

Chapter 616

A Good Friend to Have

Estella Warnock still thought of it as her grandfather's house, even though he was now gone. After the death of her parents, Warwick Warnock had retired from adventuring to raise Estella, never pushing her to adventure the way he had her father. Warwick had learned that lesson at the price of his son's life, and had been determined to avoid the same mistake with his granddaughter.

Warwick had only ever pushed Estella to find her passion, whatever that might be. If it turned out to be adventuring, he would have supported it, but to his relief, it had not been the case. The death of her father had strangled any desire to follow that path in the crib.

Warwick hadn't loved the path that Estella did eventually choose, as a spy for hire for shady people in the city, but he never tried to dissuade her from it. What he did do, from time to time, was try to nudge her in the direction of using her skills for something a little more responsible. That was how she ended up scouting for monsters that Jason Asano or other adventurers were sent after during the Builder attack.

At the same time as she was doing a rare bit of civic duty, her grandfather had gone off to fight one of the fortress cities, but never came home. They told her he died like a hero. It was the same thing they said about her father.

All of this came at a time when she was realising that her chosen profession was not working out. She enjoyed the challenge of it, but her sketchy clients always wanted more challenge than she did. To them, she was a cheap option for spying on those that would otherwise require an expensive and troublesome high-ranker to keep tabs on.

She had left the job after several hours playing cat and mouse with Asano's damnable shadow familiar. She had been uncertain at the time about whether or not to go back and what changes to make. The loss of her grandfather had left her uninspired to return at all, and she'd been languishing in aimlessness after moving back into his empty house.

Of all people, Asano had been something of a comfort. He was neighbourly and it was refreshing that he didn't want anything from her, at least until he did. His offer of employment had sounded suspiciously like adventuring by proxy. On the other hand, it would be nice to work for someone at least partially invested in her wellbeing, compared to Havi Estos and his ilk. They were all about benefits exchange, where her interactions with Asano and companions had shown that they genuinely cared for one another.

That kind of genuine companionship was something she'd never had. Her parents died before she really gained an appreciation of trust, and only her grandfather had ever earned it. There was a distinct appeal to becoming part of a group where that trust wasn't just a factor, but the norm. For all that they regularly jabbed one another, Asano and his friends breathed in camaraderie like air.

She'd been considering Asano's offer for some time, but remained uncertain. It was a path forward at a time when she felt directionless, but should she jump at the first thing that came along? Her instincts told her that it was what her grandfather would want. Despite his nudges in how she should utilise her skills, his only outright complaint was how solitary her life was.

Late one evening she was mulling the issue over, checking if expensive liquor would help resolve her indecision. It hadn't any of the other times she tried it, but she prided herself on professionalism. She had to be thorough in checking.

She turned her head, looking at the wall as her magical senses moved beyond it. Something almost undetectable was approaching; one of Asano's shadowy familiars. She'd regularly felt the shadow-being's many bodies roaming around within the scope of her prodigious senses since moving close to Asano's home, and was beginning to suspect that the familiar was using her for practise.

On this occasion, Shade made his way to her front door. He knew she was aware of his presence and did not knock, and instead, waiting outside her doorway. She got up, moved to the door and opened it.

"Something I can do for your boss?" she asked the shadow man in her doorway. "Isn't he at some big fancy party?"

"He is, indeed, Miss Warnock. I have come to discuss the offer of employment he made you."

"I've been deliberating."

"You have, by my estimate, one hour and forty minutes to conclude your deliberations or the offer will be revoked."

She frowned.

"Tell your boss that I don't like being pushed?"

"He is not pushing, Miss Warnock; he's leaving. Our full entourage will be gone within the next two hours."

"Did something happen at the party?"

“Mr Asano was attending,” Shade said. “So, yes, but my understanding is that was tangentially related at best. He informed me that the decision to leave tonight was centred on a friend helping him to remember that which mattered and that which did not.”

“Sounds like a good friend to have.”

“Quite so, Miss Warnock. If you are willing to tolerate a piece of unsolicited advice, I would point out that you should perhaps consider transitioning to a position where you can make friends of your own.”

The arena ready-areas were essentially large locker rooms, with projectors on one wall so anyone inside could watch the duels. Liara was alone in Jason's ready room, having just watched him not so much win a duel as look at it sternly until it slunk away in shame. She knew enough about him to know he had used a soul attack, but even her gold rank senses had failed to pick up the spike of aura he used to do so. The sheer power and precision of it, at his rank, was almost as terrifying as the attack itself.

Fully as terrifying was Asano's willingness to make soul attacks not just in public, but in front of a prestigious and attentive audience. Soul attacks were extremely rare, almost never coming from essence abilities. They were most notoriously associated with the kind of villains that Liara had spent most of her adventuring career hunting down.

