

Chapter 201

Regretting it Later

Jason looked around the skimmer as it sailed smoothly over the rocky ground. It was an unremarkable patch of desert, but the walk between the mountain and its hidden sacrifice chamber and the Vane Estate had been an important time for Jason. It was his first chance to slow down and get some answers from someone who didn't want to eat him or throw him in an evil blood pit.

That was when he really met Rufus, with his solid dependability and Gary with his boisterous enthusiasm. Then there was Farrah. She was the one who made the team work, bringing Gary into line when it was time for business and loosening Rufus up when he was causing unnecessary tension. Smarter than either, she could have easily led a team of her own. She was wise enough to recognise that she didn't want to, leaving that to Rufus while she engaged in her own pursuits.

Jason hadn't realised that, at the time. He was still agape at the terrifying volcano powers she had used to annihilate the sanguine horror. He was only just getting to know the people who would be his first friends and mentors in his new world.

Returning to the place it had all started, the path he had taken weighed heavily on his mind. It was a path of violence from the very beginning, so different from the safe, prosperous life he had known. That first night he had spoken to Rufus of his fears, of what a life of violence could turn him into. Rufus had not given him the reassurance he sought.

Instead, Rufus told Jason that he would have to choose between holding onto his innocence or seizing his own destiny. He promised that a life of adventure would give Jason the world, but it would come at a price. That price was safety and the inescapable stain of bloody hands. Looking back, Rufus' promise had been kept. Jason had money, power, influence. Precious friends and boon companions. But he had also faced danger, and been the danger faced by others. It could be considered a naïveté, but he wondered if violence and killing had become too easy.

The need for violence and the moral action was a harder thing to balance than he ever thought. He was proud of his growing capability, and largely of what he had done with it. But that pride also brought danger and regret. He'd gone along with everyone else to fight the Ustei tribe on their sand barge, and while they had certainly needed to be stopped, no more than a token effort had been put towards conciliation. That he didn't know how many people he killed that day was bad enough. That it had been for someone else's reasons made it all the worse.

He thought about the men he killed in the shopping arcade. For all that he told himself it was justified, he could have easily escaped without hurting anyone. In his most honest moments, he knew he didn't kill them in self-defence or through some need to send a message. Not any message worth sending, anyway. It had been pride. They had the temerity to challenge him and he had wanted – needed – to let everyone know that to come for him was to pay the price in blood.

Thadwick Mercer was, at the core, a creature of pride. It was what made him so easy to wound and drove every mistake he made. In the Reaper trials, Jason had come face to face with his own dark future, with the place that pride would take him, if he was not mindful of it.

That he had been more successful than Thadwick made people more accepting of his pride, but that was a trap. Something that made his pride more insidious, more dangerous. He had dismissed the Adventure Society's need for him to make a humble gesture, thinking himself clever for turning it to his own purpose. He was coming to realise that he had a greater need to find some humility than he thought.

"Is that it?" Clive asked, next to him, as they crossed a rocky rise.

When Jason had first spotted the Vane Estate those months ago, it had been an incongruous stretch of green. Rufus had remarked on what a waste of resources it was to maintain a temperate springtime in the middle of the desert. From the yellows and browns that had replaced the green, that price was apparently no longer being paid.

"That's it," Jason said, double-checking his map. "It looks a bit worse for wear than the last time I was there."

"Stop the skimmer on the outside," Henrietta said, leaning forward to speak to Clive. "We don't think there'll be anyone in residence, but the Adventure Society wants us checking for a reason. Best not announce ourselves too loudly."

As they approached, they found wilting plants, withered bushes and half-barren trees, their remaining leaves the brown, red and yellow of deep autumn. The Vane Estate had been an English country garden, held in a perpetual spring. As the energy maintaining the artificial climate depleted, that spring was passing through a deep autumn on the way to a sun-scorched, desert winter.

The pillars placed along the outside edge of the estate grounds still marked the border between the desert and the estate. Clive drew the skimmer up next to one and the team disembarked and stepped across the boundary. The air inside was still cooler than the desert, but hotter than what Jason remembered. Guided by Jason's map, they set off across the yellowing grass for the inner reaches of the sprawling estate.

“That’s the hedge maze,” Jason pointed out. The towering hedge walls looked thinner than he remembered, the pale green hedges a pale reflection of its previous, lush glory. “I came into this world somewhere in the middle of that.”

“Is that what made that big hole?” Sophie asked, pointing. There was a ragged arch in the hedges, mirrored in the hedges they could see through it.

“No, that was Gary,” Jason said. “He and Farrah sent their summons right through the middle of it. He said it was to sweep out any cultists, but I think it was mostly to annoy Anisa.”

“Anisa?” Henrietta asked.

