

Chapter 621

An Evil God Sitting on Her Shoulder

“The full explanation is somewhat complicated,” Arabelle said.

“It’d bloody well want to be,” Jason told her. “If there’s a simple explanation for how your team member ended up chasing around my team member’s evil brainwashed mum because he’s in love with her, a lot of people have been very, very oblivious.”

They were sitting in the cloud yacht as it hovered over the jungle beside the road leading into the city of Rajoras. They were drinking tea and watching traffic go past in the pounding monsoon rain.

“I’ll take you through what happened, as I understand it,” Arabelle said. “But know that all I have to go on is Callum’s account.”

“And Callum isn’t at his most reliable, right now.”

“Just so,” Arabelle said. “It’s disconcerting, seeing him like this. He’s never been good at dealing with people, but he’s always been stoic and reliable. Now he’s anxious and unreliable, and chasing around after a woman. Seeing him so different to when we used to work together is downright startling.”

“Have you considered letting Carlos have a look at him? Make sure there’s nothing affecting Cal beyond stress?”

“That was the first thing I did once I realised how far from normal Cal had become. I had him checked for signs of the Order of Redeeming Light’s ‘purification’ ritual, then anything else Carlos could find. This wasn’t any outside influence that he could dig out, which means that it’s all but certainly not outside influence. Finding and dealing with soul influences is his specialty; he’s at the top of his field. From star seeds to vampirism to plain soul trauma, he’s the best there is.”

“Which is why he’s so obsessed with helping the Order of Redeeming Light members, I assume?”

“Yes. And why the authorities are giving him leeway to handle this. Not a lot of people would be allowed to put a group of important prisoners in stasis and haul them around in a bus.”

“If he doesn’t fall under Carlos’ specialty,” Jason said, “then he falls under yours. Good old-fashioned mental health problems.”

“Yes,” Arabelle said. “Strictly speaking – ethically speaking – I shouldn’t be treating him, because he’s too close to me. The Church of the Healer gave me special

dispensation because he refused to even speak to anyone else and they thought he'd open up to an old team member."

"And he did."

"Of course he did. And it took me a while, but I teased the whole story out of him. At least, the story as it happened in his mind. I'll be interested to hear Sophie's mother's version of events, but having them meet now would be a disaster, given the states they're both in.

"Melody seems fairly together," Jason said. "Her aura doesn't match her body language, though. She's masking a lot of fear and confusion."

"Exactly," Arabelle said. "Too many unknown factors to bring them together yet, even if it would answer a lot of questions. The goal is to help the both of them get better, after all, not satisfy our curiosity."

Jason nodded.

"Let's start with how things went from Cal's perspective, then, shall we?"

Arabelle nodded.

"We'll start with context. Callum is part of the Cult of the Reaper. It was something that didn't impact his day to day life when we were a team, so it never really mattered."

"Like Clive," Jason said. "I don't think he's formally part of whatever organisation they have on this world, but he venerates the great astral being called the Celestial Book."

"Cal's membership in the cult of the Reaper is now very much a factor. At the same time, Melody Jain was part of the Order of the Reaper. Do you understand the difference between the organisations?"

"The cult are the ones who follow the Reaper's principles. The order is an offshoot of the cult that became an order of assassins interested in cultivating backroom political power. They split off from the cult as they increasingly moved away from its core principles."

"Yes," Arabelle said. "The story begins with Melody Jain, around a quarter of a century ago, in the city of Kurdansk. This part comes from what Callum claims Melody told him herself, from before Melody and Callum knew one another. They were each members of their respective organisations, both of which operated in secret. The Order of the Reaper was in the midst of bringing centuries of planning to fruition, and they were very particular about whom they brought into the fold. Melody was highly capable and from one of the old order families, so she was completely welcome. The man she chose for herself was not, however."

"This isn't Callum we're talking about, is it?"

“No. We’re talking about Sophie Wexler’s father, although his name was not Wexler, then. Melody kept him a secret from the order, along with the fact that they had a child. But when the child was still small, they were discovered. The Order of the Reaper specialises in infiltrating people into organisations unnoticed. With religions, it's essentially impossible to fake, but many religions have low-level administrative staff for their endeavours that aren't required to be deeply faithful. Someone working for the Church of Fertility in their record-keeping discovered the details of how the church had helped Melody have a child without her order overseers realising.”

“What were the repercussions?”

“According to Callum, Melody was certain that the order would kill her secret husband and child. This was especially true if they discovered that Melody had been teaching him the order’s method of fighting for years.”

“A method he eventually passed on to Sophie.”

“Yes. Melody was warned that the order had discovered her family by a woman named Marta Fries; a fellow member and Melody’s best friend. Melody had Marta smuggle her husband and daughter away, with even Melody herself not knowing where they went. She did not want to be captured and be forced to divulge where her family was so that the order could tie up loose ends. Even Marta Fries wasn’t certain, having supplied the secret husband with just enough information and resources to disappear on his own.”

“Thus, Sophie and her father wound up in Greenstone. Sophie doesn't have many coherent memories before adventurers found her in that shipwreck.”

“She was young. Didn’t even know that her real name is not Wexler, but Jain. It’s possible her father muddled her memories, somehow. Alchemy can be effective on children that young. There are potions used to help children move past traumatic events, although I try to avoid using them. When treating children, some horrors are best put aside, but the effect of the missing memories can linger, and be harder to deal with for their absence.”

“I have to wonder how much of this, and what version of it, that Melody has told Sophie,” Jason wondered. “They’ve been talking for weeks, and I imagine it must have come up.”

“You didn’t ask her?”

“If Sophie feels like there is something I should know,” Jason said, “she’ll tell me.”

“It has all been happening inside your cloud house. Couldn’t you listen in?”

“I could, but I don't. I know they're talking, but I put my attention elsewhere.”

“I’m not sure I could resist that temptation.”

"It's not hard. You just have to decide if you want to be the person that encroached on the most private moments of a close friend."

"Ah," Arabelle said. "Letting the realisation that you would be a terrible person douse the curiosity."

"Exactly. Now, you've told me about how Sophie ended up in Greenstone, but not where Callum comes in."

"After getting her family out," Arabelle explained, "she knew that the Order of the Reaper would not let it go. They were obsessed with not leaving threads that could cause problems for them later, especially with their plans within decades of going into motion."

"And of all the places Sophie and her father could end up, they went to Greenstone? A place where a part of the Order of the Reaper's plan was set to play out?"

"Callum didn't know why they went there. It might have been an attempt to hide where the order wouldn't look. It could have been coincidence. The order was initiating their re-emergence in locations all across the world, after all."

"So, after getting her family out, she ran?"

"Yes. And this is where Callum finally appears."

"She went to the Cult of the Reaper."

"Yes. But the cult was not going to just take her in. The order was known for its painstaking infiltration of other organisations over the last several centuries, after all. They faked the demise of their entire order as part of a plan more than half a millennia in the making."

"But that secret isn't so well hidden anymore."

"No. Their plan was always to return to their original status of being an open secret, playing tool to those in power while pulling the levers of power themselves. The first time they were too crude and got crushed. This time they are being more patient, and planning things out for the start. In just the few years you were absent they've made massive strides in this regard. And the way they've been trying to establish themselves is through making themselves invaluable. They've made critical strikes against the Church of Purity, the Cult of the Builder and other imminent threats."

"Meaning that when the rest of the world was scrambling after these enemies that blindsided most of us, the Order of the Reaper had already infiltrated them and knew what they were up to. But instead of warning people, they allowed these groups to become threats, so that they would look good by striking against those threats."

"Yes."

"But surely people saw through that?"

“Of course. But the fact remains that it was an impressive display of power. Who is to say how many infiltrators the order has, in what organisations? Anyone moving against them could easily find that someone they trusted is suddenly putting a knife in their back. We also believe that they knew about the messengers and are going to make moves against them to further cement themselves.”

“This all sounds like trouble.”

“Yes. And the Cult of the Reaper was amongst the first to realise that their former offshoot order was once again on the move, although they themselves were difficult to infiltrate. Like religious orders, authentic veneration of a great astral being is a requirement in the astral cults. It’s not as reliable as faith for a god, but it’s impossible to get around, long-term. Too easy to get unlucky.”

“But the order was trying to infiltrate the cult anyway, yes? And then comes Melody, with a seemingly convenient offer to defect. But the cult didn’t trust her.”