She had asked Jason to be serious and demonstrate that authority could reign him in. He had told her that it was a bad idea, and now she finally believed him. She had never imaged that he would fulfil her request by attacking someone with an attack of such sudden, violating brutality that Soramir Rimaros had to step in and stop him.

The arena doors opened to admit Jason, still in his sinister blood robes and uncanny cloak. He almost seemed to be progressing in a slow glide due to his smooth gait and the cloak obscuring his feet. The doors closed behind him as Jason moved towards her.

"The way you move using the cloak is unusual," she observed.

“When I was iron-rank, I spent no small amount of time developing movement techniques that incorporated various minor aspects of my powers, methodologies taken from the Order of the Reaper. It helped me to travel quickly through the Greenstone Delta on foot while navigating difficult terrain and maximising my endurance. Over time, it became habitual while I was wearing my cloak.”

A dark mist shrouded Jason, dispersing after just a moment. When it did, his robes and cloak had been replaced by his previous formalwear. The absence of his sinister adventuring attire did not alleviate the heavy air surrounding him. He wasn't projecting the

polite subdued aura that etiquette called for. His aura was barely detectable at all, and that was by a gold-ranker standing right in front of him.

"Miss Hurin told me that you are leaving tonight."

"Yes."

"You were meant to leave with His Ancestral Majesty. Make a show of you going off into the cosmos together."

"He can come to the cloud house and put on a show if he likes."

"Soramir Rimaros doesn't go to you, Jason. You go to him."

"That hasn't been my experience."

As much as she might want to, Liara couldn't argue the point. She had been raised to venerate the absentee figure of the Storm Kingdom's founder, but meeting the real thing had upended her expectations. He was a lot more casual and relaxed than the figure depicted in history books, which, she supposed, was something you could do when you didn't answer to anyone. The fact that Soramir and Jason were quite alike in this regard was not lost on her.

"I've been making arrangements as best I can to facilitate your departure," she told him. "Vidal Ladiv is bringing everything you'll need from the Adventure Society to us here. Amos Pensinata and his nephew have been notified and are en route to your building. Carlos Quildo is also making rushed preparations, with no small number of complaints over the short notice. I was not sure if you had decided to take someone from the Rimaros family with you, be it Zara or... my daughter."

"I'm taking neither; we have complications enough. From almost the first moment I arrived here, House Rimaros has been pushing itself into my affairs or pulling me into theirs. Now that I'm leaving your family's kingdom, you will find my patience for that kind of intrusion has sharply declined."

Despite the heaviness of the moment, Liara couldn't help herself.

"This was you being patient?"

Jason broke into a laugh, breaking the tension

"Believe it or not, yes. You're probably better off without me."

"No," Liara said. "You're trouble in a clearly labelled box, Asano, but you may just be worth that trouble. Without you, my husband would be dead. If your friend Belinda was still in Vitesse, the Order of Redeeming Light would still be a threat. If not for your friends Travis and Dawn, the battle with the Builder's city-fortresses would have gone very differently. If you hadn't somehow made the Builder pack up and leave, the invasion would have continued for as much as five or six more weeks."

“Princess, that’s just how things go for me. The reason I’m leaving is in the slim hope that maybe it won’t be, if even for a little while. I do have to save my home planet again, but I’m hoping I can do that on the down-low.”

The door leading into the hallways around the arena opened and Vidal Ladiv came in.

“Good evening, milady. I apologise, Mr Asano; I didn’t want to interrupt your duel preparations. They told me it was about to start, so I thought it would be underway by now. I didn’t want to come in until the duel had begun, and I didn’t sense anyone but you in here, Princess.”

Seeing someone who was visibly in front of them but absent from their magical senses was unnerving to most essence users, and a large part of the mystique high-rankers held. Vidal showed no sign of being perturbed on his face, although both Liara and Jason could feel it in his aura.

“It’s fine, Mr Ladiv,” Liara said. “The duel is already over.”

This time surprise did show on his face.

“I would have expected it to take longer,” he said. “Hector de Varco can turn himself into stone, isolate afflictions into small parts of his body and tear them off, replacing them with stone from the environment. It’s a rather unusual form of regeneration that works very well against affliction specialists. Or is supposed to.”

“Mr Asano decided to forgo afflictions for another approach,” Liara said. “You can ask him about it later, if you have the courage. Right now, he needs the documentation from the Adventure Society. Did you get everything in order?”

“I did, milady. Rodney was a great help.”

“You know my assistant?”

“Yes, milady. Very well, in fact.”

“He never mentioned,” Liara said.

“You’re a princess,” Jason said. “He didn’t think you’d care.”

