really spread your perception across the city without people noticing?”

“I’m sure a few did, but I’ve gotten pretty good at hiding it. Gold-rank tricks.”

It was more than just a gold-rank trick and they both knew it.

“You can’t be that far from gold yourself, right?”

It irked her a little that the man who hadn’t even believed in magic when she hit bronze rank had beaten her to gold. Not as much as Henri, who had been grumbling for months about being eclipsed by her little brother.

“It’s not easy, getting your head around how high-rank advancement works,” she said. “Or maybe it is, for you. Your whole team got there, right?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “We all had to find our own way, though. I’m sure you’ll find yours.”

They started walking, Jason falling into place beside her.

“Is Boko really gone?” she asked.

“It is,” he said, stashing his food in his storage space.

“I heard some things, but no one seems clear on exactly what happened. Your team was there, though, right?”

“Yeah.”

“You always did have a knack for winding up in the middle of things.”

“I’d rather not, sometimes, believe me.”

“So, what did happen?”

“The usual. Bad people trying to do bad things. Innocent people getting caught in the middle. Most of the population got out alive, but more than I’d like did not.”

“A messenger army and a destroyed city. That’s ‘the usual’ for you, is it?”

It took him a long moment to answer. She could see a shift in his body language, as if something was weighing him down.

“I don’t think what’s usual matters,” he said, the lightness in his tone now absent. “I had a bad day, yesterday. I finally went to join a guild, something I’ve been looking forward to for a long time. The whole experience went very unpleasantly, and it got me thinking about being an adventurer. It’s something that’s been important to me, over the years, more so as time goes on. But what happened yesterday made me realise that my experience isn’t what other adventurers go through.”

“How so?”

“Taking contracts. Using them to build a track record and get better contracts. Joining a guild, building a team and travelling around with them.”

“You have a team.”

“Whose defining experience with me is waiting years at a time for me to come back. Wondering if I’m even still alive. After yesterday, I started thinking about how different my experiences are from other adventurers, and it got me wondering if I’m really one of them. I haven’t really done a lot of what normal adventurers do since Greenstone. There’s always some mad crisis, pushing me to the edge. Taking me away from my team and never letting me get back to basics. The last few months, I felt like I was finally living the adventuring life everyone else gets to, and then Boko happened. Reminded me that I’m not like everyone else. Then, yesterday brought home the fact that if I try to be like other adventurers, it’s just a performance. Playing pretend.”

“Jason, I’ve heard the stories about you. If even a fraction of them are true, you live a life that other adventurers long for. Walking with kings and gods. Wielding power most only dream of.”

Jason shook his head.

“Those things aren’t what matter. What matters is knowing that my actions have kept someone safe. Shielded them from something that would have ripped their life apart. But you know that feeling. Every good adventurer does. And that’s when I realised that I really am an adventurer. It’s not about having stories told about you, and it’s not about the milestones that regular adventurers have, but I missed. My first night in this world, Rufus Remore told me what an adventurer was, and I’ve realised all over again that he was right. Strip away everything else, and an adventurer is someone who puts themselves between the bad things and those who need protection from them. Everything else is just embellishment or a distraction.”

He flashed a smile, heavy, but satisfied.

“As long as we do that,” he said, “we’re adventurers. I think that maybe I’m a bit thick, since everyone else seems to realise that’s obvious. I second guess myself too much, I suppose.”

Cassandra gave him a side glance as they walked.

“I remember that night we met,” she said. “You seemed so free, so unburdened. You really aren’t the person I knew, are you?”

He flashed the impish grin she remembered, the impudent boyishness shining through.

“Oh, he’s still in there,” he said. “All said and done, I’m kind of happy that yesterday didn’t work out. It helped me with the ongoing process of accepting who I am, and letting go of who I’m not. The same as everyone else, I guess.”

“I’ve been struggling with that as well. Is that the secret to reaching gold rank?”

“Part of it, sure.”

“I don’t think I’m doing so well in that regard. I have trouble moving on from old history.”

“Neil is an idiot.”