“They did not. This is the point where she met Callum. Our team had stopped actively adventuring, with Emir becoming a treasure hunter, while Gabriel and I took on less active roles while we raised our son. I moved from a field healer to a mental health specialist, and Gabriel started teaching at the academy. Callum, we thought, was off hunting monsters in the drive to reach diamond. That isn’t the usual path, but it made sense for him.”

“Hunting monsters isn’t the way to rank up at gold?”

“It’s a part, but not everything. You will learn more as you draw closer to gold-rank. For now, such questions are a distraction. The point is that while Callum was, indeed, out hunting dangerous prey, it was not occupying anywhere near as much of his time as we thought.”

“He became more active in the Cult of the Reaper?”

“Yes, as it turns out, and he was made Melody’s handler. They worked together for years, both investigating the order she came from and using the skills they taught her for the cult’s purposes. They never truly accepted her, however, always wary of the patience and long-term planning of the order. They kept her at a remove, with Callum being her only real connection. She would have left, except that, by that point, she would have both the Order of the Reaper and the Cult of the Reaper coming after her.”

“And that was when she and Callum got together?”

“No,” Arabelle said. “According to Cal, it was one-sided. Melody herself wanted to go find her husband and daughter, but she couldn’t while under the cult’s thumb. So, Callum agreed to help her. He made a connection between Emir and a diamond-ranker friendly to the cult. A historian who had been digging up details of the Order of the Reaper, unaware

they were still active. This man's patronage is why Emir has been looking for Order of the Reaper remnants for years, around his other treasure-hunting activities. It's why he largely employs external forces, like contracting adventurers. It leaves him to use his own people for other projects."

"Adventurers like Farrah, Rufus and Gary," Jason said.

"Yes. He knew they were looking for some independence, and the low-magic of Greenstone seemed perfect."

"That's fine, but how would all that help Callum and Melody?"

"Because Emir and his patron were looking for traces of the order, including their martial techniques, the Way of the Reaper."

"Yeah, he was collecting the skill books. I thought he just wanted them for his granddaughter."

"It was more than that. The skill books are the methodology of the Order of the Reaper we know the most about. The order's members use skill books to inculcate its vast array of techniques, then training to naturalise that information."

"Exactly what I did with Rufus' help."

"Yes. It was just a part of what they were doing, but it was what Callum and Melody actually wanted. Cal knew that between the diamond-ranker and Emir, they would have people scouring the world for traces of the Way of the Reaper. Skill books were one thing, but Melody never had the opportunity to teach her husband that way. If some random guy not attached to the order was found using their techniques, that would stand out. Callum was regularly keeping in contact with his old team member, so he could learn all about what Emir was up to."

"That's a terrible search method," Jason said. "That's knowing that somewhere in the world is a haystack with a needle in it and getting someone to check haystacks for something else, in the hope they'd stumble on a needle."

"Yes," Arabelle agreed. "It was a terrible plan, but one that they could carry out without either the cult or Emir realising what was going on."

"Cal didn't trust Emir?"

"Melody didn't. So they did what they could, knowing full well that they might never find them, and even if it did, it would take years. Even with the formidable search resources that Emir and his diamond-rank patron were able to put into play."

"Oh," Jason said with sudden realisation. "Melody didn't have many options beyond what she could get Cal to do. And Cal was in love with her, so he wasn't wildly invested in finding her long-lost husband."

“No. Cal said that he did genuinely attempt to find the man, but had no real expectations of finding him.”

“Then Sophie must have come as a shock.”

“Yes, but Callum didn’t realise what Emir had found until Emir started using her as bait for the order. Sophie and Emir had managed to find Marta Fries, Melody’s friend, who had helped her and her family escape the order’s grasp. That was when he intervened to keep Sophie and Humphrey away from her. Using Constance’s concerns over Emir using them made a good cover for his own intentions, and he tracked down Fries himself after she fled Humphrey and Sophie arriving at her door.”

“But Melody was already in the Order of Redeeming Light by then, wasn’t she? She’s been in the Sea of Storms for years, and other places before that.”

“Yes,” Arabelle said. “Going back to when Callum first hatched this plan, using one of the Cult of the Reaper’s diamond-rank contacts drew the attention of the cult. They decided it was time for Melody to make a sufficiently momentous gesture that the cult would be willing to accept her, and finally let her move from the Order of the Reaper to the Cult of the Reaper.”

“Infiltrate the Purity church?”

“Yes. Callum was against using her to infiltrate the Order of Redeeming Light, but it was what the cult required. The cult had been looking into the Order of Redeeming Light for some time and suspected that despite serving Purity, they were using necromancy to raise undead. Part of the Order of Redeeming Light’s mandate to repurpose the tools of the unclean to serve Purity.”

“That sounds like a bunch of crap. The whole redeeming light thing only came along after the real Purity was given to boot, right?”

“That is our understanding, but the cult doesn’t care who is behind it, only that undead are being used. The cult often works with the Church of Death in this regard, as they are closely aligned. The church does more public-facing things for the cult, while the cult can be the church’s hidden dagger.”

“So, the Order of Redeeming Light was known for accepting people outside the Purity faithful.”

“They did so exclusively, in fact. It seemed like a rare chance to get a foot in the Purity door.”

“Except that Melody was subjected to this ‘cleansing fire’ or whatever it was they called it. She became an artificial zealot.”

“Yes. Callum lost track of her when she stopped reporting in and has been trying to find her ever since. Sophie and Emir leading him to Melody’s friend Marta Fries was the first real lead he had. Fries been doing the same thing as him in seeking out Melody's trail, while trying to avoid the Order of the Reaper's suspicions about her. Ever since Melody's defection, she had been under scrutiny. Together, pooling their information and resources, they were able to trace Melody to the Sea of Storms. Then you arrived and we’re all caught up.”

Jason leaned back in his chair.

“Well,” he said. “You did warn me it was going to be complicated.”

“And that is only Callum’s side. I’ll be interested in hearing Melody’s. I confess, however, that I am unsure how to proceed with the wellbeing of both in mind. Melody isn’t truly capable of making informed choices while still under the influence of whatever was done to her. Perhaps we can’t move forward until we see if Carlos can figure out how to undo this mess.”

“On Earth,” Jason said, “when you are unable to make your own informed decisions for whatever reason, that power generally falls to the closest family member.”

“It works much the same here, although house politics often comes into play with nobility. You’re saying that we bring in Sophie to see what she thinks.”

“It’s her mother. It seems only right that she make decisions until Melody can make her own without an evil god sitting on her shoulder.”

Chapter 622

A Responsibility as Much as a Privilege

“There is an option,” Jason told Arabelle. “Something I’ve discussed with Carlos before. There is a place where things that aren’t usually possible become possible. Somewhere I can turn off what’s been done to Melody, so long as she is there. Removing it would kill her the moment she left that place, but suppressing it should be safe enough.”

“You’re talking about your soul space,” Arabelle said.

“Yes.”

“I know there have been changes. And I know that we’ve barely talked about them.”

“Some things I’m not even sure how to talk about. I’ve seen glimpses of some higher society that exists in the wider cosmos. Soramir Rimaros, and I’m presuming many other diamond rankers have seen it. Dawn is someone important there. She’s told me snippets; tales of a great city with visitors from a million universes. That wider cosmos has reached into the worlds in which I exist, changing me in different ways. Mentally, physically, magically. I’ve been annihilated and remade multiple times. My soul is unrecognisable from what it was.”

“You’re describing changes,” Arabelle said, “but how changed do you feel? Do you find yourself to be a fundamentally different person from when you were human?”

“I’m different, but that’s true of anyone. We all become different people over time.”

“Then it’s a question of whether you, yourself, have changed, or if outside forces changed you?”

“It’s not a question. The answer is both, but that’s still true for everyone else. I just think that my ratio might have been tipped a little in favour of external forces. But the closer I come to those forces, the more I realise that I’ve barely caught a glimpse of a realm to which I increasingly belong. There are aspects of myself that belong to that greater cosmic society. I’ve got one foot out into the cosmos, with no idea what I’m stepping into.”

“And with the departure of Dawn, the closest thing you have to a guide is gone.”

“Yes. The closest thing I have now is Soramir Rimaros, and I don’t trust him. I don’t distrust him, but he’s not Dawn. Or Farrah, or you, or anyone else that I truly trust and rely on.”

