

Chapter 627

Asset

Having returned in the pre-dawn, Jason emerged from his cabin when it was almost time for lunch.

“Oh, thank the gods you’ve come out,” Neil said, rushing up to him. Jason narrowed his eyes, about to probe his aura to confirm his identity as Neil continued.

“Clive made... I suppose we have to call it breakfast,” Neil lamented. “Taika threw him into the river.”

“Taika’s only bronze rank,” Jason said with a laugh.

“He’s strong,” Neil said. “The monster surge got him pretty close to silver. He also had the element of surprise, and Clive was very surprised.”

“We probably shouldn’t be wasting food when people are putting so much effort to feed people in this region.”

Jason remembered the food rationing on earth during the monster waves when refugees were crammed into the largest urban centres for safety. Food production and distribution had broken down. As even the smaller cities were abandoned due to a lack of people to protect them, let alone rural areas. Jason went for almost two years without eating anything but spirit coins.

“It was fairly basic in the first place,” Neil said. “Just cereal and bread.”

“He messed up cereal and bread?”

“It turns out that all Clive knows how to cook is eel,” Neil explained. “I can assure you that adapting those recipes to a simple breakfast does not work.”

Jason winced. He could sense Taika in the yacht, his aura strong and steady. The proto-spaces and then monster waves on Earth, plus Farrah’s training, had allowed him to rocket through the ranks, especially with being human as an accelerating factor. Between that and the monster surge after switching worlds, Taika had rarely seen the less hectic conditions that most adventurers faced. His progress was faster than Jason’s, whose lower rank progress was met with lengthy delays.

Taika's human abilities had been replaced with outworlder ones, but Jason had never sat down and taken a good look. He'd shared his party interface and let Rufus and Farrah manage his training and advancement, both being better teachers than Jason. Taika's power set was very much in line with Humphrey's, from his role as a high-mobility brawler to his mix of powerful and varied attack and defence options. They even shared the Might and Wing essences leading to a confluence based on a mythical creature.

In Taika's case, it was Garuda rather than Humphrey's dragon confluence, which made Jason wonder. Was the garuda a real creature in Pallimustus? If so, which of the various myths, legends and RPG flying monsters was it closest to.

"Neil," Jason asked. "You ever heard of a garuda?"

"Sure," Neil said. "Big flying creatures. Lots of variants, like griffins and dragons, spread across the ranks. Most fall in the silver-gold range, I'm pretty sure, but I've never seen one. Never been to the right part of the world. I think Pranay might have them."

Pranay was a city that Jason and his team had visited after their first trip to the Order of the Reaper's astral space. They hadn't left the massive urban centre, so the only magical beasts they had seen were familiars.

"You're thinking about Taika's abilities?" Neil asked.

"Yeah. I've never really seen him in the field since he was iron rank."

"He's got some impressive powers. You know, with another fast brawler and if we brought in Rufus, we'd have a monster of a team, here."

"Isn't it hard to train up in a team of eight? Don't you need to take on larger-scale contracts, which means expeditions, which means other teams which means more restrictions?"

"It doesn't have to be like that. Our team is built around different synergies. Remember when Humphrey's sister was training us? We took that road contract and she kept pushing us into different combinations."

"It's an interesting idea," Jason mused. "Mixing things up is always good as a training exercise. You know that Rufus and Taika are only with us temporarily, though. Rufus will go off the Greenstone, eventually, and Taika might end up with the other Earth people. I'm going to need someone to wrangle the pricks."

"What makes you think they're pricks?"

"They're from Earth."

"Not a lot of love for your own world, then."

"This is my world now."

"Well, we're glad to have you," Neil said, slapping Jason on the back. "So long as you make lunch. We need to go on afternoon patrol, soon, and Belinda said that Clive was eyeing off the bread again."

"Oh crap," Jason said. "I'd best get on it, then."

The base camp for Adventure Society and Magic Society activity in the area was laid out carefully into sections, somewhere between a school campus and a military base, but

all the buildings were magical tents. The tents were reinforced against the weather and included drainage, plumbing and other amenities. Many were the size of full buildings, with a few even reaching as high as four storeys. For the most part, they were all square or oblong, the rigid frames visible under the drape of the fabric.

Jason's team moved across the open marshalling area, although Jason's place in the group was taken by Rufus and Farrah. Leading them was Vestine, their assigned Adventure Society functionary. They moved towards a tent the size of a small aircraft hangar. It was the main vehicle pool for the camp, managed by the Magic Society but primarily used by the Adventure Society.

The marshalling area was a mix of adventuring teams and groups from the two societies in charge of the camp. Some were coming and going on foot, while others were using skimmers, making the yard's massive size a necessity to handle all the activity.

"This afternoon we're heading for the other side of the city," Vestine told them as they approached. "The far side of the city is the most dangerous zone in the area. It's where the diamond-rank monster fell, making it the most concentrated source of the lingering power that's drawing in the monsters. We haven't had a gold show up yet, but we've seen silvers come in very large waves, so be ready to fall back and regroup with other teams at all times."

"Yesterday you told us we wouldn't be assigned to the far side of the city," Sophie pointed out.