“Neil is an idiot,” she agreed. “But he saw it in me. That there are things I couldn’t let go of.”

Jason nodded.

“He shouldn’t have handled things the way he did. He should have talked things through, instead of deciding for both of you and running away. He was so scared of losing you that he gave you up first. Like an idiot.”

“He wanted me to meet you. To see how different you were. As if that would somehow fix everything.”

“Which was extra foolish. I’m much sexier now, so that definitely won’t cure you from pining for my masculine embrace.”

She looked at him from under raised eyebrows.

“You haven’t completely changed, then.”

He flashed another grin.

“I told you that.”

“You’re still an idiot.”

“Hey, I thought we were talking about Neil.”

“You’re both idiots. It’s Nik I feel sorry for, growing up with you two as influences.”

“He wants to see you, if you don’t mind. He feels bad about his part in convincing Neil to end things.”

“That’s Neil’s fault for taking romantic advice from a three-year-old. I would love to see Nik again.”

“And Neil?”

“No. He hurt me, Jason. Even if he thought he was doing the right thing, he wasn’t really considering me. He hid his feelings instead of sharing them. He decided everything for himself and ran away before I had a chance to get my head around any of it.”

They walked in silence for a while. They had no destination, but the sprawling gardens of the Adventure Society campus gave them no shortage of places to wander.

“Could you tell me about what you’ve been doing since Greenstone?” Cassandra asked. “Maybe it will help me to, I don’t know, put down some old baggage.”

“Only if you tell me about what you’ve been doing since Greenstone as well.”

“I’ve just been doing normal adventurer things. Nothing like what you’ve done.”

“Exactly,” Jason told her.

“...the wrong spell, and the hydra exploded. And I mean exploded, chunks flying everywhere. Being so big, we were drenched in its blood and guts. Because it was only bronze rank, it didn’t burn us, but it dissolved all our clothes away.”

Jason let out a laugh, then sipped from his glass. He’d pulled out some of his blended juices from Greenstone, giving Cassandra a taste of home.

“You know, I’ve had my clothes blasted off a time or three as well. I assume you had more to change into.”

“Yes, but it was right at that moment that the reinforcements arrived. And you know which church they ended up getting them from?”

“Lust?”

“Wouldn’t that have been nice? No, they were from the church of Chastity!”

Jason snorted juice out of his nose, then started coughing.

“How did that go?” he asked after recovering.

“Oh, about as well as you’d expect. Jiralla was the only one of us still decent, because of her heavy plate armour, but she kept complaining about it pinching and started stripping off. Right in front of the priest!”

“You’re kidding.”

“The woman has no shame.”

Cassandra noticed Nik sitting on a park bench and nibbling nervously on a biscuit. She stopped walking and Jason did the same. They turned to look at each other.

“So,” she said. “I suppose this is it.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “I don’t know if this will help you find some closure, or come to terms with anything from the past, but I had a nice afternoon. It was good seeing you again, Cass.”

“You too, Jason. Tell Neil... I don’t know. That if I want to see him, I’ll come find him. Tell him not to look for me himself.”

Jason nodded.

“We live long lives, Cassandra. Too long to hold onto every mistake, but also too long to hold onto every person. Only you can decide if you want to forgive Neil, or forget him.”

She bowed her head.

“It feels like if I agree to see him now, I’ll be acknowledging that he was right. That he was right to hurt me that way.”

Jason nodded.

“As I said, life is long. You don’t have to decide anything now, just because we happen to be in town. We’ll cross paths again.”

Jason watched the flowering towers of Vitesse shrink away as the cloud ship moved further into Estercost. He could sense his companions in various places around the vessel, including Neil drowning his sorrows at the bar. After one last glance at Vitesse, Jason opened a portal arch to his soul realm and stepped through. He arrived in the forest city of Arbour.

The city remained largely uninhabited. Like Jason himself, the soul within his soul that comprised the city was still finding its way. When it first formed, the city had been a homogeneous place, basically flatland filled with sequoias and treehouses. There were

now hills and valleys, rivers with castles set on grand bridges and gorges where buildings clung to the walls, covered in ivy.