“How much does Soramir know?”

“I’m not sure. Enough to hurt me, although I think he’s well-meaning. It’s hard keeping secrets around diamond-rankers.”

“Why did you bring this up?” Arabelle asked. “Are you concerned about stumbling into something by using these cosmic aspects of yourself? By which I assume you mean the changes to your soul space.”

“Yes. I don’t know if my concerns are valid or if I’m jumping at shadows.”

“Are you considering leaving your soul space alone until you know more?”

“No. One thing I’m very certain of is that I need to use every advantage I can, even if that sometimes comes with a cost. Right now, that means using my soul space to try and help Carlos.”

“You think you can help him heal Sophie’s mother and the others?”

“I hope so. If he can reach a certain point, I might be able to get him over the line.”

“But you think you can help Melody now, if only temporarily.”

“I believe I can help the real Melody to emerge, so long as I can get her through the portal to my soul space.”

“I thought the restrictions on that portal were gone?”

“Yes, the trust restrictions are gone, but it’s still a portal. You can’t force anyone through without consent.”

“Then the question becomes whether Melody will concede to go through some strange portal.”

“Yes.”

“I would advise you to consider this more carefully before moving forward, especially before taking this idea to Sophie. If you build her hopes up beyond what you can deliver, it could do real damage.”

“I’m not rushing into anything.”

“Good,” Arabelle said, nodding her approval. “Even if this is something that you can do, it doesn’t mean you should. You cannot expect to suppress the malicious magic affecting Melody and have her just be fine afterwards,” Arabelle warned. “You know better than most that after the soul trauma is repaired, the mental trauma lingers. Especially since she will know that to leave your soul space is to return to her afflicted state.”

Jason winced.

“That’s a horrible thought. Knowing that you’re about to be taken over by something else.”

“Thus, I counsel caution.”

“I was going to discuss this idea with Sophie. Would you help me figure out how to do that? Even do it with me?”

“I will.”

“We don’t need to go rushing into it,” Jason said. “We can take the time to make considered choices, even if we’re left with nothing but hope that they’re the right ones.”

Arabelle narrowed her eyes at Jason.

“You’ve embraced the idea of moving forward slowly, haven’t you?”

“Should I not have?”

“You absolutely should. But you’ve been running from one crisis to another for long enough that I thought it would take more adjustment.”

Jason chuckled.

“Slowing down is what I’ve been dreaming of for a while. I was so ready for this.”

“Alright,” Arabelle said, standing up. “Try to maintain that attitude; you’re not getting any older. Ever.”

The giant bus Carlos was using for the trip was not as big as Jason’s hover yacht, but it was still inconveniently bulky. Even so, space inside was at a premium. Despite placing most of the Order of Redeeming Light members in stasis and efficiently racking them, space was still required for Carlos and his three assistants, also from the Church of the Healer, to live and conduct their research.

A large consumer of usable area was Gibson Amouz, whose father had supplied the vehicle to facilitate his son's recovery. Gibson was inside a large, specialised containment tank, floating unconscious. Carlos had managed to prevent Gibson's degradation following the half-complete 'purification' ritual the Order of redeeming Light had performed. He hoped that Gibson was the key to helping the others and, in a perfect world, many more besides. Gibson Amouz was potentially the key to unravelling such seemingly permanent curses as lesser vampirism, if Carlos could crack the nature of his affliction.

Carlos was sat at a desk covered in intricate notes. He ran his hands over his exhausted face, stood up and grabbed an umbrella on his way to the door. He opened it, seeing the pounding rain he’d been listening to strike the vehicle’s rigid panels all day. The only windows were for the driver at the front, so this was his first time seeing the wall of falling water.

Unlike Jason’s yacht, his vehicle couldn’t fly using power drawn from the astral, so it was parked between the road and the jungle. Carlos chose not to walk, and instead floated out over the mud. Levitation was easy enough, so long as he wasn’t disturbed, being easier for a gold ranker than a silver. His umbrella generated a water-repelling field and floated on its own, like one Jason once owned. He had left his with his niece on Earth.

The air outside was wet and heavy in the pounding rain, rather than fresh as Carlos wanted. He unnecessarily breathed it in anyway, trying to clear a mind caught up in his project. He needed to untangle his thoughts before proceeding, his head feeling like a clogged pipe. The importance of his current project was adding an extra layer of pressure.

Amos Pensinata floated down from the cloud yacht, apparently not caring as he was drenched in rain. He landed next to Carlos, his heavy boots settling in the mud that Carlos was avoiding. They stood side by side, watching the traffic backed up from the city gate, which had only gotten worse as the day progressed.

Carlos absently wondered what the stoic man had been like before Carlos had met him all those years ago, in a lunatic's dungeon. Probably the same, if his equally stolid nephew was anything to go by. Now that they were away from Rimaros, Amos was no longer projecting a politely restrained aura, and was instead hiding it away completely. Asano's friend Dawn had done well in recruiting Amos, as Carlos knew very few others who even could teach Jason about aura manipulation. There were people with stronger auras at the high end of gold rank and beyond. Strength was a different thing from skill, however, and like Jason, Amos was more than raw power.

"Have you started working with Asano yet?" Carlos.

Amos shook his head.

"You think you can show him some things?"

Amos nodded.

"You and I should sit down and discuss some things about Asano and his aura. There are some quirks that you'll need to know. His body and soul are a single entity, like a messenger's. It means he has the potential to do the same things they can."

Nod.

"You've fought messengers?"

Amos nodded, looked contemplative and then to look at Carlos.

"I don't have time for day-drinking," Carlos said. "I'm just clearing my head. I need to complete this first stage of my research as quickly as possible. If we can start working out how to treat the Amouz boy, that opens up a world of possibility."

Carlos looked out from under his umbrella at the rain hammering on the road, the vehicles traversing it, and on Amos.

"This rainy season came out of nowhere," Carlos said. "It feels like it'll never let up."

Amos shrugged, prompting Carlos to lean towards the edge of his umbrella's coverage and look up.

"This afternoon? I don't see it."

Amos made an uncertain gesture with his hand.

"I'd be nice, even if it was a little break," Carlos said. "This rain feels oppressive. Makes a break like this not so refreshing."

Amos shrugged.

"Booze won't help, as you damn well know."

A smile teased at the corners of Amos' mouth.

"Fine, booze won't help me. If you want to get sauced in the middle of the day, that's your business. I suppose you're living a bit of a lazy life at the moment. Any time you aren't teaching Asano or looking out for your nephew, you've got nothing but time, in a luxurious boat made of clouds. What are you going to do with yourself?"

"There's always work to be done," Amos said in his gravel slurry voice.

"What work will you do on a luxury yacht?"

"Read. Train. Drink."

"In that order?" Carlos asked with a grin.

Amos' friendly chuckle was the sound people heard in dark alleys in their nightmares.

"You're going to get back into a training routine? Chasing after essence revelation again?"

Amos nodded.

"I suppose you've got the time to focus on meditation. I don't think I'll ever shoot for diamond. It's too hard when you came up using cores; I'm lucky I got to gold."

Amos gave him a look.

"Don't give me that," Carlos complained. "I know that anything you don't try is impossible, but I'm trying to cure vampirism here. Maybe let me attempt one impossible thing at a time."

The city of Rajoras sprawled inland from the coast, built around the estuary of a broad river, the Rajo. It was a major manufacturing hub for water and air vehicles, and the seat of House de Varco. This made it the perfect place for Korinne and her team to find a vehicle of their own for their time on the road. They needed something that could serve as a true world-traveller, up to the rigours of intercontinental travel, along with being a robust home for adventurers.

Korinne's team was gathered in a vehicle warehouse the size of a sports stadium, filled with various bus-like vehicles. They had been looking over different vehicles that various members of the team had been excited about for one reason or another. Korinne was yet to find something she was satisfied with, matching Orin's taciturn expression.

Whether or not Orin found something exciting remained a mystery to his team. He might not have the enhanced aura strength of Jason or his uncle, but Amos had trained his aura manipulation skills personally. Unless someone of higher rank started poking his aura, it revealed no more emotions than his blank face.

The staff member guiding the team around showed no distaste at the team's lack of unity in what they wanted from a vehicle.

"When looking for a vessel that will not just be a vehicle but a home," he said, "it's important to take your time to make the right choice. Have you considered something larger, with the capacity to meet all of your needs? There are many excellent options that fall well within your stated budget."

