

## Chapter 641

### Settling Differences With a Nice Chat

The brick locker room under the fighting cages was small, which made sense as there were two for each of the four cages. They weren't much different from domestic bathrooms in size and layout. Jason emerged from the shower having washed off the blood, of both himself and his opponent. His regenerative abilities had already healed his injuries, the biggest factor being Colin.

Jason's clingy cyclist-style outfit was surprisingly resilient and hadn't ripped, so after washing it off in the shower as well he yanked it back on, ignoring the wetness of it. He didn't bother with crystal wash for himself or his clothes as they would soon be bloodied again. Just as he was awkwardly yanking the wet top into place with sharp tugs, the door opened to admit the chihuahua-headed outworlder Zolit.

"Not bad, Cook," Zolit told him as he strode inside. "The bookmakers let people keep betting into the start of the fight because there are always those chumps who think they can read how it goes from the opening moves.

"Does that mean I get a bigger slice?" Jason asked not bothering to look at the skinny man in the white suit.

"Sure does. Of course, being your first fight, there's only so much going around."

Jason turned to stare at the little man.

"Hey, I'm not responsible for the betting, and the later rounds are where the real money is. Everyone is paying attention to this Nightingale girl, and that's where all the money is going. Even putting aside what she looks like, which is just... wow, she's really good. I mean, no offence to your respectable skills, but she is just plain better than you. You get a lot of travelling adventurers trying their hand in the cages, and most don't do that great. In a box, with no powers, it's a different fight. But this girl knows her way around a cage."

"I'm well aware of her competencies."

"You know her?"

"I'm a cook for an adventuring team. She's on that team."

"No kidding. Think she'll go easy on you if you get matched up?"

"I do not."

"Good thing you weren't matched up until the final round, then. You're up against some adventurer next, but people saw you both fight and the odds are pretty even. Maybe take a few hits early so the bookies can roll up some chumps? Keep up the turnaround

fights if you want to fatten up your piece of the pudding. I know that means taking an extra beating and I was even bringing you a potion to kick that healing into action. You don't appear to be having any problems in that regard, though."

"Isn't it about time you left so I can get in the right headspace?"

"Okay, I'll go. I think you've got this next fight but try and make it look like a struggle. It'll help shift the betting odds for the fight after, and that's where you'll make your money."

Jason didn't respond and Zolit left. The small man was concerning to Jason in that his aura showed nothing but what Jason would expect from a mid-tier underworld fight promoter. Since he was an outworlder like Jason, it was more strange for him to be ordinary than not, especially given his unusual appearance. Jason's Eurasian features didn't match any of the human ethnic groups he'd encountered on Pallimustus, but there were enough variations that he didn't especially stand out. The little chihuahua-faced man would have had much more trouble blending in.

The upcoming fight was not playing on Jason's mind. Win or lose, it was just an experience for him. More pressing was the question of what to do about Zolit. While it wasn't a rule that outworlders had to get involved in exceptional events, it was his understanding that it was almost always the case.

There had been another outworlder in Rimaros when Jason arrived, but they had never gotten to meet. From what he discovered, she had become embroiled in a conflict between some lesser elemental gods and had left the city early in the monster surge in an attempt to broker peace. The monster surge was bad enough without a holy war involving powerful elemental forces.

She had apparently achieved results, as some of the priests in question had been on hand to help shield coastal communities from the backlash of the Builder's flying city crashing into the sea and causing a tsunami. The outworlder herself had not returned and Jason hoped to meet her in the future.

Compared to that, Zolit was a more curious proposition. On one hand, Jason wanted to reveal his full identity and learn all about the man's experiences. On the other, he seemed a relatively ordinary and not wildly trustworthy person. His instincts told him not to break cover, as flimsy as his false identity was. There was a big difference between a mysterious stranger who quickly moved on and hanging out his secrets for the world to see.

Jason pushed the small man out of his mind, shifting his concentration to the fight ahead. Zolit could wait, although Jason wondered if he was letting the other man make the

choice for him. The emotions he read in the man's aura held disproportionately more curiosity than caution.

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Zolit returned to his reserved seating, mildly annoyed at its location. The four cages were placed in a square, with seating around and in between them. He was on the opposite side from the fight everyone wanted to watch, anticipating the Nightingale again making absolute brutality seem graceful. Instead, he was stuck watching the cook with his strange scars and air of mystery.

Plonking down next to Benella, Zolit sat with a sullen expression as the panels in the cage floor opened to admit the fighters. It went about as Zolit had predicted, with the adventurer's inexperience operating without his powers showing in his messed-up rhythm.

The cook fought a little differently, to Zolit's mild surprise, although the start was quite similar. The opponent was aggressive but lacked the same mastery of the cage that the cook's previous opponent had. This new one had more skill, but failed to make use of the confined space and sharp boundaries of the cage.

Rather than unveil a countering strategy that slowly increased the wariness of his opponent, the turn in the fight came suddenly. After feeling out his opponent for a while, the cook started aggressively leaping on every mistake his opponent made. Those pacing issues became glaring weaknesses as the cook used each one to launch not just attacks but entire attack sequences. Caught on the back foot, the opponent was pounded repeatedly, which was the kind of hammering it took to deal with a silver-ranker.

Zolit observed as the cook's style went through subtle changes throughout the fight, shifting his approach to keep his opponent off-balance, every time the adventurer started adapting to the cook. He started to wonder if the cook had started playing possum long before Zolit suggested it.

As the fight continued, Zolit was joined by an unexpected guest. Claiming the seat next to his was a prestigious figure of the underground fight scene, a priest of the Warrior called Kraysch. The priest was an elf, who were naturally slender as a people, but like Neil and Lucian Lamprey, Kraysch was unusually bulky for his kind. He was tall but not towering, broad-shouldered but not hulking. His loose clothes, the standard informal outfit of his church, looked similar to martial arts training gear.

"What brings you by, honoured priest?" Zolit asked, straightening his posture.

"My god is very happy with this place, Mr Kreen. Battle is rarely fair, so places like this, which are as close to fair as you are likely to find, fall under his favour."

"We are blessed," Zolit said, his tone almost a question as he tried to figure out what the priest wanted.

"Being under my god's favour means that he doesn't like things disrupting it."

"Apologies, honoured priest, but I am not a man of political mindset. I'm not sure what you're getting at."

Kraysch sighed.

"There is a certain kind of story," he said. "I'm sure you've heard some variation. It's about a man whose true skill in life is killing, so he kills and he kills and he kills until all that he is, is a killer. Until all that he has is killing. So he gives it up, in search of something else. Anything else. He becomes an unremarkable man doing an unremarkable job."

The priest gave Zolit a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

"Of course," Kraysch, "he's not really an unremarkable man, and he gets remarked upon. Someone notices something and starts digging deeper. And stories being stories, the man gets dragged into something he shouldn't, and is forced to resume all the killing he tried to leave behind. Are you familiar with this kind of story?"

"I am, Priest Kraysch."

"And are you a smart man or a wise man, Mr Kreen?"

"I aspire to each of them, honoured priest, but fear I fall short of both."

"Then perhaps you would be open to some spiritual guidance."

"Of course."