Much of the city still held its original disposition, however, and Jason arrived in one of these areas. It housed the research centre for Carlos, and the accommodation for his test subjects. Jason's power suppressed the magical influence that had brainwashed them, but only Carlos could free them from it entirely. The time was approaching for Sophie's mother to go through the process, which was still being refined.

"Tomorrow," Carlos said without preamble as Jason walked into his study. "We'll be ready tomorrow."

"You're the man setting the schedule," Jason told him. "Better to do it right than fast."

"Better right than fast," Carlos echoed. "Looking into that sword they attacked you with only slowed me down a little."

Carlos had spent some time with the investigation team in Greenstone that was studying the attack on Boko. They were focused on Jason's attacker, who had not been a messenger but wielded unusual equipment. He had rejoined Jason and his companions recently via portal travel.

"That sword was definitely based on the weapons we were developing at the start of the messenger war," Carlos said. "We gave up on them back then because they weren't cost efficient. The idea was to create weapons that would make less combat-oriented silver rankers more of an opponent to a messenger. The results were never worth the outlay, though, so we moved on. It seems that someone continued that work after we abandoned it, as that sword was made recently. It also showed some signs of having been advanced from what we created, but the improvements were marginal. Not enough to pick up the project again."

"Someone obviously felt differently about that."

"Yes," Carlos said. "But unless you're going to pull on that thread yourself, it's for the Adventure Society to investigate. I've been away from my work here long enough."

"I'm happy to leave it to them. We have enough going on without chasing after something others are happy to pursue themselves."

"On that, I agree. If possible, I'd like to get all the Order of Redeeming Light members treated before heading for Earth. I'm hoping to use my time there to explore the medical knowledge of your world, and its potential applications for my work. How long do you think we have before heading to your home universe?"

"I think that depends on how scattered the people from Earth are, and how many even want to go back. I'm not going to force anyone who wants to stay. We'll get more

information on them in Cyrion, and go from there. Once we've rounded people up, it's back to Rimaros to finally complete the bridge between worlds. Clive thinks that will be relatively quick. I imagine that we're looking at heading to Earth in weeks, rather than months, assuming that nothing goes wrong."

"You're just going to say that out loud? Aren't you asking for trouble?"

"Trouble always knows where to find me," Jason told him with a malevolent grin. "And it knows what it gets when it does."

Chapter 929

Tactical Playbook

Springclaw gorillas were weak, as gold-rank monsters went, but they were smart and spawned in large herds. When one such herd had hidden away in the mountains, the first group of adventurers sent after them had not done well. After a week of fending off guerilla tactics from the gorillas, they had only a handful of kills and a lot of frustration.

Resupplying in a large town at the base of the mountain range, the adventurers encountered Jason and his team doing the same. Humphrey offered to take the contract off their hands, without taking the contract rewards. The adventurers were suspicious until they discovered they were dealing with Team Biscuit, looking to rebuild their tactical playbook after ranking up to gold.

The team had spent limited time together over the last few years as they followed their individual pathways to gold rank. They needed to revise the strategies they had developed and honed over more than a decade, along with reintegrating Jason into the team dynamic. They had been working on it during their travels, but Humphrey was satisfied with nothing less than perfection. And once perfection was reached, they could train even harder to maintain it.

Each team member had their own new tricks, with even basic abilities growing ostentatiously powerful at gold rank. Humphrey's Mighty Strength power, arguably the most common power in the adventuring world, could now expand his size. The mana cost became more exorbitant the larger he grew, but it allowed him to physically confront the often-enormous gold-rank monsters.

Sophie's speed left even a fully buffed Jason in the dust, and her aura let her walk through a town, healing the sick like a saintess. Neil's summon was a trump card against hostile magic, drawing it in like a black hole before transforming into something that countered all it had absorbed. Belinda was the right answer to every question, whether it was controlling enemies, empowering allies or using items to transform into a warrior or powerful magician.