"No," Korinne said. "A soft environment fosters a soft will. We're travelling to train as adventures, honing ourselves to a knife's edge. We need a scabbard, not a cushion. This isn't a leisure tour."

"Couldn't it be both?" asked Rosa, the team scout.

"No," Korinne said. "Orin, what do you have to say on the issue?"

"My uncle is a hard man," Orin said.

"Exactly," Korinne said before the slow-spoken Orin could continue. "Amos Pensinata is an exceptional role model. A hard adventurer needs hard surroundings. Flint and steel. Oh, what about this one?"

The vehicle she was pointing at was the size and shape of a bread truck.

"Ah," the salesman said. "The War Band model, from House de Varco. It was designed as a budget-conscious troop transport, but it does have the option of a long-term travel configuration, with accommodation features and enhanced long-distance travel features, such as more efficient flight. It's an excellent choice for one or two adventurers, but can, strictly speaking, be set up for as many as eight. This is by replacing two bed-and-cupboard configurations this one has with racks of what aren't bunks so much as shelves. It's workable if you're silver rank and can float into the higher slots. You just can't stand more than about three people plus, plus two seated in the driver station."

"What do you mean, can't stand?" Kalif asked.

"You have to remove the seating room and the storage to fit the bunk racks," the salesman explained. "We put in a rack a rack for hanging dimensional bags. Or we will; we haven't actually sold any of that configuration, yet. But, as I said, two people can sit in the driving station at the front."

"Oh, that's fine, then," Kalif said. "There's only six of us, and two can even sit in comfort."

"I didn't say comfort," the salesman hurriedly corrected. "You can't hold me to that."

"I want to see inside," Korinne said.

"I don't," Rosa said.

"Are you kidding?" Kalif asked.

"It costs nothing to look," the salesman said. "Let me just open it up. The current configuration is for two, and it's probably best to avoid more than two or three in there at once. It's a little snug."

"I think it's perfect," Korinne said, once she was inside. "All business, no indulgence."

"I'm not above a little indulgence," Rosa said, crammed in with Korinne and the salesman. "Somewhere to sit down, for example. Somewhere to eat."

"Indulgence makes you weak," Korinne told her. "If you have time to sit down and eat, you have time to consume a spirit coin while you train."

"You do realise the monster surge ended, right?" Kalif said, poking his head in from outside. "We made a pretty good showing for ourselves."

"Pretty good," Korinne said. "You think the messengers will let you live because you put up a pretty good struggle?"

"Korinne," Kalif said, "you've been extremely militant ever since the Builder attacked Rimaros. While I agree that diligent training and discipline is good for us, so is getting to relax from time to time. If a rope is constantly pulled taught, it's going to fray."

"I agree," Rosa said. "I know you're the team leader, Korinne, and we've been following your lead, but Kalif is right. The monster surge is over, so it's time to loosen up and enjoy what we've earned. Even if it's only a little bit."

"Adventuring is a responsibility as much as a privilege," Korinne told her.

"Exactly," Rosa said. "We've had almost half a year of responsibility and it's time to enjoy a little privilege. The occasional hot meal won't turn us into lazy degenerates."

"Actual food," Kalif said longingly.

"Having a place to sit down won't turn us into failed adventurers, Korinne," Rosa continued, gesturing at the vehicle around them as much as she could in the available space. "This is a can for storing food, not adventurers."

"Orin," Kalif said. "Would your uncle stay in Korinne's tiny metal box?"

"My uncle is a hard man," Orin said again, "but he likes soft beds."

Clive and Belinda watched as a submarine was disassembled at a dry dock by a team of professional shipwrights.

“We’re not going to feed the components to the cloud flask here are we?” Clive asked.

“No,” Jason's voice came from Clive's shadow, courtesy of Shade hidden inside it. It was the Shade body that had driven the stolen submarine upriver and into the dock.

“We’ll need to make sure that no individual part exceeds our storage space limit, then,” Clive said. “You’ll need to take the bigger parts, Belinda.”

Each storage space power differed in size and weight allowance for any given object. Clive's power had the lowest capacity on the team but also the strongest other functions. Its bronze-rank effect was to open portals, while at silver it could fuel rituals in areas normally too low-magic for them. Belinda's storage was the largest, and while its other abilities were useful, they weren’t portal useful.

“Shade,” Clive asked. “How did a familiar sneak a submarine stolen from the Order of Redeeming Light through the river checkpoint without the Magic Society or the Adventure Society getting up in arms about it? And where did you get the paperwork for this job to be approved?”

“Miss Belinda made the arrangements.”

Clive turned to Belinda.

“What?” she asked.

“How did you manage that?”

“Do you remember when I asked about how easy it was to bribe the people here?”

“Yes.”

“It was an act. I already knew.”

“But we hadn’t even gotten here yet?”

“You’re right,” Belinda agreed. “We hadn’t.”

Chapter 623

Fighting the Power

Korinne glowered, complaining.

“This is a bunch of lizard shi—”

“We took a vote,” Rosa said, cutting off her latest complaint. “You’re the team leader, Korinne, not the team queen.”

“I don’t feel like the leader when you all mutiny like this.”

“We didn’t mutiny, Korinne. We just bought a vehicle that we actually want to live in.”

They were riding out of the city in a House de Varco designed Outpost Rover. It was a vehicle model that the very happy salesman described as the premier choice for the adventuring team that looking to travel in spacious luxury. What he meant was the choice for the adventuring team that could afford it.

While unquestionably comfortable for six, it was no pleasure barge, as Rosa and Kalif kept pointing out to Korinne. It had powerful defensive measures to withstand monster attacks, features designed to facilitate training and even a prison cell that could be expanded externally to the vehicle to contain a relatively large monster of up to silver rank.

Due to the impressive size of the vehicle, which would match that of the Carlos Crime Wagon, they took the salesman’s advice and obtained the required temporary permits to fly it out of the city. That came at a further and considerable expense, but was worth it to avoid having to navigate the massive vehicle through the streets, let alone the gummed-up traffic around the city gates.

The entire endeavour was extremely expensive, but this was a team of silver rank guild elites, fresh off a monster surge. They were a long way from the only adventurers making hefty investments in their future. Successful teams often took the approach of using their success during a monster surge to set up their next decade of adventuring until the next one.

The Adventure Society bonus system rewarded those who stepped up during the surge, and Korinne's team had very much done that. With the monster surge lasting five or six times longer than normal, the rewards for active adventurers had climbed to never-before-seen heights. Fortunately, the massive number of monsters meant more loot than ever before from which to distribute those awards. Adventure Society loot teams were always deployed as part of after-action teams, cleaning up after adventurers without loot powers themselves.

Jason's team had done fairly well in terms of bonuses, although Jason himself was a bit of an oddity. While he did have some outrageous contributions, he also had lengthy dead periods where he was doing nothing but recovering. In the end, he'd been given a special assessment, which he used to claim some useful quintessence to feed into the cloud flask.

The convoy remained at Rajoras for a few days as the new vehicle was customised and a certain submarine was discreetly broken down into parts and brought to Jason, who fed them into the cloud flask. Jason never went into the city himself, although he debated it during the breaks in the rain. It wasn't likely he'd be recognised, but it was still the playground of House de Varco, so he decided to remain on the yacht until they were further from Rimaros.

The three-vehicle convoy had become four as Korinne's team eschewed the yacht for their own vehicle. They left Rajoras not by road but upriver, joining the water traffic on the way to their next destination. The short term plan was to follow the river that followed a valley just inland of the east coast, moving out of the Storm Kingdom's territory. Eventually, they would leave the river to head for the coast proper.

Jason and his companions were gathered in a briefing room on the yacht, along with Carlos, Arabelle and most of Korinne's team. Only Kalif had been left behind, to drive their new vehicle. He was starting to get a handle on it, and had run it into very few other vehicles on the river all day.

Humphrey was going over the convoy's immediate plans, with a map behind him showing their river route and intended path east. Korinne was standing beside him. Humphrey used a thin rod to indicate their disembarkation point from the river.

"We'll be landing here," he said. "Prior to the monster surge, this was the location of the river city of Cartise. Unfortunately, the Builder cult managed to claim a nearby astral space, causing widespread destruction as the astral space separated from our world. When a diamond-rank monster manifested shortly after, the city was overwhelmed."