"When an ostensibly unremarkable man, with an unremarkable job – say, a cook for instance – tells you that he doesn't like questions, you have a smart path and a wise path. The smart path is to ignore him and learn all you can, as there are dangerous secrets lurking about. The wise path is to let go of your curiosity and leave it be."

"The Church of the Warrior is interested in the cook?"

Kraysch bowed his head, saddened.

"Curiosity it is, then."

Kraysch stood up just as the cook's opponent fell down, too beaten and exhausted to continue. Zolit stood as well.

"Priest Kraysch, I wouldn't want to do anything that would frustrate your deity."

"I have already told you of my god's feelings. But since you have already asked the question, then no. The only interest the Church of the Warrior has in your fighter is not getting involved with him. Faith does not always need to be smart, Mr Kreen, but it should be wise whenever possible."

The priest walked away leaving a confused Zolit behind. The hitherto silent Benella, Zolit's aide, only spoke once he was gone.

"Do you believe him? That the church isn't involved with your cage-fighting cook?"

"I think it's likely he's telling the truth, if only because I'm not important enough to lie to. But it's not just that. I think he came to me like this because the church isn't involved and doesn't want to be."

"You think the cook is some secret super-warrior? That he's hiding his real skills?"

"No. I think the danger is if he starts using his powers."

"You think he would start using his powers and go on a rampage here?"

"How would I know? I met the guy, what? An hour ago? And I'm already starting to hate this guy. If you want people to think you're a cook, maybe don't join a fighting tournament and flash your scars you stupid..."

Zorit let out a little growl, and Benella successfully hid her reaction to the tiny-dog adorableness of it.

"What are you going to do?" she asked. "This fighter is starting to sound like trouble."

"Starting? A church full of combat fanatics doesn't want him making a mess at an underground fighting area. Something like that isn't the way trouble starts, Bennie. That's how trouble ends."

"Then I'll ask again: what will you do?"

"Did you notice what Kraysch said about the cook not liking questions? That was something he said in the prep room, which has a privacy screen. A good one."

"Meaning?"

"His god has blessed this whole place. Warrior probably directed his priest to come over here and talk to me. I do not want gods paying attention to me, for a variety of reasons. I've already got a bad feeling that the cook is better at reading me than he should be. And if this guy is a big enough deal that gods are moving, I'm moving out of the way. I'm going to take the advice of my fine local clergyman and not ask any questions. I'm going to pay the cook what he earns and send him on his way, in the hope that he takes the money and leaves. If someone else wants to make trouble that's their problem; I just want to avoid anyone blaming me for it, be it the top fight organisers or Warrior, the god of not settling differences with a nice chat."

## Chapter 642

### The Sex Magic Thing

Jason's second opponent in the underground cage fights had been capable enough, but suffered from a critical flaw in his fighting techniques. This was due to an absence of the essence abilities he normally had access to, and Jason completely sympathised. Combat styles interacted with essence powers on a spectrum, with one end having the fighting style as the skeleton, with the essence powers building off of it. This was Sophie's end of the scale, and such adventurers fared the best when deprived of their powers.

At the other end of the scale was Jason, whose essence abilities were the fulcrum of his combat style. He had developed his martial arts specifically to work around his powers, rather than his powers working around them. When deprived of his essence abilities, such as in the cage fights he was undertaking, he was forced to heavily adapt his normal style.

Jason had the good fortune to have enjoyed Rufus as a teacher and Sophie as a sparring partner, which meant he had the practise adapting his style. Rufus, as a magic swordsman, fell in the middle of the spectrum, where skill and powers both needed to be mastered in order to thrive.

Rufus had been adamant about preparing for the worst-case scenarios, such as being forced to fight while power-suppressed. Given that Jason had met Rufus in that exact situation, he understood why Rufus had been so emphatic about it.

The opponent clearly fell on Jason's end of the spectrum, but without his training at the hands of Rufus. He also lacked the time sparring with Sophie, who relished hammering every gap in Jason's techniques caused by the absence of his powers. After feeling out his opponent, Jason dished out the same treatment. When he was done he looked over at where Sophie had already finished her opponent and was watching him from her own cage.

"Took you long enough," she called out to him.

"I'm a lover, not a fighter," he called back.

"And how's that working out?"

"Well, I'm fighting so... not great."

Sophie let out a laugh that startled Jason with how free she seemed. Although she was using the Nightingale name again, as she had in the fighting pits of Greenstone, she was a world away from the prickly creature he remembered. He flashed her a grin and then walked down the stairs revealed by the opening floor panel, into the changing room below.

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"You really do know the Nightingale, don't you?" Zolit asked.

"I already told you that," Jason said as he emerged from the shower with a towel around his waist, using a second towel to dry his hair. Zolit ignored his nakedness, but his aide did not, her eyes wandering over Jason's scarred torso. The lean, sculpted muscle was unremarkable for a silver ranker, but the permanent marring of his flesh was not.

"My eyes are up here, lady," Jason told her.

"I'm not looking at your eyes."

"*Bennie*," Zolit hissed sharply and she sullenly stalked off.

"You seem worried, Zolit," Jason said. More than his body language, there was a change in Zolit's aura since their last encounter. Someone or something had put a proper scare in the little man.

"I'm just nervous about your next match," Zolit lied. "Two rounds is enough to make sure no one is left standing through luck."

Jason's ability to read the complex emotions of people through their auras had rapidly grown over the years. On Earth especially, where most people had little to no power to shield it, he had learned to dig through the nuances of what their auras revealed. Jason had a feeling that Zolit had some inkling of either Jason's real identity or had become aware of how dangerous learning it could be.

Underneath that surface concern, though, was a deeper worry. He was repressing it well, leaving Jason with no sense of what it was, but there was a fear that any trouble coming from Jason would bring it to light. Odds were that it was just some criminal activity making Zolit nervous; the cage fights were literally underground, but not against the law. If there was something shadier going on as a side business, that would explain the small man's wariness.

Zolit left and Jason's familiars re-emerged, Jason's gaze lingering on the door that had closed behind the fight promoter.

"Do you think Mr Kreen is related to our real purpose here?" Shade asked.

"It's worth checking, but probably not."

"An outworlder might be more aware of how dangerous the messengers could be than the people native to this world," Shade suggested. "Such knowledge could make them more amenable to being an agent for the messengers, should they come calling."

"That's good enough for me. Have Stella look into him, but have her focus on the aide more than him. What did you make of her aura?"

"It seemed easy enough to read," Shade said. "You noticed something suspicious?"

“The thirsty vibes she was giving me seemed a little performative. I haven’t been paying that much attention, focused as I’ve been on Zolit, but that may be the point.”

“You think she is masking her aura and using Zolit as a distraction, so no one looks too closely at the ordinary elf standing behind him?”

“Anyone with halfway decent aura senses will mark him as an outworlder, and that draws attention. It certainly drew mine. But I think whatever spooked Zolit may have worried her a little and she overcompensated. I’m not saying that means she’s what we’re looking for, but she seems a better candidate than Zolit. I think that guy really is just an outworlder who found his calling as a small-time crook.”

“Do you want me to surveil her?”