“Priestess of Purity. She was temporarily attached to Rufus’ team. The church were the ones that sent them out here, which we think was all part of their game-playing. I have to imagine an alliance between them and the Builder cult is an uneasy one.”

“It seems dangerous for the cult to involve outsiders, like that,” Belinda said. “Too much chance of exposure. Getting too impressed with the cleverness of your own plans is a sure way to mess them up.”

“The Builder cult apparently had their hearts set on this place,” Jason said. “I can see how the combination of isolation, space and comfort would appeal. The matriarch of the house didn’t like the Builders, though. Didn’t approve of her son being part of the wrong cult.”

“You seem to run into a lot of cultists,” Humphrey said.

“Oh, that’s nothing,” Jason said. “Back in my world they come to your door with pamphlets.”

He turned his gaze back to the hedge maze.

“I couldn’t tell you exactly where I appeared in there. My arrival didn’t seem to do any damage, and every place looks like every other in a maze. Which is the whole point, I guess.”

As they progressed through the estate, they saw more and more damage beyond that caused by the desert reclaiming the land. Someone had taken axe and flame to the place, breaking down outbuildings and torching gardens. When they reached the manor, it had clearly taken the brunt of whatever ire had driven the vandals. Only sections of burned and collapsed building still stood at the original height. Every section of wall intact enough to fit it had been painted with bright red graffiti, denouncing the inhabitants as blood drinkers and murderers.

“It seems word got out about the blood cult preying on the nearby towns and villages,” Humphrey said. “There isn’t much of a manor left to check out.”

“There were some fairly extensive cellars,” Jason said. “They may be intact.”

The team made their way into the gutted ruin of the manor house.

“Careful of the parts that haven’t collapsed yet,” Henrietta warned.

They quickly discovered that the floors had been burned through, dumping the charred remains of the house above into blackened piles in the expansive cellar space. Jason managed to find the entrance to the underground ritual room, but the tunnel was packed tight with debris.

“Should we dig it out?” Humphrey asked.

“No,” Henrietta said. “If we did it fast, what’s left of the house would collapse on us. If we went carefully, it would take too long and might collapse anyway.”

“There’s another entrance,” Jason said. “It’s bit of a crawl through a tight, wet tunnel. Which is at the bottom of a well. After that, though, it’s just a subterranean cave with a walkway and you’re there.”

“I don’t think we need to go that far,” Henrietta said.

“Perhaps we should be thorough,” Humphrey said.

“Agreed,” Jason said.

“Alright, we’ll compromise,” Henrietta said. “I’ll sweep my aura senses from above through that cave system. It should be between here and the centre of the maze, right?”

“I can put us right over it, using my map,” Jason said. “Maybe we should actually go down and take a look, though.”

“By crawling through a wet tunnel at the bottom of a well?” Neil said. “If there were still cultists here, then they would have killed the people who came to burn this place down. Or left, if it happened before they came back.”

“It does seem worthless as a place to hole up,” Clive said. “Without the manor, it’s just a place they’ve been known to use in the past. That makes it all threat and no value. Even if they came here, they would have moved on.”

“That does make sense,” Humphrey acknowledged.

“Still, I’ll do the aura sweep, just to be thorough,” Henrietta said. “We don’t want to go regretting it later.”

From within the edge of the estate grounds, Timos and Zato watched the skimmer disappear into the distance.

“Consider this a formal apology,” Zato said. “I thought your ideas were overwrought. Burning down the manor and moving everyone into the cave. Using so many of our

resources setting up the aura suppression. You protected our final chance. Even if we killed them, more would come looking.”

“Our work here will take months,” Timos said. “I knew someone would come, eventually. I remained hidden in Greenstone for so long because I was more careful and more thorough than anyone believed I had reason to be. If the leadership hadn’t felt Thadwick was worth risking exposure, I’d be hidden there still.”

“You’ve made a believer out of me,” Zato said. “You’re in charge of keeping us secure. Whatever measures you think necessary, take them. So long as it doesn’t compromise the work.”

The team moved south from the Vane Estate, following the direction, but not the path Jason had once taken to the Mistrun River. The direct route they had taken at that time had required most of a week on foot. The team anticipated taking about the same amount of time because of their zig-zag route that would visit all the local towns and villages, with all the time it would take to clear off their adventure boards.

The skimmer garnered attention as it arrived in the North-East Quarry Village Number Four. Such a magical conveyance was only ever used by adventurers or big shots coming to check out the quarry operations, so the villagers immediately knew that important visitors had come.

The village was situated in a ring around a lake fed by a channel leading from the nearby mountain that was the site of the quarries. A waterfall sprayed out of a hole in the mountainside, feeding the channel.

“I was sprayed out of the mountain by that waterfall,” Jason said, pointing it out.

“Why would you jump into that spray?” Sophie asked.