"Most of the population was evacuated to the large towns nearby and along the river," Korinne said, picking up the narrative. "But Cartise was the major hub in this area for trade and travel. Its absence increases the logistical strain on surrounding centres as they start rebuilding after the surge."

"Especially now that they have overpopulation issues with the Cartise refugees," Humphrey added.

"In short," Korinne said, "we're saying that there is a lot of adventuring work. The surge may be over, but that doesn't mean our jobs are done. While the monster numbers

won't be as high, the problems will become increasingly about logistics. Securing supply routes, escorting specialists rebuilding infrastructure. Utility powers will be increasingly at a premium, with storage and portal powers both in high demand. It may not be glamorous work, but it's essential. People need our help just as much now as they did a month ago; it's just not about constantly killing monsters anymore."

"We're from one of the best guilds in the world," complained Polix, from Korinne's team. "You want us doing delivery runs and escorting craftspeople? That's trash adventurer work."

"Trash adventurers," Korinne said, "are defined by their attitudes, not their combat ability. Our duty as adventurers is to do what people need, not what we want."

"Exactly," Rosa agreed. "Don't be a turd, Polix."

Jason felt old as he watched Korinne's team bicker briefly amongst themselves. Like Humphrey and Neil, they were roughly the same age now as he had been when he first arrived in Pallimustus, but he wondered if he'd ever been that much of a young little prick. He thought back for a moment and then shook his head. He'd been worse.

"We've moved out of the high-magic Sea of Storms, so gold rankers will be a lot less common," Humphrey said, continuing the briefing. "As silver rankers, it falls to us to step up and not just do our duty as adventurers, but to set an example. With our behaviour."

Korinne's team looked sheepish. They were each from major adventuring families in Rimaros, and had been lectured their whole lives about the standards they were meant to set. But most of their adventuring careers had been under strict supervision, where they were never expected to represent adventuring as a whole to the public. They were now heading into exactly the kind of experience this self-directed tour was designed to give them.

After the briefing, Humphrey found Jason and they headed in the direction of Jason's cabin as they talked.

"Thank you for expanding the cabin sizes," Humphrey said.

"Well, with team Rain Chopper—"

"Storm Shredder," Humphrey corrected.

"With team Wet Stabber moving into their new ride, there was room to expand."

"How would you like it if people were deliberately getting our team name wrong?" Humphrey asked.

"I'm fine with that. What would they go with, though? Team Scone? Ooh, that's not bad. Maybe we should formally change the name to Team Scone."

"We are not changing it to Team Scone!"

“See, I knew you’d come to love Team Biscuit.”

“We should change it to something sensible.”

“You mean like team Damp Jabber?”

“Storm Shredder.”

“What would we go with, using that name as a model.”

“I don’t mean to copy their name.”

“Team Moist Crevice? Seems a bit risqué.”

“I get it,” Humphrey surrendered. “We’re sticking with Team Biscuit.”

“Hey Shade,” Jason said. “Tell the others that Humphrey is talking about changing the team name again.”

“Please don’t.”

“Tell them he wants to go with team Moist Crevice.”

“Shade,” Humphrey said, “please do not do that.”

“Mt Geller, I am afraid that I am but humble familiar, bound to my summoner’s commands.”

“You should tell that to Stash,” Humphrey grumbled.

“Hey, since I’m changing up the cabins,” Jason said to Humphrey, “did you want me to merge yours and Sophie’s instead of adjoined cabins with a connecting door?”

“No, Sophie values having her own space and time to be alone. Also, if she and Belinda don’t get enough private time together, Lindy starts giving me looks that worry me a great deal. Farrah’s started joining them as well. I’m beginning to suspect they talk about me in there.”

“Beginning to suspect? Mate, they’re definitely talk about you.”

“You’ve been listening in?”

Jason put a comforting hand on Humphrey's shoulder as they arrived at Jason's cabin.

“I don’t have to, mate. They just are.”

The cloud door disappeared to grant them entry. Humphrey moved to sit in an armchair while Jason moved to a cooling container.

“Can I talk you into a refreshing fruit drink?” he asked.

“Please,” Humphrey said. “This endless rain and heavy air is worse than back home.”

“The delta is a geographical oddity, because of an astral space spewing out water,” Jason said. “It’s got the heat and the humidity, but it’s too far south for a monsoon season.”

“You know a lot about the natural world,” Humphrey said as Jason started preparing fruit for juicing. “You know a lot in general.”

“Those statements are both false,” Jason said. “Especially here, where magic changes rules. Back on Earth as well, now it has magic too.”

“I think it’s a matter of perspective,” Humphrey said. “I suspect your education system is much better than ours. The Church of Knowledge does what it can, but they get a lot of pushback. At the risk of supporting your thoughts on aristocracy as a system, a lot of the nobility is resistant to widespread education beyond the reading and writing programs the church managed to make standard.”

“Honestly, my home culture isn’t any better. My education was good because we had money.”

“Wait, after all the complaining you had about nobility this and nobility that, your way isn’t any better?”

“Yeah, well... you didn’t come up here to discuss school funding disproportionately being funnelled into private schools.”

Jason used a pair of magic wands to juice the fruit and put it in a pitcher before taking it over to Humphrey on a tray with some tall glasses containing ice cubes. They sat in armchairs facing one another, with the drinks on a table between them.

“It’s about what we were talking about in the briefing,” Humphrey said. “Setting an example. And also, perspective.”

“Oh?” Jason prompted as he poured drinks.

“Jason, your perspective is extremely skewed. In Greenstone, you were an iron ranker regularly dealing with silver and even gold rankers. That isn’t normal. Then you went to Earth, where things were even more disproportional, if my discussions with Farrah are anything to go by.”

“You’ve been talking with Farrah about my time on Earth?”

“Taika and Travis, as well. We all realised that talking about it with you wasn’t a good idea,” Humphrey said. “We left that to Arabelle. When we first arrived in Rimaros, you were an open wound, Jason.”

“You’re not wrong,” Jason conceded. “And yes, I wasn’t exactly a face in the crowd.”

“Then you arrive in the Sea of Storms and suddenly it’s princesses everywhere, diamond rankers and whatever Dawn is.”

“She’s diamond rank. Technically. I’m still not entirely clear of what half-transcendent means.”

“You shouldn’t have to,” Humphrey said. “My mother has indicated enough times that there are things about gold rank that I don’t know, let alone diamond. Diamond rankers are more legend than reality in low-magic zones like Greenstone.”

“What’s the point you’re meandering around?” Jason asked.

“Jason, you’ve been conditioned to interact with the world in a certain way. You’re used to the people around you being far more powerful, and needing to be more than a little outrageous for them to take notice. You’ve always had to make bold moves so you weren’t dismissed out of hand.”

“But?”

“But now you’ll be meeting a lot more people to whom you are the powerful one. If you run around doing outrageous things when you’re the one with all the power, that’s not bold; it’s maniacal. These aren’t people you need to go all out with. If you treat them like you did Elspeth Arella or Vesper Rimaros, you’re going to turn their worlds upside down. To ordinary people, an unhinged silver-rank adventurer is far worse than a silver-rank monster.”

“Unhinged?”

“Jason, most of the people in this world are just ordinary folk, going about their lives. Silver-rank adventurers coming in and acting wild have all the power and destructiveness of a hurricane. In the places we’ll be going from now on, you won’t be fighting the power anymore. You’ll be the power.”

“You know that I was always good at interacting with normal people back in Greenstone.”

“And are you the same person you were back then?”

Jason grimly nodded, conceding the point. He looked thoughtful as he sipped at his drink.

“I suppose I’m not,” he said. “Since then it’s been a series of increasingly powerful people trying to yank me one way or the other, and I’ve become more and more extreme to face that. Now that you say it, I’m not sure I know how to be anything else anymore. But now I’m the powerful one, so I’ve become the thing I was always struggling against. You may be right that I don’t know how to handle that.”

“Yes. It’s hard to see what’s happening to you when you’re dealing with Soramir Rimaros or you’re the most famous essence user in the world. But you’re probably stronger than anyone who was in Greenstone back then. Except for Thalia Mercer and my mother, but they weren’t really Greenstone residents. They were just back for the monster surge that kept not coming. At least now we know why.”

Jason frowned and took another sip of his drink.

“I’m not sure what to do about that. How to deal with regular people. I never wanted to be that guy so removed from regular people that he becomes detached from ordinary life.”