“Let’s hold off on that for now. If she is masking her aura, then she’s very good at it. And if she’s that good with her aura, she might spot you. Let’s give Estella time to do some professional spying before we make any more moves.”

“Are you implying that I’m an amateur, Mr Asano?”

“I’m saying that I’m an amateur and you’re stuck with me.”

“Very astute, Mr Asano. Self-awareness is the path to enlightenment.”

“You are terrible at giving compliments, you know that?”

“I work with what I have.”

Above them, the panel at the top of the stairs slid open.

“Alright,” Jason said, looking up. “Time to go beat up a girl.”

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Jason groaned as he moved to get up, only to have a foot on his torso shove him back to the floor.

“You know,” he croaked, “I could probably keep this up for a while. I’m in a lot of pain, it’s true, but being in pain is kind of my thing.”

“You’re a masochist, are you?” the woman looming over him asked. She was an unusually tall elf, muscular, like Neil, but she wore it a lot better, at least in Jason’s opinion. Proportionally she was similar to other elves he’d seen but fifteen percent larger, like looking at her through a zoom lens.

“I prefer to think of myself as open to new experiences, but looking back I can see how—”

Jason yanked on the leg pressing into him as his hand pushed the back of her knee. His body spun like a top and flipped away from her in a display of acrobatics only available to silver rankers or people bitten by radioactive spiders. His opponent was already moving, a foot catching him in the gut as he landed on his feet.



Jason let the momentum carry him, softening the blow as he started a one-handed backflip but then shoved himself into the air. She had predicted the backflip with her follow-up lunging kick that hit nothing but air. She threw out a punch as Jason pivoted in the air, twisting to catch her in the chest with a kick. It did no damage, having been launched from the air with no leverage, but it shoved her away long enough for him to land.

Jason held up his hands.

“Can we just pause for a moment to appreciate how awesome this fight is?”

He failed to block her straight punch to the face and he reeled back.

“No,” she said and kept coming.

The level of the training and experience his opponent possessed was thoroughly imprinted on Jason as the fight continued, lasting well past Sophie's match. In most cases, a drawn-out match was not enjoyed by the crowds, but this fight had the audience fully engaged. The elf's relentless, efficient attacks clashed with Jason's shifting styles and tricky counterattacks. There were wild acrobatics and frenetic exchanges of strikes, punctuated by lulls as they felt each other out. Jason attempted distracting banter in such moments, usually followed by his receiving a sharp blow to the head.

Jason had trained to adapt his skills for when he didn't have his powers, but the results were not flawless. Slowly but surely, the elf picked him apart, the way Jason had done with his previous opponent. It was just a much longer and more even affair where Jason landed more than a few brutal attacks of his own.

Both combatants were heavily pummelled, but Jason's stamina was the first to give out. Even so, he desperately clung on, used to fighting on the ragged edge. He even managed to surprise his opponent, who had managed to break apart every trick and tactic Jason had thrown out and baited her into.

Back to the wall and giddy from a merciless pounding, Jason's not entirely lucid mind put him into fight or flight, drawing on old experiences. The cage fight didn't have much in the way of rules, but he had still been treating it as a sport, albeit a brutal one. The savagery that came from Jason entering survival mode startled the elf.

Taken aback, a fist to her face included a knuckle to the eye. Jason yanked her arm straight and twisted it before bringing his elbow down on hers, bending it the wrong way. Jason almost turned the fight around through raw aggression before she countered. His onslaught was vicious but also sloppy, both from the mindless approach and his still-exhausted body. Even so, he didn't stop until she hammered his body so badly it would no longer move. She stood over him, staggering, blood dripping from her mouth and fists.

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The door to the change room opened, admitting not Zolit but Sophie. Jason was already healed, largely due to the recuperative powers provided by Colin. He was still painted red, however, having not yet taken to the shower.

"I can't believe you cheered for the other person," he groaned.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she said innocently.

"I heard you yelling 'kick him in the bits, random lady!'"

"That could have been anyone."

"Uh-huh."

"She was pretty okay, I'll admit. It took me a lot less time to handle her than for her to handle you, but still, not bad."

"Oh, that's how it is?"

"You couldn't even make it to the final round."

"Oh, you want to go find a mirage chamber and see how that goes?"

"Absolutely."

"Ugh, I forgot I was talking to someone who kicked me in the face the moment we met."

"I could have kicked you in the face again today if you hadn't lost to a girl."

"You're a girl."

"I'm a woman."

"So was she, believe me."

Sophie narrowed her eyes.

"How is the sex magic thing going?"

"It's mostly been me getting the crap kicked out of me."

"That wasn't the first time?"

"It was not."

"How about the other thing? Stumbled across anything yet?"

"I might have something. My promoter's aide tweaked my spider-sense."

"Your what?"

"Never mind. Estella will look into it."

"Then you're free to come drown your sorrows. All the arena big-nobs are throwing a party for the fighters who managed to avoid embarrassing themselves."

"And that includes me?"

"No. You kept getting punched in the face midway through a pathetic banter attempt. But I can get you into the party."

"What do you mean by pathetic?"

## Chapter 643

### The Power and the Control

Jason had yet to enter any of the towering glass and metal structures he had seen from a distance while approaching the city. This would soon change as the clientele of the underground arena departed, Jason amongst them. As he had speculated on finding the VIP area, there was a private entrance aside from the tunnels he had shuffled in through himself, shoulder to shoulder with the crowd. Rather than just a less crowded set of stairs, the private exit was an underground tram station.

Two lines connected the arena chambers to the city's underground tram network. As Jason let Zolit guide him, the fight promoter answered Jason's questions about the tramway. Jason listened closely, careful not to give his aide, Benella, any undue attention. The entertainment district was the most outlying section of the tram network, which mostly serviced the affluent inner districts. The lines out to the entertainment district were restricted to at least the semi-elite, so they didn't have to mix with the rabble. Jason's silver-rank adventurer badge, even being an auxiliary one, was enough to get him aboard.

The ride had Jason reminiscing about the submerged subway in Greenstone, which was more impressive than the dark tunnels of the tramway. By leveraging the property of the region's unique magic stone, Greenstone's city founders had created a fascinating train made up of submarines. Absently, he wondered how long it would be until he saw it again.

The station they eventually arrived at was disappointingly similar to a subway station on Earth, with plain white tiles covering the walls. The main difference was that the station was cleaner than what he would have expected on Earth.

"Private station, for the building above us," Zolit explained to Jason. "It's the biggest hotel in the region; lots of mercantile river barons."

They stepped onto an elevating platform, crammed in with other lesser lights of the underground fighting scene. Sophie was nowhere to be seen, having been taken on one of the earlier tram rides that were less crowded. Zolit's aide begged off for the night, leaving him and Jason to ride the platform together. It moved swiftly up through the building until it arrived at a floor that appeared to be a private club.

It was not as raucous as a nightclub but more vibrant than a country club. There was a small section where a slew of attractive young people were dancing. They were generally low rank and in clothes that were fashionable but not expensive, akin to what he had seen in the entertainment district. The people watching them from the mezzanine floor

above were dressed in more expensive and conservative attire, and the way they looked at the dancers reminded Jason of people eyeing a buffet.

