

## 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.

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“...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.”

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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."