Clive remained both the weakest individual combatant, and most powerful damage dealer. Zara could match him over wide area, and Jason could over time, but when it came to hurting one thing *now*, neither came close. His previous spikes of destructive output now came much closer together, with catastrophic secondary effects.

Clive also had several powerful buffs that enhanced Humphrey and Sophie especially. One delivered powerful retribution effects to anyone who attacked them, while

the other surrounded them with consumable runes whose effects were varied and random, but always potent. Neil's means to enhance the team had likewise reached a new level.

Zara's power progression was somewhat unusual in that her powers grew smaller, rather than bigger. Her area attacks had always been fitting for her former title of Hurricane Princess, being as powerful as they were imprecise. She now had options that would concentrate the power of a storm to the size of a fist, tearing through enemies like a chainsaw through custard.

Humphrey's role in most of their tactics was to be the buff-laden centrepiece of the team. This usually left him as some combination of initiator, primary weapon, distraction and bait. Clive and Neil used Onslow's shell as a secure battle platform while the rest of the team were mobile and flexible, in accordance with the team's needs and current strategy.

The springclaw gorillas were cunning opponents, not just pouring out of their hidden mountain lair in a wave. They went for merchant caravans and brief hit-and-retreat raids, scouting out targets and drawing off defenders with feint attacks. They demonstrated a clear recognition of the threat posed by adventurers, even before encountering them. This was a hallmark of intelligent monsters who came into being with knowledge already imprinted on their minds.

Rather than charge into the mountains like the last team of adventurers, Humphrey decided to make use of Belinda. She had several abilities that let her use specialised item sets to awaken temporary powers, usually taking on warrior or spellcaster roles. Her Instant Adept power could make her a swift striker or powerful archer, but also take on utility powers as well. With equipment suited to a wilderness scout, she awakened a suite of useful tracking abilities.

Humphrey didn't allow the team to make use of their various flight options, both for the training value and to escape easy detection. The gorillas would spot them easily if they flew around, and were stealthy enough to avoid distant observers. Like many ambush predators and high-intellect monsters, they could suppress their auras until even Jason would have trouble sensing them.

The previous team had taken a flight-and-scan approach to poor effect. Most of the time they had found nothing, only to be ambushed on getting complacent. This was the source of their few kills, but they hadn't come close to finding the main lair.

The team entered the mountains on foot, relying on Belinda's temporary powers. The terrain was inhospitable, with dense forest growth and steep inclines. The sharp cliffs and hidden crevasses made the terrain dangerous, not from a potential fall but from the

constant threat of ambush. Springclaw gorillas also came in less aggressive natural variants, rather than monsters, and such terrain was home territory for them.

Humphrey had his team make their way on foot. Navigating forests and scaling cliffs was well within the capability of their gold-rank attributes, but they needed the skill and experience to make use of them.

“Jason,” Humphrey said, his voice a warning.

“Yes?” Jason asked innocently.

“Your climbing skills seemed to have improved considerably, all of a sudden.”

“That’s because of your excellent leadership.”

“So, you didn’t shadow jump to that last city and buy a climbing skill book?”

“Absolutely not. You just lost track of me because of my inherent stealth.”

“You realise that you’ve given the whole party access to the tactical map, right?

The one with our locations on it?”

“I, uh, did forget about that, yes.”

The mountain pass was beautiful and green in the summer, spanning out ahead of Jason and his team. The ground was a mess of thick scrub and rocks dotting the landscape. A narrow river spilled down in their direction, with a disused and overgrown road running alongside it.

“You said these things are smart, right?” Jason asked.

“I did,” Clive said.

“Are we talking ‘dog that knows how to open the bathroom door’ smart or ‘get a bunch of ghillie suits and bait us into a trap’ smart?”

“That depends,” Clive said. “What’s a ghillie suit?”

“A non-magical disguise. The kind you wear when you’re gearing up to kill some folk.”

“Definitely that one,” Clive said. “You think they’re out there?”