Masking the distaste in his aura, Jason panned his gaze slowly around the room, taking it all in. There was a double-wide spiral staircase leading up, next to the elevating platforms at the centre of the room. Music that was an odd mix of classical and old-school electronica to Jason's ears came from oversized recording crystals floating in the air. They served double-duty, also shedding the light that illuminated the room.

Columns, booths and tables made the room an obstacle course, which patrons traversed to reach the four bars, each placed against one of the four walls. The room was a perfect square, with walls made entirely of glass. The four bars were situated such that the walls behind the bartender offered panoramic views from the tall building, obscured by various colourful bottles. Jason intended to investigate them shortly.

Before that, he made his way over to the south wall to take in the view, Zolit trailing behind. It was Jason's first real look at the heart of the city, having only seen the dark metal towers and glass ziggurats from afar. It turned out the club was in one of the ziggurats, with Jason's floor being the lowest level of the cube sitting atop the building.

Just to the south of the building, a wide river flowed east to west. The river docks were lit up, operating through the night, but the river also had more decorative stretches. Many sections had trees lining the banks, with multicoloured lights painting them with rainbows. Jason couldn't help but wonder about the value of riverfront property left undeveloped for the sake of aesthetics, but could not deny his appreciation of it. The outer reaches of the city, visible from the height of the building he was in, only showed sporadic lighting. The inner districts, however, were lit up like an Earth metropolis.

"I have to say, Zolit, you've found a pretty nice place to call home."

"Yeah," Zolit said, moving to stand next to Jason as they both looked out over the city. "We endured the monster surge better than most, but this mess upriver..."

"The messengers," Jason said.

"Right now it's only the adventurers getting worked up," Zolit said. "The Adventure Society is talking about war, but it hasn't affected the rest of the city quite yet. If anything, people are scrambling for lucrative contracts to supply the conflict."

"People ignore disaster in the face of profit," Jason said. "I've seen it in my homeland."

Zolit opened his mouth to ask where that was, then restrained himself.

“I think the government and the Adventure Society are trying to shield the populace,” he said instead. “People aren’t ready for another conflict when they aren’t done recovering from the last.”

“That’s what the Adventure Society is for, right?” Jason asked. “Protecting people?”

“That’s what they say,” Zolit scoffed. “You know the society controls all the suppression collars we use in the arena?”

“They are regulated magic,” Jason pointed out.

“Regulated my bony rump,” Zolit said. “I could find someone to sell you an unregistered suppression collar without leaving this room.”

Jason didn’t argue. The person Zolit found could even have been Jason himself, having accumulated his own notable collection of suppression collars over the years.

“The Adventure Society makes a big show of bringing in auditors to make sure none of the collars have gone missing, as if the arena was where they all leak from. What they really want is to remind everyone who has the power and the control.”

“I thought power and control were the Church of Dominion’s, er... dominion.”

“I don’t see them speaking up. The Adventure Society has been telling everyone what to do for years now. Surge readiness, then the surge, then the Builder and now these guys with wings? There’s always a new reason they get to tell everyone what to do. The society has been encroaching more and more, and I’ve never even met a priest of Dominion.”

“You’re better off,” Jason said. “Their boss is annoying.”

“Boss?” Zolit asked before stopping himself. Jason felt him forcibly staunch the curiosity he could feel in the small man’s aura. The small man couldn’t entirely help himself, though, for all the good it did him. The penetrating look he gave Jason was spoiled by his big chihuahua eyes.

“If a man was looking to stay out of trouble, he’d move along nice and quick,” Zolit said. “If he stays in a place like this, it could be the man is just telling himself he wants to stay out of trouble when what he really wants is to find it. However much damage it does.”

Jason glanced at Zolit and chuckled.

“Someone put the wind right up you, didn’t they mate? I’ve got no problems with you, Zolit. But I’m not the danger you should be watching out for.”

“And what should I be watching out for?”

“Best you don’t watch out at all, lest you draw its attention. If you are what you seem, then the safest move for you is to stick to your normal routine. Just avoid any uncertainty as much as you can.”

“Avoiding uncertainty is my normal routine. But normal is in short supply these days.”

“Isn’t it just?” Jason agreed with a chuckle. He then turned his gaze from the window to the bar. “I think I might get myself a drink.”

“Stick to the bar down here or one floor up,” Zolit said. “Higher than that is for the big-timers, not the likes of us. Maybe your Nightingale friend can get you up there. They like winners, and they love big-time adventurers, and she’s both. She’ll be enjoying a sickening amount of adoration right now. The top end of this club is still the bottom end of high society, and important adventurers are famous for opening doors.”

Jason could feel Zolit’s frustration, which was causing him to prod at Jason, even knowing that anything he learned was trouble. Jason mercifully left the man behind and made his way to the bar, flashing the elven bartender a smile.

“What’ll it be?” she asked.

“I don’t know the local beverages very well. Something colourful and sweet?”

“What rank, and how fancy do you want to go?”

“Silver,” he said, “and as fancy as it’ll go.”

“You should go one floor up,” she said. “That’s where they keep the stuff the people down here can’t afford.”

“Good to know, thank you,” he said, getting back off his stool as he flashed another smile. “Shame, though. What I’ve seen down here seems quite enticing.”

Jason made his way to the stairs, following them up to another level. The only overt difference from the floor below was the additional bouncers in front of the stairs leading further up, as well as at the elevating platforms. None of the bouncers were elves, and instead were mostly imposing leonids, plus one of the rarely-seen draconians.

Jason headed for one of the bars and his eyes landed on the bartender, who looked identical to the one below. Peeking closer with his aura he sensed they were definitely different people, but with a subtle bond between them.

“Oh no,” he muttered as he wandered over. The bartender came to serve him.

“You have a familiar face,” he told her.

“You met my sister downstairs? She’s Isabelle, and I’m Mirelle. But everyone calls me Elle.”

“There aren’t eight of you, are there?”

“Just twins, sorry. Disappointed?”

“On the contrary; I’ve been having trouble keeping up.”

“I’m not quite sure what that means,” she said, narrowing her eyes as she looked him up and down. He noticed her gaze paused on the scars on his face, as well as the larger one at the base of his throat

“Adventurer?”

“Sort of.”

“Sort of?”

“I cook for adventurers. There’s still stabbing, but it’s safer.”

“You don’t look like someone who avoids danger. You came in with the cage arena crowd?”

“I did.”

“You’re a fighter?”

“No one told me the rule about needing a flunkey to fight for you. I fought, but I’m not sure that makes me a fighter. A fighter would end up with sore fists instead of a sore head.”

“Get dropped in the first round?”

“Third.”

“At silver rank? That’s suspiciously good for someone who got pushed into a cage for not knowing the first rule.”

“I had it on good authority that the first rule was to not talk about fight club. I don’t suppose you have something for a sore head?”

“Not a problem,” she said. “Everything I’ve got back here will give you a sore head.”

He snorted a laugh.

“I’m going to have a rough morning. Alright, set me up with something colourful, sweet and expensive.”

“It’s not that kind of establishment, fighter boy,” she said with a cheeky smile. He flashed her a grin.

“I’m just looking for drinks; I’ll make my own arrangements for the other thing.”