“Maybe think of this as a chance to reconnect with that. I’m just warning you to be mindful of the power you wield, and the fact that many people don’t.”

Jason nodded.

“Thanks, Humphrey. I appreciate you looking out for me.”

“Of course.”

“No, I mean it. You’ve helped me get over a huge hump in my mindset.”

“Please don’t.”

“It’s just good to know that I can rely on the team, instead of humping this issue alone.”

“Just stop.”

“The same goes for you. You don’t have to hump the burden of looking out for me by yourself.”

“You are my least favourite team member.”

Chapter 624

Make Jason Great Again

“This valley would be gorgeous if we could actually see it through the rain,” Jason complained as he looked out the window. The convoy was floating on or just over a rather busy river, with water traffic heading in each direction. The vision-obscuring downpour slowed progress as boats, skimmers and hover vehicles cautiously navigated the waters and each other.

The banks were dangerous to any vehicle with a draft as the river was swollen with the fresh rains. It made the river’s outer reaches a dangerous and murky trap for unwary boats, but freed up space for floating vehicles.

The monsoon rains had continued, with breaks in the weather lasting an hour at most. It was as if the rain, like the people it fell on, had been waiting out the monster surge that went on for far too long. By the time the river trip moved into the second day, Humphrey had pushed the team into training.

The training room did more than provide magically enhanced weights, courtesy of the various materials and quintessence Jason had fed his cloud flask. On top of the weights, the training room could have the gravity enhanced, either across the whole room or in specific sections. The team were acclimatising to this when Jason was approached by Amos Pensinata.

“Time to get started?” Jason asked.

Amos nodded, then immediately walked off.

“I guess it’s aura training for me,” Jason told the others, then followed.

“What exactly did Dawn give you that you’re willing to do this?” Jason asked. “If you don’t mind me prying.”

“Insight,” Amos rumbled. Jason waited, but no further explanation was forthcoming.

“Enlightening,” he said.

“Yes,” Amos agreed.

Amos led Jason to the stairs that went up to the roof deck and stopped.

“I saw you using your aura to deflect the rain.”

“It seemed like a good way to practise.”

“Lazy.”

“Uh, okay. What do you want me doing?”

“You know ritual magic, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Use your aura to draw a ritual circle with the rain. Get it right. Precise.”

“You know I won’t be able to perform a ritual doing it like that, right?”

“You don’t need a ritual. Just need complexity.”

Jason was floating just over the roof deck in a meditative pose, completely drenched as rain pounded down on him. He was mentally exhausted after hours of painstaking concentration, which was something he hadn’t experienced in a while. His silver-rank spirit attribute enhanced his mentality in various ways, including focus, concentration and multitasking. All of those had been pushed to the limit by the exercise.

Before undertaking the task from Amos, Jason had been convinced that his aura manipulation skills had been pushed to their limit. He suspected a key purpose of the exercise had been disabusing him of that notion, which it had quite thoroughly done. Using his aura to manipulate physical objects was still something he was getting used to. Shielding an area from the rain wasn’t too taxing, but pulling in small amounts of water and shaping it into an array of lines and sigils very much was. Even going for the simplest ritual circle he knew was like trying to closely observe every bee in a hive simultaneously.

His early attempts had involved the simpler method of creating invisible force moulds with his aura for the water to settle in, but he had given up on that. It felt like not only was he getting more precision by manipulating the water directly, but it was better for developing control. The purpose of the exercise was training, after all. The goal was to improve his skill, not learn to cast rituals using the rain. If nothing else, water made a terrible platform for ritual magic without specialised abilities to support it.

Jason overexerted his concentration over and over again, causing even the basic rain shield to collapse, which was how he ended up soaked to the skin. But after each failure, he took a moment to recentre himself and then started over.

Amos gestured to Rufus, who was exercising with Jason's team in the large training room. Rufus was doing a flexibility exercise, which involved swinging across the room while dangling from rings, flipping through the air as he launched from one set of rings to the next. After dropping to the floor, Rufus moved over to speak with him.

“Something I can help you with, Lord Pensinata?”

“You trained Asano.”

“When he first arrived in our world, yes. I gave him his start in adventurer training, primarily in combat techniques. I've also been helping him with combat trances since he came back. My companions taught him in others areas, though. If you want to discuss his

early aura training, you should speak with Farrah. She took that portion of his training and is stronger in that area than me, but she'll freely admit that Jason has moved past us both in that regard."

"It's not about his previous training. How hard I can push him before he'll balk?"

"As in, how much training you can shove him into before he quits?"

Amos nodded.

"I honestly don't know," Rufus said. "It's part of what made me realise early that he was going to be great. He has a voracious appetite for training. However hard I drove him, he was always grateful. He never asked questions about why he needed to train so hard; he kept pushing to get stronger, like any weakness inside him is a poison. So long as he believes that you have a way to push him forward, he'll take all the pushing you've got."

Amos and Clive arrived on the roof deck to find Jason sitting under an orb around which the pounding rain curved. Inside it, he was sat cross-legged, hovering just off the deck. Around him was a floating ritual circle comprised entirely of water. Jason opened his eyes at the arrival of the newcomers who were standing dry under an awning.

"I have to thank you for this, Lord Pensinata. I haven't felt anything push me this hard in a while. In training, anyway."

Amos looked at Clive, who peered at Jason's fake ritual circle.

"That's pretty close," Clive said.

"Show me," Amos rumbled.

Clive pointed with his finger and started drawing a ritual circle with glowing light, overlapping with Jason's own diagram made of water. As he finished, it became evident where Jason's circle had minor imperfections.

"Let me guess," Jason said. "I have to keep going until you get it right."

"No," Amos said. "When you get it right, you pick a harder ritual."

Jason grinned, and his water circle fell the deck in a series of tiny splashes. Droplets started filtering into the orb instead of around it and started forming a new ritual circle as Jason closed his eyes.

Clive yawned as he trudged out onto the roof deck. The rain finally had a proper break as they continued south and the dark sky was lit up with stars. There was still plenty of water sitting on the deck for Jason to float into complex ritual shapes. He'd moved onto a second, slightly more sophisticated ritual after mastering the first.

"Jason, it's the middle of the night."

“Check me.”

Clive overlapped Jason’s ritual circle in lines of glowing light, highlighting the many inconsistencies.

“Alright,” Jason said, looking around and mentally noting the problem spots.

“This is the last time, Jason. I’m going to bed.”

“Good night.”

“You should be going to bed as well.”

“We arrive at Cartise tomorrow,” Jason said. “Maybe even overnight. I need to get in my training while I can.”

“Jason, didn’t you say you’re fairly sure that you’ve stopped ageing? You have time?”

“So long as no one kills me, sure. And while I might have forever, I don’t have Lord Pensinata forever. The great thing about a reliable instructor is that you know that so long as you put in the work, you’ll get the results. No luck, no privilege. Just work for reward. There’s a comfort in that reliability.”

“There’s also a comfort in comfort, Jason. I’m going to bed.”

The dark did not obscure Jason’s vision as the yacht approached the ruined city of Cartise in the dark. He looked out from the roof deck and was reminded of old pictures of London after the Blitz. Nothing was undamaged and entire blocks of buildings were reduced to chunks of rubble no bigger than a fist.

The old docks had been destroyed, and the remains had been fished-out to prevent obstructions. Jason could see the detritus that hadn’t been salvaged for the new docks, piled up further along the shore. The new docks served the Adventure Society camp that had been set up to handle operations in and around the fallen city.

With the rest of the group asleep, it fell to Jason to go meet the dockmaster and secure a berth. Shade appeared and pulled the team’s documentation from his dimensional space, and Jason transferred it to his own. He then took a running leap off the roof deck, sailing over the docks, and landing in a crouch on the shore, next to a stone cottage. He didn’t lighten his fall as that would require calling out his distinctive cloak.

Jason’s mode of arrival did not faze the grizzled man who came out of a stone cottage, which had the distinctive tells of a building hurriedly stone-shaped out of the earth with magic. He was the dockmaster for a camp that was exclusively host to adventurers and Magic Society field agents, so he found Jason’s approach downright tame. His cottage was simple and square, all of a single piece. It had the plain, rough texture of a child’s clay

art project. Jason approached the man and handed over the team's documentation and the dockmaster looked it over.

