

Chapter 480

Supplies

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

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

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

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

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

"You lost, friend?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's right," she said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, that's a good idea."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Marrying a princess."

“Yep.”

“You see that as a particular danger?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

She patted the frog affectionately on the back.

“You’re a good boy, aren’t you Neil?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Uh, g’day?”

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

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

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

“It’s what most men come here for.”

“It’s not what I came for.”

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

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

The priest gave Jason a sympathetic look.

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

“You have prostitutes breeding little priests?”

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

Jason held up his hands.

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

“Well, why didn’t you say so?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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