“Good to know,” said a handsome man with midnight black skin and colourful beads woven through his hair. He slid onto the stool next to Jason. “Are you going to be monopolising this lovely young woman all night?”

“That’s up to her,” Jason said, holding his hand out for the other man to shake. “John Miller, nice to meet you.”

“Emir Bahadir.”

“I think someone like you belongs on the higher floors, Mr Bahadir.”

“I was looking for my friend Jason. We were meant to meet in a couple of weeks, but then I heard he was running off to hunt a species of dangerous and aggressive birds.”

“I have it on good authority that he won’t be available until the end of next week. Maybe you should take that time to visit other old friends.”

Emir stood up, sliding a gold spirit coin onto the bar that only lasted a moment before vanishing into the barkeeper's hands.

"I'm confident that John here can more than cover his own drinks," Emir told her, "but it's always nice to give a gift when making new friends. I'll see you again, John."

Jason shook his head.

"You know who that was, right?" Mirabelle asked once Emir was gone.

"He did just tell me his name. Emir something?"

"That's Emir Bahadir. The treasure hunter. You know him, don't you?"

"In another life. Since he went ahead and paid you, let's go ahead and rack up some drinks."

Mirelle gave him another assessing look.

"Colourful, sweet and expensive, was it?" she asked.

"It was indeed. I'll trust your judgement."

"Oh, you probably shouldn't do that," she said as she turned around to pull one colourful bottle after another from the shelves behind her.

"You know, a lot of the out-of-towners like that awful, throat-burning stuff," she said. "I like amber as much as the next girl, but who needs a hundred varieties of throat fire?"

"I have always enjoyed elven liquor, ever since I first discovered it," Jason told her. "A sweet rainbow of drunkenness for me, thank you."

"I can arrange that. A lot of the fighters like to one-up each other with the nastiest drinks anyone will sell them."

"I've had to drink quite enough bitterness in my time, thank you."

Jason watched as she poured out a row of expensive drinks. The kind of specialised ingredients that went into high-rank liquor, at least anything that was more drink than boat polish, cost the kind of money that regular people used to renovate their homes. High-end spirit coins were not used for ordinary transactions. They were used to buy things like buildings and skyships, or the kind of indulgences that powerful adventurers enjoyed.

"I'm making what we call a rainbow wave," Mirelle told him. "There are countless variations, based on price and availability, but the idea is for each drink to be enhanced by the one that came before it. A good rainbow wave is how you tell the difference between a real bartender and someone just handing you drinks for money."

"Well, you certainly ain't that," a voice slurred from a few seats along the bar. "I've been waiting for you to serve me, but you just keep talking to rich pricks."

"I'm not the only bartender," Mirelle said, gesturing at the other staff. "In fact, I watched you wave one of them off. Also, you seem to have had quite enough."



"I want to be served by you. I like pretty girls."

"Well, if you want them to like you back," she told him, "I suggest spending less on drinks and more on soap."

A snarl crossed the man's face until a massive hand covered in dark green scales arrived on his shoulder. It belonged to a massive bouncer who was all the more intimidating for being a draconian. Jason had only seen a few of them before, but they were tall and well built, with swept-back faces and tiny scales instead of skin.

"There are three kinds of people in this club," the draconian said with a deep hissing voice. "Those important enough that they can be obnoxious and those that aren't. You're coming with me."

"Is the third kind the ones who aren't obnoxious at all?" Jason asked.

"It is," Mirelle said.

"Well, that's not me. I think I'll have these drinks and then get thrown out. Will you put in a good word for me?"

"Drink up and we'll see," she said as she went to serve another patron.

As Mirelle moved away, a tall elf claimed the barstool to Jason's left. Jason looked over and then up at the woman who had beaten him in the third round. Unlike Neil, whose bulk shifted his proportions from the elven norm, this woman looked like a normal elf but scaled up.

"This yours?" she asked, nodding at the yet-untouched row of drinks.

"It is," Jason said. "You like a rainbow wave?"

"Gods, no," she said, then nodded at Mirelle who was coming back. "Give me a hursketh claw."

Jason watched as Mirelle mixed a drink that smelled like aviation fuel.

"I'm Avale," the large elf introduced herself.

"John Miller."

"You fight well, John Miller."

"You fight better."

"That's why I came and found you," she said. "I like drinking with good fighters, but I also like being the best."

"Then this might not be your night," Jason said, leaning forward to look past her.

"Hello, Sophie."

Avale turned to watch Sophie slide onto the barstool on her left.

"Damn it."

## Chapter 644

### Distant Power

Within the relatively confined area of a city, swift travel was a simple matter for Jason. Being able to shadow jump respectable distances through Shade's bodies meant that Jason could deploy his familiar around the city and jump to those locations, sight unseen. Because of this ability, Jason had never gone the long way to the camping grounds just inside the city wall where merchants, adventuring teams and other travellers left their sizeable vehicles. In his brief visits to his team, he would slip in and out using a Shade body.

In the kitchen of Jason's hover yacht, he emerged from a Shade body to find Taika and Gary assembling a hillock of slices and pastries.

"That is not the basis for a healthy breakfast," he scolded.

"Bro, it has to be this way. Rufus threatened to cook again, and you were off making whoopee with twins. Congratulations on that, by the way."

Jason scowled and flung out his arm in an angry gesture. The floor opened up and Sophie passed up through it on a moving section of floor. She had a confused expression and a magically-enhanced dumbbell in one hand.

"Firstly," Jason said, "it wasn't twins. It was one woman who happens to have a twin. Her twin was not involved."

"I'm sorry bro. You must be disappointed."

"That I didn't lure sisters into sharing a sexual encounter with one another?" Jason asked. "That's not okay."

"Oh," Taika said, his brow creasing in thought. "It's kind of creepy when you think about it like that."

"It's extremely creepy when you think about it like that," Jason said before wheeling on Sophie. "What are you telling people?"

"What makes you think it was me?" she asked.

"Because you were there."

"So was Emir."

"We all have our flaws," Jason said. "I imagine that Emir's makes for a fascinating list that does not include a lack of gentlemanly decorum."

"What's he even doing Yaresh?" Neil asked, walking in with a dumbbell in his hand. "And why did Sophie just pass through my cabin?"

"Why weren't you wearing a shirt?" Sophie asked him.

"Because I was in my cabin. You dropped this, by the way."

He tossed the dumbbell lightly through the air and Sophie staggered as she caught it. Unusually for a healer, one of Neil's elf abilities had evolved to give him strength akin to Gary.

"I think if we're going to discuss Emir's presence, we should include him in the conversation," Humphrey suggested as he also entered the kitchen. Being Jason's kitchen, it had plenty of room to accommodate the increasing population. "Also, Jason, what's this I hear about you making sisters do inappropriate things to one another?"

Jason turned a flat glare on Sophie.

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The camping grounds where Jason's cloud vessel was parked had a panoply of other vehicles occupying space. The magical vehicles varied widely in size, design and colour, with the result looking like a wizard shantytown.

Jason hadn't reconfigured the cloud vessel to a cloud palace form, despite the stationary nature of the team's current activities. It had a much larger footprint in that form, and he felt it would be obnoxious to take up even more of a space already crowded with vehicles. They already stood out enough with the hybrid cloud vehicle, although it was far from the only exotic means of transport on display. Jason especially admired an artificial beetle even larger than his own vehicle.