“They’re out there,” Belinda said. “This is home territory for them. They’ll have realised that we’re tracking them by now, and I think the last team showed them that small ambushes won’t stop adventurers. They need an environment where they still have a chance of getting the drop on us, but will let them bring their numbers to bear.”

“With us just standing here talking,” Neil said, “they probably know we know they’re there.”

“And that we know they know we know they know,” Belinda added.

“Don’t start,” Humphrey said. “What do you think, a double scoop slam?”

“They probably won’t bite unless we wander in looking oblivious,” Sophie said.

“Then that’s what we do,” Humphrey said. “Lindy, do you want to go backline or be in the mix?”

“Backline,” she said. “I’ll help Zara and Clive blanket bomb the zone.”

“Zara, cover the others as they withdraw when it kicks off.”

“On it,” she confirmed.

“Jason, I want you trimming the edges. They’re smart, so there’ll be runners once things go badly for them. Mop up most of them, but put a tracker on a couple and let them run. We can trace them back to their lair.”

“Will do.”

“You realise they might not even be out there,” Neil said. “Unless someone is sensing something I’m not.”

“You’re sensing it,” Jason told him. “You’re just not paying attention.”

“To what?” Neil asked.

“You’re focusing on the gorillas,” Jason said. “Look for the auras of everything else. The animals out there that haven’t run already are skittish and hiding.”

“And stop suppressing your sense of smell,” Belinda added. “Your mundane senses are incredibly sharp at gold rank.”

“Oh, I’m well aware of that,” Neil said. “I took one sniff of a city and choked off my sense of smell almost entirely. I would have shut it off entirely, if that didn’t make food taste bland.”

“Your priorities might be a little off kilter,” Zara suggested.

“No, I’m happy with where they’re at,” Neil told her.

“Enough chatter,” Humphrey said. “Stash, you ready?”

The hill mouse in Humphrey’s pocket made an adorable ‘chu’ sound.

“Alright,” Humphrey said. “Move forward, and try to look oblivious.”

“But they definitely know we know,” Neil said as the group moved forward. “Why the pretence?”

“It’s ‘know we know they know’ chicken,” Jason said. “Whoever pretends to be surprised best wins.”

“I’m pretty sure it whoever kills everyone on the other team wins,” Sophie said.

“And I’m pretty sure I said enough chatter,” Humphrey reminded them.

“You always do,” Sophie told him. “It’s adorable that you still try.”

The gorillas waited until the team had well and truly walked into the middle of them before they triggered the ambush. Jason was impressed to see they actually were wearing

something like ghillie suits, the monsters seeming to erupt from the landscape. They leapt at the party who sprang into action.

Jason and Sophie both vanished, Sophie in a blur and Jason into the shadow of a rock. Stash leapt from Humphrey's clothes, transforming into some creature Jason didn't recognise. It was something between a bird and a lizard, or perhaps one and a half of a bird and lizard. It had three heads, three wings and three arms that dangled down from a central body. Existing in flagrant disregard of both aerodynamics and biology, it looks like it should get tangled in itself, fall to the ground and beg to be put out of its misery. Instead, it flitted like a hummingbird, snatching up Neil, Clive and Belinda before taking to the sky. Zara shot up next to Stash's monster form on a blast of wind.

Humphrey was left behind, becoming the last target standing for the leaping monsters. Springclaw gorillas were more agile than their Earth counterparts, as appropriate for their rank. They were named for their signature leap attacks and the sharp claws delivering anticoagulant venom. Their favourite tactic was to deliver rapid strikes and then back off, letting their enemies bleed to death.

The gorillas had learned that their preferred tactic was a poor one against adventurers. The presence of healers and potions made counting on bleed afflictions an unreliable strategy, but they were smart enough to devise a counter. Much of the group turned from Humphrey as the easy target and focused on the withdrawing backliners. They didn't know which one was the healer, but quickly guessed it was one of those trying to escape.

Using their powerful leaps, they launched into the air at Stash. What they met was a descending wall of wind and water, dropping on them like a concrete slab. It smashed them back down, right on top of Humphrey and the gorillas he was fighting. At the last moment, Humphrey teleported away, leaving the monsters to crash into one another.