"Two silver-rank teams and an assortment of gold rankers," the dockmaster muttered. "We can certainly use that."

"I only speak for one of the teams, Team Biscuit," Jason said. "The others you'll have to arrange with separately."

"Are you saying they came here where there's nothing but work and aren't interested in working?"

"Not at all. I'm just saying that I can't speak for them," Jason said. "I'm just a team auxiliary. You won't catch me going around giving orders to gold rankers."

In Jason's shadow, Shade was grateful for his inability to choke as it would have revealed his presence.

"You're the auxiliary," the dockmaster said, leafing through the documents. "John Miller, that's you?"

"It is."

"Your team feels the need to take around a silver-rank cook?"

"Just between you and me, I have a few other utility tricks up my sleeve. We just keep it quiet to avoid poaching attempts."

"You're not open to someone making a better offer?"

"I trust the people I work with. Who can make a better offer than that?"

"That's a good attitude," the dockmaster said. "It's four vehicles?"

"Yeah, the dimensions are listed there."

"That's fine. Give me a moment to copy these documents and I'll find you somewhere to put them."

"John Miller," Farrah said, pausing with a forkful of pancake. Jason and his companions were sitting around the breakfast table. "We've been wondering for days what crazy name you picked for yourself, and you went with John Miller."

"The point was to not stand out," Jason said. "That's a pretty ordinary name, even in this world, right? Vidal, you said it was normal."

"I did, yes," Vidal Ladiv said. The Adventure Society liaison was still somewhat nervous around the group, rarely speaking up unless directly addressed.

"We've been bugging this guy since we set off to tell us the name," Belinda complained, "and all he'll say is that you told him not to tell us."

"I figured you'd all have some fun with it. I assume you all made guesses."

“Captain Handsome Boatman,” Neil said.

“Buck Stone, Bounty Hunter,” Belinda guessed.

“Action Fighter,” Travis added. “Or maybe something inappropriately exotic, like Enrico de la Fuente.”

“That doesn’t fit at all,” Sophie said. “I can see him going for that.”

“What about Karl Marx?” Humphrey suggested.

“How do you know about Karl Marx?” Travis asked him.

“Jason and I used to have discussions about aristocracy a lot. This was back before we formed the team. I’m not sure who he is, but Jason seemed very enthused.”

Travis turned to look at Jason.

“You don’t seem like much of a socialist, having a massive buffet breakfast on your magic superyacht.”

“Everyone has things they’re good and bad at,” Jason said defensively. “I am a socialist, I’m just... not great at it.”

“Not great?” Farrah asked. “You can create infinite amounts of money.”

“What?” Vidal asked.

“Don’t worry about that,” Farrah said. “I was guessing on some name from Earth. Bruce Banner. Bruce Wayne. Bruce McAvaney.”

“You seem obsessed with the name Bruce,” Jason said. “I’m actual Australian, not Monty Python Australian. I didn’t think you’d like Monty Python.”

“What kind of maniac doesn’t like Monty Python?” Farrah asked.

“People who were oppressed by the British,” Jason said. “There’s a woman I know who used to work for my dad, and her dad wouldn’t let her watch any British television growing up. She missed out on Monty Python, the Goodies, Fawlty Towers.”

“Even I’ve seen Fawlty Towers,” Farrah said. “And I’m from another universe.”

“How much Earth culture did you absorb?” Jason asked her.

“You kept going into transformation zones and leaving me twiddling my thumbs.”

“I was saving the world.”

“And I was watching internet videos. The name doesn’t have to be Bruce; there are plenty of other choices. Clark Kent, Ahmet Zappa, Man-E-Faces, Carlos Danger, The Artist Formerly Known as Ringo Starr. Pol Pot.”

“Pol Pot?” Jason exclaimed. “You seriously think I’d go with Pol Pot?”

Farrah continued reeling off guesses.

“Maximilien Robespierre, Rolf Harris, Mother Theresa, Joseph Stalin.”

“Now you’re just listing terrible people,” Jason complained.

“Gonk,” Gary said.

Everyone at the table turned to look at him.

“What?” he asked.

“Gonk?” Rufus asked.

“As a name,” Gary said. “I thought Jason might go for a mononym.”

“And you thought that if I went for just one name,” Jason said, “that the name I’d go for is Gonk?”

“Why not?” Gary asked. “There’s no telling what you’re going to do.”

This drew general nods of agreement around the table, which in turn led to an affronted expression from Jason.

“I was hoping for Manny McManface,” Taika said, “but I thought you’d go with Michael Long.”

“I thought you had it with that one, actually,” Farrah told Taika. “I was sure he’d try for some obscure alias that someone on Earth used where no one would get the reference.”

“Actually,” Taika corrected, “Michael Knight was the alias and Michael Long was his real name.”

Farrah reached out – and up – to put a hand on the shelving unit that was Taika's shoulder.

“Taika,” she told him. “I’m not sure I can fully express the degree to which I do not care.”

“Not all of your many terrible guesses were aliases,” Jason told Farrah. “And John Miller *is* an alias, thank you very much. And none of you did get the reference.”

“An alias for who?” Farrah asked.

“Oh,” Travis said. “I just figured it out.”

Chapter 625

Neil's Big Mouth

Jason watched from the roof deck as Rufus, Farrah and Gary headed upriver on the skimmers they kept stored on the yacht. With them was Estella Warnock, whom they were escorting from the Adventure Society camp to an actual population centre. Estella would be fulfilling her role of scouting out such places, for opportunities and danger. She didn't need the escort, but it was a chance for Rufus, Gary and Farrah to work together again as a team.

Letting out a sigh, Jason couldn't help but reflect that just as his team was coming together, theirs was coming apart. It was not long after Humphrey, Jason and Clive had done their first job together that Farrah had died, which had profoundly impacted Rufus and Gary. Even though Farrah was now back, none of them had a taste for full-time adventuring anymore.

Rufus was increasingly interested in training adventurers over being one, while Gary and Farrah were focusing on their very different crafts. Gary was seeking to master the old ways, chasing perfection in the smithing of weapons and armour. Farrah, by contrast, was chasing the future, pushing magic into new fields.

This trip was an opportunity to relive the old days when all they had was ambition and each other. It was also a chance to say goodbye to those days, and fully appreciate that their futures followed paths they had not anticipated. Even when they should have because they wouldn't shut up about their family running a school.

Jason chuckled at the thought and pushed himself off the railing. He had his own team and his own adventures to have, even if he was playing the role of secretly awesome cook. He wondered again if he should have named himself after a similar character from the Steven Seagal movie.

"No," he muttered to himself. "Even my rose-tinted nostalgia has limits. A man has to have standards."

"Mr Asano, are you thinking about Steven Seagal again?" Shade asked.

"No."

Jason's team was tasked with heading into Cartise to clear monsters out of the ruined city. They were one of several teams tasked with doing so, and were being guided through their assigned sweeping route by Vestine, an Adventure Society functionary. Jason himself wasn't with them, because why would you bring the cook?

“Not to be ungrateful,” Neil said, “but why do we need a guide?”

“There have been some issues,” Vestine told him. “Teams getting a little over-enthusied, roaming into another team’s territory and suddenly they’re fighting duels instead of monsters. We don’t have time for that.”

“So, you’re guiding teams away from making stupid choices,” Belinda said.

“I hardly think that’s necessary,” Clive said.

“Then you should pay more attention,” Neil told him.

“I completely agree,” Belinda said. “That should be the policy for all teams.”

“You want someone hanging around all the time, observing what you do?” Neil asked her, and Belinda’s expression went stiff.

“I formally rescind my suggestion.”

“We prefer to think of it as helping the teams stay focused,” Vestine said.

“I bet that’s because they’re already trying to ditch you and cause trouble,” Belinda said. “You outright tell them you’re babysitters and they’re going to throw a tantrum.”

A smile crept onto Vestine’s face, despite her best efforts, but she didn’t respond.

As they moved through the ruins on foot, the team made swift progress. Having once spent months in a city not just ruined but overtaken by jungle, the terrain was no obstacle to them. They traversed the city, alert but relaxed, Sophie only occasionally visible as she scouted around them. The team took the chance to learn more about conditions in the area by questioning their guide.

“Just so I’m getting this right,” Neil said, “Something is attracting monsters to the city and we’re *not* meant to stop it?”