Emir did not share Jason's compunction about overt ostentation. His massive cloud palace required a large enough space that it had to go hard up against the city wall, some way from Jason's vehicle.

While Jason's cloud vessel had gone through extreme changes since Greenstone, Emir's was almost exactly as Jason remembered it. The only differences were minor ones, mostly around the base where it rested on land instead of sea. Emir's palace was larger than Jason's, even when it was on full display.

Emir's preferred design was five grandiose towers, topped by shimmering domes and connected by bridges. It made no attempt to hide its nature, and the cloud material it was made from flaunted brilliant sunset colours.

"I guess I don't need to ask where he parked," Jason said as he and Humphrey walked down a ramp from Jason's vessel. Emir's palace loomed over everything else in the grounds, even obscuring the wall behind it. They looked at the maze of vehicles between them and Emir's palace, then up.

"Fly?" Humphrey suggested.

"Fly," Jason agreed.

Humphrey conjured his dragon wings, air surging as they launched him into the air.

"I shouldn't pull out the cloak," Jason said. "Let's just do a flight suit."

"Are you certain, Mr Asano?" Shade asked from Jason's shadow, his voice tinged with concern. Since leaving Earth behind Shade had not taken a single form based on the vehicles there, even when it was more convenient. Jason had never asked him to, either.

"It's fine," Jason said, not entirely convincingly, but darkness swirled from his shadow to surround him in a hover suit. Jason immediately thought back to his niece flying around over the water, giggling like a fool.

"Mr Asano?"

"It's fine," Jason repeated and took to the air, quickly catching Humphrey's slow progress. They weren't the only ones eschewing ground travel through the grounds and everyone was moving at respectful speeds.

"What is that thing?" Humphrey asked.

"It's something they make on Earth to let people fly without magic," Jason said.

"That works without magic?" Humphrey asked.

"Shade does the magic version," Jason said. "It's a lot more convenient and a lot less loud."

They passed over the grounds before arriving at the massive double doors to Emir's front tower, their flight aids disappearing as they landed. The doors opened up to reveal Emir standing behind them in a cavernous atrium.

"Hello boys," he said with a grin. "Come on in."

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"Has Arabelle spoken to you about Callum?" Jason asked Emir as they rode up an elevating platform.

"She's kept me apprised," Emir said. "I never realised he was already deeply involved when I invited him to join me in Greenstone. He's always kept so much hidden, even when we were at our closest. You're still deciding whether to give him access to Miss Wexler's mother?"

"Yes, although that comes down to what Sophie wants and Arabelle thinks is best. It's for them to decide, not me."

Emir nodded.

"I know that story. You get a cloud flask and start accumulating people, but you have to realise that your roof doesn't always mean your rules."

"He needed help to finally figure that out," a melodious voice said as the platform arrived at the top of the tower. Under the translucent dome was Emir's sprawling office of

mutable cloud furniture, subtly shaped to draw the eye to a massive desk at the back. Sitting behind it was Emir's chief of staff and now wife, Constance.

Emir and Constance had been moving around each other for years, but the power imbalance had sat between them like a wall. Not only was Emir her employer, but also gold rank to her silver. Over the years she had become more and more indispensable to Emir's operations, more partner than employee. Her ascension to gold rank had signalled the final boundary between them falling away and they married during Jason's time on Earth. She got up and moved across the room to meet them, looking contrite in front of Humphrey.

"I owe you and Sophie an apology, Master Geller. I genuinely believed that Callum was trying to protect you, not act on an agenda of his own."

Constance had been training with Callum to finally reach gold rank, returning just as Sophie and Humphrey discovered that Sophie's mother was still alive. Callum had let their best lead get away, ostensibly to shield them from dangers they were too low-rank to confront.

"Yes," Jason told her solemnly. "I hope you learned your lesson that teenagers are always right and you should let them do whatever they want."

Emir snorted a laugh as Constance shook her head and Humphrey gave Jason a flat look.

"Sophie is your age," he pointed out.

Jason frowned, looking Humphrey up and down.

"That's a good point," Jason said. "She's bit of a cradle-snatcher, isn't she?"

Constance gave Humphrey an amused smile.

"If it makes you feel any better," she said, "the difference between Emir and myself is more than the full age of either of you."

Jason and Humphrey both turned to give Emir disapproving looks.

"Oh, come on," he said. "I knew her for twelve years before anything happened."

"Humphrey," Jason said.

"Yes, Jason?"

"Does your world recognise and condemn the concept of grooming?"

"Yes, it does," Humphrey said.

"Now, that's not fair," Emir said jabbing a finger at them. "She was an adult when we met."

"Uh-huh," Jason said.

"I'm sure everything was fully completely legitimate," Humphrey unconvincingly added.,

Constance chuckled at Emir's scowl. He threw out an angry gesture and all the office's cloud furniture dissolved. It reconstituted around them as a series of comfortable chairs with a table in the middle. A hole opened up in the table and a drinks tray rose up, much as Sophie had done earlier in Jason's cloud vessel. They sat down around the table and Emir poured himself a glass of amber liquid as the others looked at him.

"I'm not sure that's what I'd go for this early in the morning," Jason said.

"The greatest joy of power," Emir told him, "is not having to conform to what anyone else wants from you."

"Put it away," Constance told him.

"Yes, dear," Emir said without missing a beat. The drinks tray, complete with Emir's poured drink, descended back into the cloud table that reformed over it.

"I think we should put aside the issue of Callum for the moment," Jason said. "As I said earlier, that is the decision of people not currently with us."

"Which leaves the question of what brought you here," Humphrey said. "I didn't think you'd be in the region for another week and a half."

"Once we heard that you were going after messengers," Emir said, "we felt that it was best to see you immediately."

"This is about the mysterious job you have for us?" Jason asked. "is it related to the Order of the Reaper?"

"No," Emir said. "That has taken on some complex and political elements that I am very wary of wading into. Especially until I figure out just how much trouble Callum's meddling has caused. For which reason, I would like access to both him and your prisoner, Melody Jain."

"Again, that's up to Sophie and Arabelle," Jason said. "I won't help or hinder you in that regard. But Sophie remembers that you gave her shelter when she needed it most. At the very least, she'll be willing to hear you out."

"I can't ask for more than that," Emir said, which prompted a cough from Constance.

"Well, I *won't* ask for more than that," he corrected. "What I will ask you for is help with something new. You may recall that the scythe that you, Jason, ultimately brought to me, was the culmination of a years-long search that involved dozens of teams contracted to search remote reaches and fallen ruins the world over."

"I do."

“I have something similar in the works. A treasure hunt for something even more elusive and valuable, with no idea where in the world it is.”

“Or if it even exists,” Constance added.

“It doesn’t matter whether it exists or not,” Emir said. “It matters if we get paid to look for it.”

“That sounds ethical,” Jason said.

“Being serious,” Constance said, “if this thing is real, then it could change the course of history.”

Jason went very still.

“No,” he said, his voice icy.

“Jason,” Emir said. “You don’t even—”

“I said no.”