“I was up there taking a look when it turned off,” Jason said. “Me and another bloke were taking a look when it turned back on.

“It’s fed by an aperture, right?” Henrietta asked.

“That’s right,” Jason said.

“There were a number of instances of the aperture’s being interrupted,” Clive said. “It was the whole reason the expedition was formed in the first place. That must have been one of the earliest incidents. What happened, exactly?”

“I was standing right next to the stream when it stopped. The caretaker and I went for a closer look and a shab came through. It was my first iron-rank monster. We killed it, and then the water turned back on. It threw me, the other guy and a bunch of extra shabs right off the side of the mountain. It was kind of awesome, actually. Most of the shabs died

when they hit the ground, but a few survived by landing in the water, although they still took a good hit from that height. Rufus, Gary and Farrah were off chasing the guy that set them up for the blood cult, so me, the other guy and Colin finished the shabs off.”

Their arrival having been noticed, the mayor was soon hurrying out to greet them.

“Jason? Jason Asano?”

“G’day, Greg,” Jason said, shaking the mayor’s hand. He looked Jason up and down, taking in the dark combat robes, a sword on one hip and a dagger on the other, his bandolier full of throwing darts.

“Look at you, all intimidating,” Greg said. “Every inch the successful adventurer.”

“I wouldn’t rush to conclusions,” Jason said. “I’m the reason my team got stuck with punishment detail.”

“Yes, I do recall your friend mentioning you would be by soon enough. Are they doing well?”

Jason forced himself to keep the easy smile on his face as he recalled Farrah’s flippant remark.

“Let me introduce you to some new friends,” he said, giving Greg all their names.

“Geller?” Greg asked. “As in…”

“No, not those Gellers,” Jason said. “These two are from the other Geller family. Very big in the peat trade. As the saying goes, if you want to find a Geller, look in that disgusting peat bog. These are some of the first to go into adventuring. Not the actual first, though. It was a shame about the others. Such an undignified way to die.”

Henrietta watched Jason from under raised eyebrows as Neil shook his head. Humphrey took it in stride, also shaking the mayor’s hand. Greg led them into the village, along the ring road that circled the lake. They drew a lot of attention, some people coming up and greeting Jason by name.

“My daughter still has that spirit coin you gave her when you had her run from the monsters. She keeps it in a box like a treasure.”

Jason would share a few words before they let let the intimidating cluster of adventurers move on.

“Dan,” Jason greeted one man. “We’ll have to get some of that grilled giant worm.”

“Not this time of year,” Dan said as he shook Jason’s hand. “We don’t take them during their breeding season. I can do you a steamed pockmark lizard, if you like.”

“Sounds terrible,” Jason said. “I’m in.”

“I don’t get it,” Neil said as they made their way to the adventure notice board. “You were here for what? A couple of days, half a year ago?”

“It was three, I think,” Jason said.

“How do you know all these people?”

“You aristocrats are all about dignity and status,” Clive said. “We regular folk appreciate someone who doesn’t climb up on their high horse. And say what you will about Jason, it’s clear that if he was ever on a high horse, he fell off.”

The team found the adventure board notices and Henrietta looked them over.

“There’s nothing impressive here,” she said. “If you like, Asano, you can stay here while the rest of us handle these and pick you up after. You seem to have some catching up to do.”

“That would be nice,” Jason said. “I can call in on an old friend.”

“Three days, six months ago,” Neil said again. “How do you have old friends?”

“The Magic Society have actually been looking into it,” Jason said. “It turns out that once you cross a certain charisma threshold, it starts warping reality around you.”

“Just to be clear,” Clive said, “The Magic Society has not been doing that.”

Jason was sitting in the yard of Hiram, the caretaker of the local astral space aperture. They had been thrown off the mountain and fought the monsters that emerged from it together. His home faced onto the lake, where his granddaughter splashed about with some of the neighbours’ children.

“Things here have been just fine,” Hiram said. “I want to hear all about your exciting adventures.”

“I might have had a close call or two,” Jason said. “There was actually something of a contest for adventurers that...”

Jason trailed off as rainbow light started shining from the middle of the lake. He leapt out of the lounge, stern gaze locked onto that light. It was growing rapidly, to a size indicating a bronze, or possibly even silver manifestation.

“What is it with this village? Hiram, you need to evacuate. Everyone, the whole village. If you have some kind of shelter, put them in it. Otherwise, just get everyone as far away as you can.”

“How long before it finishes manifesting?” Hiram asked.

“If it’s bronze-rank,” Jason said, “maybe quarter of an hour. I can probably handle that, though. If it’s silver you have twice as long, but there won’t be anything I can do.”

Hiram nodded and headed for the children who had stopped playing and were looking at the beautiful rainbow vortex.