“That’s right,” Vestine told him. “When the diamond-rank monster died here in the city, it left behind spots of magical resonance that still linger, and will for weeks to come. Monsters normally fear their diamond-rank contemporaries, but this resonance seems to draw them in, from a hundred kilometres away or more.”

“Then why not get rid of it?” Clive asked. “Eliminating magical resonance isn’t that hard. Even from a diamond-rank monster, it should be easy enough. You just have to align a purgation ritual with an amplification ritual with a—”

“How many rituals would it take in total?”

“Four, maybe five,” Clive said, then shrugged. “Diamond-rank, so let’s call it five. Six at the absolute most.”

“And these would all be in a sequence?” Vestine asked.

“They would have to be, yes,” Clive said.

“You just said it would be easy.”

“Yes?” Clive asked, confusion in his expression.

“I think the lady’s point,” Belinda told Clive, “is that not everyone thinks that running half a dozen rituals in a unified sequence is easy.”

“Really?” Clive asked.

“Yes, really,” Neil told him.

“Oh,” Clive said, his tone suggesting he was not entirely convinced.

“I believe that Clive’s original question,” Humphrey said, “was why not eliminate this resonance. The difficulty or ease of doing so aside, I imagine the reason is that the Adventure Society wants the monsters here.”

“Exactly,” Vestine said, still giving Clive odd looks. “The surge is over, but there are still many monsters that manifested in the wilderness that weren’t dealt with because they didn’t pose an immediate threat. This city is an empty ruin, while the towns and villages around it are not. Better to draw the monsters here than have them attack the over-populated and under-resourced locations that are bursting with refugees.”

“Rebuilding the city isn’t a priority, then?” Neil asked.

“It can’t be,” Vestine said. “The monster surge was five years late. Five years of the economy being strained by everything being in a state of readiness for a surge that kept not arriving. Then the surge itself lasted six times longer than it should have, and that’s not even accounting for the Builder invasion. Now there’s a conflict with the messengers, and who knows what trouble that will bring.”

“That is a lot,” Neil conceded. “I suppose you have to do what you can instead of what you want to.”

“I know that story,” Belinda said.

The team heard the high-pitched shrieking of monsters in the distance and rushed in that direction. They sensed auras as they drew nearer, but the auras blinked out, one by one, and by the time they arrived, the monsters were gone. There were signs of combat, claw marks raking stone, but no corpses and no blood.

“Again,” Vestine muttered.

“Again?” Humphrey asked.

“The Adventure Society functionaries guiding the teams are keeping contact through a communication power,” Vestine explained as she crouched to examine a claw mark. “This mark is from a skittering raker, which matches the sounds we heard. They’re ambush predators, a common monster in this region. This is the third instance in the last couple of hours of monster packs disappearing before adventurers could get to them.”

“Almost like someone was running around, killing and looting them,” Neil said innocently, earning him a slap on the arm from Belinda.

“Maybe,” Vestine said. “If so, I wish they’d report to the Adventure Society camp. Someone running rogue means that we’ll have to expend time and people we desperately need to use elsewhere on a false threat. But we suspect it’s another monster, though.”

“Oh?” Humphrey asked.

“One of the teams reported seeing some strange butterflies near where one of the monster packs vanished. The butterflies themselves fled before anyone could get a closer look, though. They were reportedly extremely fast.”

Humphrey caught Clive’s eye.

“Vestine, please excuse us for a moment,” Humphrey said. “I need to consult with my team member.”

Humphrey and Clive walked a little way from the group and Humphrey activated a privacy screen. Clive pulled out a blue marble tablet, the engravings on which started shifting as he moved his fingers across it.

“Shade,” Humphrey said. “Is this Jason?”

“No, Mr Geller,” Shade said from Humphrey’s shadow.

“Are you sure?”

“Quite certain, Mr Geller. Mr Asano discovered just how desperate the Adventure Society efforts in this region are for resources and decided to volunteer himself as an actual auxiliary. He’s been looting monster remains brought in by other teams for materials and meat, which he is cooking in ways friendly to long-term storage. He’s quite busy.”

“Oh,” Humphrey said. “I thought he’d gone off marauding on the sly.”

“Jason’s butterflies aren’t fast, the way our guide described,” Clive said, then held up the Magic Society monster almanac in his hands. “I think I know what this monster is.”

“You just looked it up? Those almanacs are a pain to sort through. My mother used to make me go through them for practise.”

“I may not be part of the Magic Society anymore, but my ability to efficiently search through their record system remains intact.”

“You think it’s a butterfly monster then?”

“Yes, but let’s go back to the group so I’m not explaining it twice.”

Humphrey nodded and disabled the privacy screen. They returned to the others and Clive explained what he suspected to be the culprit.

“There’s a kind of butterfly monster called the glorious harvester,” he told the group. “It’s rare, and normally shows up a decent way south of here, but there are a handful of

records of them showing up almost as far north as Rajoras. It's a swarm-type monster with a few distinctive traits. One is their appearance, which is green, blue and yellow, with a golden glow. Another is that they are one of the rare monsters that hunt other monsters and mostly avoids anyone else. They produce dust that triggers a rapid breakdown in monster bodies. This breakdown continues after death, dissolving them as a looting power would. The glorious harvesters then consume the magic as it returns to a raw state. I'm more or less saying that they eat rainbow smoke."

"So it's really a monster, then?" Neil asked. "I was sure it would turn out to be—" Belinda slapped his arm again.

"Turn out to be what?" Vestine asked.

"You are so bad at this," Belinda told Neil shaking her head. "And I mean *Clive* bad."

"Hey!" Neil and Clive exclaimed simultaneously, then glared at each other.

"This dust that the butterfly monster produces," Belinda said, drawing attention away from Neil's big mouth. "It dissolves monster bodies, right?"

"Yes," Clive confirmed.

"High rankers, and even well-trained mid rankers, have bodies that are basically the same as that of monsters," Belinda said. "Wouldn't that make us vulnerable to this dust?"

"No," Clive said, shaking his head. "Well, not as much. The almanac noted that it doesn't affect essence users the same way, which is why glorious butterflies are one of the rare monsters that hunt other monsters. I'm not sure why it's less effective on essence users; the almanac didn't say."

"There's a reason we say our bodies are 'basically' the same," Neil said. As a healer, he had the best understanding in the group of how their bodies worked. "There are key differences between the very similar makeup of an essence user and a monster's body. The big one is that, barring essence ability intervention, monster bodies are a lot more resilient. That's because monster bodies don't have to contain an actual soul, like an essence user, or an actual spiritual entity, like a summoned familiar. Because their bodies don't need that spiritual reinforcement, they can focus on physical reinforcement."

"Then it sounds like this dust targets whatever makes monster bodies tougher than ours specifically," Clive said. "It will affect us to some degree, but not to the same degree. It won't be as severe as... someone else's afflictions."

Belinda shook her head.

"So bad at this," she muttered. "Clive, he went off into the cosmos with a diamond ranker, not a mystic land where saying his name will levy a curse. You can say his name."

"Ah, yes, right," Clive said. "He went off with a diamond ranker."

Belinda groaned.

"Yeah, real convincing, Clive," she complained. "I take it back. You're not allowed to talk about him."

"Who are we talking about?" Vestine asked.

"It doesn't matter," Humphrey said. "We should get moving again if we want to complete our sweep on..."

Sophie dropped to the ground next to the group.

"I found some weird butterfly monster," she said. "It was more yellow and green than Jason's."

"Who is Jason?" Vestine asked.

"Some guy we used to work with," Sophie said. "He went off with a diamond ranker for being an extra-special boy or some nonsense."

"Callously abandoned us," Belinda confirmed.

"Did you see which way the butterflies went?" Vestine asked.

"They didn't go anywhere," Sophie said. "They weren't very fast, so I just dealt with them."

"Wait," Vestine said. "You're saying they were slow?"

"Yeah," Sophie confirmed. "Not you people slow, but slow."

"You probably shouldn't fly around," Vestine warned. "Monsters might see you and end up following you back to us."

"Exactly," Sophie said. "You people are slow, so I rounded some up. You should sense the first group any second."

"Sophie!" Humphrey scolded. "What did I tell you?"

Sophie's face took on an expression of exaggerated uncertainty.

"That you like it when I tickle your—"

"I said stop rounding up monsters because you think we're too slow!"

"Oh, that makes more sense," she acknowledged. "The other thing is kind of private."