Jason leaned forward in his chair, rubbing his face in his hands and then staring at his feet. His aura retracted until even Emir could barely sense it. Constance, who had only been gold rank for a couple of years, couldn’t detect his aura at all.

“Jason,” Emir said again. His voice reflected that he realised he’d stepped on a landmine. “Arabelle gave me some indication of what you’ve been through. She didn’t give me specifics, but instructed that I was, under no circumstances, to put you in the middle of important events. And I’m not. This is important, yes, but I’m only looking to put you at the periphery. You and your team will just be one set of adventurers amongst many. It’s how I operate. I hire teams of adventurers and send them out. It’s an ordinary job.”

Jason looked up at Emir, his eyes no longer masked by the magic coins Belinda gave him. It was the first time Emir had seen their true state, and though his senses didn’t pick up anything strange about them beyond their appearance, his instincts made him flinch. Jason’s expression was cold and his nebula-like eyes with their black sclera felt like a mercifully distant power in an unfathomable abyss. When he spoke, his voice was gravel being poured over a winter grave.

“An ordinary job?”

“Yes,” Emir said.

“Tell me.”

## Chapter 645

### Who You Truly Are

Emir had known Jason before many of the tribulations that reshaped him from the soul out. Gods marking his soul, in the way overbearing deities would see as a reward. The Builder, using a star seed to try and force Jason into accepting slavery. The long, slow recovery from that, and his struggles against powerful political forces.

Emir himself was responsible for placing Jason into situations he should not have been. It was Emir's search for the Order of the Reaper that ultimately sent Jason into the astral space where he died. Now Jason was back, not just from another world but from death itself. Despite having seen Jason's formative experiences, Emir had been startled by how different Jason was.

At a glance, Jason was much the same; when they spoke over a water link connection, it was little different to the past. But water links did not transmit auras, and a brief conversation did not reveal that damage, waiting just a scratch beneath the surface. It was their brief encounter in the club that had started changing Emir's perspective.

Emir's intention had been to have a little fun with Jason, who was clearly terrible at maintaining a cover identity. Flashing his scars and proving his skills in a cage fight was the opposite of how to sell himself as an unassuming cook. When he met Jason, however, he had been startled. The strength and clamp-tight control of Jason's aura had meant that even Emir, a veteran gold ranker, could not see through him at all.

Even so, Emir had not realised the degree to which he no longer understood the manic, plucky outworlder he had once known. Jason had always put on a good front of being unconcerned about the powerful people around him. The gold-rank Emir had always known, though, that Jason's feelings were consumed with worry over that power imbalance. Jason was always in a manic scramble to somehow level the odds, be it through nonsensical behaviour or bold, unexpected moves.

From the way he strode through Emir's imposing cloud palace to his utter disregard for gold rankers, Emir could tell there was no façade at play; Jason was genuinely unintimidated. It was sitting across from Jason, looking into eyes that spoke of power waiting in the void, when Emir truly realised he no longer knew the man in front of him. Jason's aura was politely restrained, yet an ominous feeling teased at Emir's senses. It was like knowing there was a predator hidden somewhere in the bushes, waiting for a moment of vulnerability in which to strike.



"Tell me," Jason said in a voice of stone closing over a tomb. "Tell me about the messengers, Emir. Tell me what you want."

Emir suddenly felt that telling Jason anything was a very bad idea. Arabelle had warned him, but Jason's reaction was much worse than he imagined. He glanced at Humphrey, whose face revealed nothing. He reached out with his senses to explore Humphrey's emotions only for a hard wall to spring up in his way.

Jason's face showed no change for having blocked Emir, who suspected that Humphrey hadn't even noticed the high-level aura clash. Emir was startled that Jason was even capable of the feat. Blocking the senses of others in such a way was normally only taught to gold rankers. It wasn't an especially difficult technique for someone of that rank, if they had the right skill foundations, but the power, confidence and precision with which Jason executed it was intimidating.

"I've clearly approached this very wrong," Emir said. "We can do this another—"

"I said tell me," Jason commanded. His voice was soft but with an inexorable force at its core.

Emir pushed down his anger at being told what to do in his own house, knowing that it wouldn't be productive. He was not used to being the responsible one, which was Constance's job, but he was the older man and the higher-ranked one. He glanced at his wife, who nodded her approval. Emir then turned back to Jason who was watching him with those unsettling eyes.

"You're aware of the problems surrounding the church of Purity," Emir told him. "People all over the world are trying to figure out exactly when and why the original Purity was sanctioned by the other gods. The churches either haven't been told by their gods or are telling us they haven't. I do know the diamond-rank community has been looking into it."

"There's a diamond-rank community?" Humphrey asked.

"Diamond rankers are powerful," Emir said. "Their numbers are limited and things like distance and money are almost irrelevant as problems. They keep in contact with one another, most of them, and they barter in favours and rarities rather than money. I have more contact with them than most, but I've only seen glimpses and don't know exactly how they operate. What I do know is that they've been digging into what happened with Purity, and I know what they've found."

Jason didn't react, still watching Emir with a silent, unblinking stare. Emir waited only a brief moment for a reaction before giving up and continuing.

"They've asked me to leverage the networks that I use for treasure hunting to seek something out. I'm not the only person they deployed, not by any measure, but they want to cast as wide a net as they can without causing a commotion. For that reason, me and people like me aren't telling the adventurers we hire what they're looking for. When we get a lead, we give them the details we have and send them out without knowing what they're truly looking for, or why."

"That seems dishonest," Humphrey said. "Not to mention, inefficient. Adventurers deserve to go into any contract knowing everything they can."

"That's true when hunting monsters," Emir said. "Hunting treasure is a different game, and what I've just described is standard. Ask any teams that specialise in treasure hunting and they'll tell you the same."

"How do they know what to look for?" Humphrey asked.

"They don't," Emir told him. "Even I don't know what to look for. I'm just a middleman, passing on what clues I've been given."

"That doesn't sound reliable," Humphrey said.

"I'm not oblivious to that fact," Emir said with a chuckle. "All we can do is throw as many trustworthy adventurers at this as we can. I'm just asking for your team to be amongst them, and knowing more than the rest, at that. We're not even talking about sending you somewhere. It's just that if you happen to converge on a point of interest, I may ask you to make a slight detour to check something out. From time to time."

"And now is one of those times," Jason said, finally speaking. "Because it involves the messengers, doesn't it?"

"Yes," Emir admitted. "As I said, I'm not telling anyone what we're after. But I've received permission to tell you."

"From whom?" Humphrey asked.

"Diamond rankers," Jason answered, pre-empting Emir. "Someone told Emir, here, that I have some business with the messengers. He wants me to see what I can find about his mysterious goal while I'm at it."

"Yes," Emir said.

Jason continued to look at him, blank-faced, but at least with Humphrey, Emir could see his words having an impact. Jason felt more like another gold ranker, and a hostile one at that.

"Even the diamond rank community doesn't have an answer for exactly what happened to the god of Purity," Emir said. "Not one they're telling me, anyway. But there is a belief that it was related to something. A device, a substance, a process; we don't know

its nature. But whatever it is, it can achieve a goal as old as essence magic: cleansing the effect of monster cores.”