"The situation changed overnight," Vestine told them. "A Builder cult lair was found and multiple teams that normally patrol the far side of the city are currently engaging in a suppression action against lingering Builder constructs. We had to dig our way down using rituals to access the lair, as the access shaft had been completely sealed. There were so many rocks in there it wasn't worth clearing them out, and so we dug straight through the earth."

"I remember that ritual," Humphrey said. "You could have warned me it was going to spray mud everywhere, Clive."

"It was a digging ritual in a swamp," Clive said. "Do you want me to warn you that dumplings are available in a dumpling shop?"

Humphrey shook his head.

"We were aware of the cult lair," he told Vestine.

"Word gets around a camp like this very quickly," Vestine said, her voice disapproving. "On a related note, be aware that there is an unknown, potentially hostile entity in the area, but we don't have little information on it. We can't even be sure if it's a

monster, magical beast or essence user. It's potentially a priest from one of the dark gods, so be wary. Its aura is very distinctive, being silver rank, extremely powerful and extremely sinister."

"I don't suppose this entity happened to be found where the cult lair turned out to be?" Belinda asked.

Vestine stopped walking across the marshalling yard and turned to look at Belinda.

"Do you know something you should be reporting?"

"I've never known anything I should be reporting," Belinda said. "That's how they get you."

"Your patrol sensed a particular asset to which our team has access," Humphrey said. "It reported finding a Builder lair, but it left when it sensed a patrol approaching. Since the patrol found the lair, we didn't report the discovery ourselves."

"You're claiming this asset found the lair. Are you trying to claim credit?"

"We don't care about credit," Humphrey said. "I'm only telling you this so you don't have the patrol teams jumping at shadows."

"And what is this asset of yours? Why is it a secret?"

"It's not a secret, strictly speaking," Humphrey told her. "Our team has access to a certain special asset that people often find confronting, sinister or outright evil. It's not. But this asset is known to the Adventure Society, and the branch in Rimaros decided to keep our asset mostly off the books. If anyone were to go digging, contact the Adventure Society branch and ignore their polite suggestions that you leave it alone, you'll find the answers you're looking for. You can check all this for yourself, of course. I noticed the temporary water-link chamber that's been set up for communication, although I know those devices are extremely resource-intensive. You likely only use it when strictly necessary, which means that you're left either taking my word for it or not."

"The water link we have is expensive to operate," Vestine acknowledged. "We only use it when truly necessary. Lacking ready access to the Adventure Society administration in Rimaros, the best solution is that you brief me and I determine how much needs to be shared with the officials here."

"No," Humphrey said.

"And if I march a few teams onto that boat of yours to find out for myself."

"Then that would be unfortunate," Humphrey said. "It's always sad when bad things happen to good people."

"Are you threatening me, Mr Geller?"

“No, Miss Calhoun, I am not. Imagine a mysterious pit of monsters. Imagine that anyone who manages to jump in the pit and survive will be punished by the Adventure Society, in the unlikely event of their survival. It is not a threat to warn someone of the dangers of the pit, Miss Calhoun. It is well-meaning advice that, I will admit, could easily be misconstrued as an attempt to intimidate an Adventure Society official. But I will remind you, Miss Calhoun, that all the information concerning you about this situation came from a single source: me. I could have said nothing, but I did you the courtesy of warning you in the hope that you would not waste any time and resources.”

Vestine looked at Humphrey for a long time.

“Wait here,” she said finally. “I’m going to consult with the chief official of the camp.”

The team watched her turn and march off.

“How big a problem will this be?” Neil wondered aloud.

“Not very,” Rufus said. “The Adventure Society has many secrets. She’s going to ask someone in camp leadership what to do, and she’ll be told to be quiet and go along. If there’s no imminent threat, then anyone smart enough to be left running this place with minimal oversight knows better than to buy trouble they could avoid for free.”

“And if she decides to push?” Clive asked.

“Then they’ll use the water-link, regardless of the cost,” Farrah said. “At which point, they will be sternly instructed to leave us alone. They’ll assume Geller family interference and leave us alone.”

“And you’re okay letting people think your family is engaged in corruption?” Clive asked Humphrey.

“With politics,” Rufus said, “you need a little corruption. Just a little, or no one else will trust you.”

“Well, that’s just backwards,” Clive said. “I’m really starting to detest politics.”

“There are upsides,” Sophie said, bumping her body against Humphrey. “I like it when you go all officious and stern.”

Her voice then turned to a low whisper.

“You want to get out of here?”

“No!” Humphrey said, stepping away from her. “This is not the time. Or the place. Or the circumstance.”

Sophie’s expression turned vulnerable and hurt.

“So,” she said, her voice a trembling whisper, “you don’t really like me?”

“What?” Humphrey asked, taken aback. “Of course I do.”

“It doesn’t sound like you do.”

“It’s not that! I just...”

The tension in his bunched-up shoulders relaxed as he gave her a flat, admonishing look.

“...realised that you’re teasing me. Do we have to have the talk about professionalism again? There is a professional space and a personal space, and you shouldn’t be bringing the personal space out on the job.”

“There are lots of things you shouldn’t do on the job,” Belinda interjected. “You shouldn’t steal your Adventure Society guide’s watch.”

“Lindy,” Humphrey asked through gritted teeth, “did you just steal her watch?”

“No,” Belinda said, the picture of innocence. “I didn’t *just* steal her watch.”