What was left was a mess of confused gorillas, bodies tumbling and limbs tangling together as Zara's water bomb washed over them. The ambush had gone very wrong very quickly, with almost a hundred monsters scattered and disoriented. They recovered quickly, however, getting up and looking around for their targets. A handful of gorillas started grunting out orders.

The moment the monsters showed signs of reorganising, Sophie reappeared. Dashing through the monsters, she left behind afterimages, seemingly in four places at once. The gorillas resumed their leap attacks at the afterimages, all of which imploded. They turned into points of dimensional suction force, the aggressive jumps from the gorillas again turning into helpless tumbling.

The areas around the imploded afterimages were covered with disorienting illusions, triggering vertigo in the monsters as they attempted to recover. Wind blades shot out from the suction points still yanking gorillas off their feet.

While this was going on, Clive had called out Onslow, the flying rune tortoise expanding his shell to let Clive, Belinda and Neil inside.

“Second scoop,” Humphrey said through voice chat. Belinda, peering out from the edge of the shell, looked to the ground below. The four suction points formed a square, and she conjured a force tether right in the middle. A crystal rod rose from the ground and a force beam shot out, connecting with every gorilla in the area.

The way Belinda’s Force Tether power worked was to drag every tethered creature towards it. It inflicted little damage to those that allowed themselves to be dragged, inflicting escalating damage to those that resisted. In this instance, the suction points from Sophie’s mirage power did the resisting for them, yanking the gorillas away from the tether rod. The gorillas were physically powerful enough to resist both effects, but the disorienting illusion from Sophie’s power made it hard to get their feet under them.

Slowly but surely, Belinda’s force tether won out as Sophie’s power faded. The gorillas were yanked into a pile as the screech of a descending missile filled the air. Humphrey landed right on top of the force tether, destroying it immediately. This triggered the detonation effect of the tether on top of the explosion of Humphrey’s Dive Bomb power. Neil’s Burst Shield power snapped into place right before Humphrey landed, absorbing the damage from the tether blast on Humphrey and detonating itself, inflicting a third blast on the beleaguered monsters.

After the execution of the double scoop slam, the monsters were scattered, hurt confused. They scrambled to even understand what was happening, let alone mount a counterattack. Clive and Zara started blanketing the area with destructive magic, Belinda alternately reducing their cooldowns and copying their powers. The gorillas that had been furthest from the centre saw the battle was lost and moved to escape rather than join their fellows. They bolted for the surrounding forests and cliffs, their loping runs punctuated by huge leaps.

As they fled, shadowy arms jutted from the shadows of the rocky landscape, stabbing at them with red and black daggers. The damage seemed negligible, so they ignored the minor wounds and continued their flight. Jason, unnoticed as his cloak pulled shadows around him, softly incanted his Castigate spell. The Mark of Sin it inflicted would let him track them, should any of them survive the other afflictions his shadow arms had delivered.

Jason and Humphrey cleaned up the handful of monsters that survived Zara and Clive's indiscriminate blasting. Without any kind of healing, the monsters that fled fell to Jason's afflictions. He could sense the ones he had marked converging on what was presumably their lair. After looting the dead monsters, the team tracked them down, mopping up what was left of the herd. Only a handful of monsters had been left to guard the cave system they had made a home of, against other monsters and magical beasts.

"That was clean," Humphrey said in the aftermath. "I think we're starting to get our cohesion back. Let's not get complacent, though."

Jason slapped Neil companionably on the back.

"Mate, I saw the timing of that shield you dropped on Humpy. That was immaculate."

Neil gave Jason a suspicious look, waiting for a backbiting comment that never came. Jason had moved on, slinging an arm around Clive's shoulder.

The team looted the monsters and recovered what they could of what the gorillas had taken from raiding towns and caravans. They then portalled back to the town where they'd left the cloud ship. The adventurers whose job they'd taken over said they would go check the battle site before reporting the contract completed. Humphrey gave them directions and left them to it. Jason and his companions returned to the cloud ship and moved on.