Humphrey rocked back in his chair, eyes wide. Jason didn't move.

"You think this is what the messengers are here for," Jason said, less question than statement.

"Yes," Emir said.

"Why?" Humphrey asked. "Don't messengers look down on essence users as belonging to inferior species?"

"Power," Jason said. "Power and control. If you have a monopoly on turning core users into regular essence users, you're holding a hand down over the entire essence-using world."

"You could have all the people who regret using cores become able to train like adventurers again," Humphrey said in hushed tones.

"That's only the beginning," Emir said. "From an objective perspective, the difference between core and non-core users is negligible. But the idea of that difference being real is a cornerstone of society's upper reaches. Something like that could throw the levers of power into disarray, and that's assuming whoever controls this cleansing power is benign. If this power is real, the world will change, one way or another. The nature of that change will depend on where this power comes from, what is it and how it works. And, most importantly—"

"Who controls it," Jason finished.

"Exactly," Emir said.

"Jason," Constance said, speaking up for the first time since the discussion began. "We're just looking for adventurers. Lots of adventurers, of which your team would be one of many. That is what Emir meant when he said you would be on the periphery. Resolving this is not your responsibility. We're just looking for people we can trust."

"That might not be me," Jason said. "My judgement can be compromised when it comes to the dissemination of power. If I find something like that, I won't just obediently hand it over to whoever hired me. I'll do with it what I decide is best, and I haven't always been right about that."

"That's why it won't be you making that choice," Humphrey told him. "It will be us."

Jason turned to Humphrey, his expression finally softening.

"Are you making the call, team leader?"

"I am."

Jason nodded.

“Alright then.”

Jason got to his feet, Humphrey following suit.

“Always a pleasure,” Jason told Constance and Emir, but it was unconvincing since his tone still sounded like a threat. “I’ll see you again at the end of next week.”

“I’ll show you out,” Constance said.

“It’s fine,” Jason said. “I’ll portal directly.”

“You won’t be able to portal out of the palace,” Emir said.

Jason pulled the necklace holding his two amulets from under his shirt. One was his Amulet of the Dark Guardian, while the other was his shrunken cloud flask. Cloud stuff spilled out and formed a portal that filled with darkness that Jason stepped through. Emir watched the darkness vanish and the cloud stuff disperse, his eyebrows attempting to climb off the top of his head.

“How the fu—”

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Unsurprisingly, the city of Yaresh had no shortage of parks. They featured expanses of thick, soft grass, dotted with lush plants, and vibrant flowers. After getting riled up by Emir, and then angry at himself for getting riled up and treating his friend like crap, Jason found a park and started meditating to resettle himself. It also gave him a chance to rest after he tapped into his astral gate to punch a portal through Emir’s cloud house defences. While his cloud flask absorbed most of the impact from tapping into that energy, even the little left over caused him to be shaken.

Jason lost track of time as he allowed his mind to quiet into an empty peace. He had learned many meditation techniques but he ignored them for the moment, seeking only pure calm. When he opened his eyes, the sky was a gorgeous sunset orange. In equatorial Rimaros, the sunset had been like flipping a switch off. They were now far enough south that it was still quick, but offered fleeting moments of glory at the end of the day.

Rather than leave in search of accommodation as the city passed into night, Jason closed his eyes again, returning to meditation. This time he practised a technique Amos had taught him, expanding his senses in such a way that didn’t project his aura in an easily detectable way. It was the most difficult form of aura manipulation he had learned, representing a more advanced technique than anything else he knew.

Learning the technique involved simultaneously concentrating his focus and a meditative relaxation of the mind, which left him feeling like he needed two heads. The

spirit attribute enhanced the mind in certain ways, including improved multitasking, but this was pushing his silver-rank abilities to the limit.

Much of the aura manipulation Amos was teaching Jason was normally reserved for gold rank. When those techniques relied heavily on raw power, Jason picked them up easily. When it was more about skill and he couldn't lean on his strength, it was much more of a struggle. Even if he couldn't master the techniques through a limitation in his rank or just his aptitude, grasping just the fundamentals would be a massive boon once he ranked up.

Jason slowly and carefully expanded his senses, making sure that his aura was undetectable to all but the most sensitive. In almost every adventuring scenario, acting so slowly would be fairly useless, but Jason continued to act with patience. Even if he didn't use what he was practising in the field for a decade, after he'd ranked up, he knew he was building the foundations of something amazing.

One of the things Amos had taught him was to pay more attention to the differentiation of his various senses. Most adventurers, Jason included, lumped their senses into two boxes: natural and magical. Neither of these was strictly correct, as even the 'natural' senses of sight, hearing, taste and touch were powerfully enhanced by magic.

The physical senses were also increasingly refined with each rank, as Jason could expand them into spectrums unavailable to normal humans. Mostly, though, he used that refinement to filter input. His mind didn't actively perceive things on the limits of the visual and audible spectrums unless they stood out for some reason, and he didn't process the bulk of the tastes and aromas wafting on the air. That saved him from nauseating experiences that normal people were mercifully spared from.

Magical perception was made up of two senses: the ability to sense magic and the ability to sense auras. All essence users understood there was a difference between them from an absolute perspective, but treated them as one from a practical perspective. This was as true for Jason as it was for most, although he did have an advantage in differentiating them, as his aura sense was much stronger than his magic sense.

Even so, Jason had rarely utilised them separately until Amos pushed him to do so. It was the first step in increasing what Jason thought were already highly refined senses. As he became increasingly proficient at using them separately, he discovered that doing so made them much more sensitive. This was the key to expanding his senses without what he now thought of as crudely shoving them with his aura. There was a lot of practise ahead of him, but even his early results had him excited.

Once again, Jason lost track of time. He fell into a meditative cycle as his senses expanded at a crawl, moving out centimetre by centimetre. His perception glacially expanded to encompass the park and he could sense the few people in it, late into the night.

This was the point where he realised it was the early hours of the morning, as everyone left in the park was engaged in behaviour he would rather not pry into, be it sketchy or amorous in nature. It was a familiar aura, though, that had his eyes snap open.

“Mr Asano?” Shade asked.

“It’s the outworlder’s aide, Benella. She has some other silver rankers with her.”

“You think she is here for you?”

“Yep.”

“I am somewhat concerned that she was able to find you.”

“I may be practising at hiding my aura as my senses expand, but my efforts are still sloppy and crude. To someone with sufficiently sensitive perception, I was closer to being a beacon than being hidden.”

“How are you going to react?”

“Well,” Jason said, “I see us as having three options. One, scarpers before they get closer. Two, try to turn it around and sneakily follow them. Three, fight.”

“The second option offers the greatest benefits,” Shade pointed out. “We could learn who this woman truly is. But the sufficiently sensitive perception you just mentioned would be a threat.”

“Agreed.”

“Of the remaining options, Mr Asano, escape is the more sensible approach. Fighting gets you nothing except showing this woman who *you* truly are.”

“I’m not going to lie,” Jason said. “That holds a certain appeal.”

“But it only holds consequences with no upsides, Mr Asano.”

Jason grumbled, but nodded his head.

“Alright, but we are officially hunting this woman back.”

Shade emerged from Jason’s shadow and Jason stepped into him, vanishing.