Liara looked at Jason, then back to Vidal, whose face gave reluctant confirmation. She frowned unhappily.

“Mr Ladiv,” Jason said to the man who increasingly looked in need of rescue. “What do you have for me?”

“Give him what he needs, Mr Ladiv,” Liara said. “I’m going to go help extract Mr Asano’s companions, so they don’t end up in any further political messes after the duels.”

Vidal nodded, moving over to Jason and taking a file folder from a dimensional pouch as Liara departed.

“This is the documentation relating to your Adventure Society memberships,” Vidal said, and handed over the folder. “The paperwork for your real identity and your new identity, with the alias you have chosen, is all here. By the time the sun comes up, these will all have been updated in the Adventure Society central record.”

Vidal then took out a small box.

“These are your new badges, with the updates rank for your real identity and the false identity.”

Vidal opened the case to reveal two silver-rank Adventure Society badges, sitting on the padded lining of the box. The badge on the right had a single star while the one on the left had three. In both cases, however, they differed from the solid five-pointed stars that Jason was familiar with. The single star on the right badge had a circle around it, while the three stars on the left badge were not solid stars, but pentagrams.

“What’s going on here?” Jason asked, pointing them out.

“This,” Vidal said, indicating the single star, “is the standard marker for an auxiliary adventurer. It means that they can’t take solo missions; they have to be attached to a team. It’s for auxiliaries that can hold their own in a fight, if necessary, and means they qualify for a share of contract awards if they participate in combat or, more frequently, other dangerous activities. An intrusion expert might need to join the team if they’re breaking into some fortified lair, for example. They might not fight the things in there, but they’re still going into the dangerous place to open locks and bypass traps.”

“So, it’s for when the cook is secretly super combat guy and there’s a naked lady asleep in the cake.”

“I’m afraid you’ve lost me there, sir.”

“Don’t call me sir. Call me Jason, or Asano, if you’re more comfortable with that. Call me H.R. Pufnstuf if you like, but not sir. I’m not in charge of you.”

“No, you’re definitely in charge of me, sir.”

“You’re an independent liaison from the Adventure Society.”

“Sir, I’ll be with your team and your friends in your cloud construct. While I’m confident that most, if not all of the rumours I’ve heard about that building are wrong, there are people I’m very scared of who are scared of it. Add that to you being suspicious of me as an outsider and I’m not entirely certain you won’t kill and dispose of me if I stumble onto the wrong secret. You’re in charge of me, if only from the perspective of my not being an idiot.”

“That’s fair,” Jason acknowledged. “Alright, tell me about the other badge.”

"Well," Vidal said in the tone of someone familiar with the term 'shoot the messenger,' "you're definitely a three-star adventurer. Three stars means dealing with contracts related to high-level politics. If Soramir Rimaros is asking about your star rating, that pretty much answers the question right there. But, the Adventure Society is also aware that you sometimes feel compelled to act against your own best interests when your principles are involved. While that is certainly admirable, the society wanted to de-incentivise you flashing a three-star badge that, officially, is in another dimension."

"You were told to say that pretty much word for word, weren't you?"

"I was, sir, yes."

"So, what do these modified stars mean?"

"They don't, strictly speaking, mean anything. This star design was made for you, and you alone."

"Oh," Jason said. "That's actually kind of clever. If I go trying to use the authority of a three-star to go taking shortcuts for my team, the idiosyncratic badge will mean that an Adventure Society branch will dig deeper, opening up the whole can of worms where I'm meant to be off in another dimension. Basically, they guaranteed that any time I use my badge it will be a whole mess. They want to reduce the temptation to use my star rating to take shortcuts, in the hope that I'll seek out more nuanced methods first."

"Very astute, sir, which I imagine to be how you got those three stars in the first place."

"Don't patronise me, Ladiv, or I'll throw you overboard while we're in the middle of the ocean."

"I have the water essence, sir, so I would be quite fine in that scenario."

"Of course you would; I'm not going to murder you for patronising me. I'll just make you run alongside the vehicle for an hour or two."

Chapter 617

Put the Extraordinary Aside

A large flying carriage landed on the lawn in front of Jason's pagoda. Jason and his companions emerged, along with Liara, and Jason immediately walked up to the pagoda doors, which opened at his approach. As soon as they did, water came spilling out onto the grass. It was far from a flood, but enough to demonstrate that the massive atrium floor had been flooded to at least a couple of centimetres deep.

Like the night outside, the interior was dark. That did not obscure Jason's vision, but he still conjured his cloak, from which a swarm of tiny star lights emerged. They swept up into the building, growing brighter as they went. The massive destruction that had taken place on the building's interior became plain for all to see. It was clear that some force, not explosive but annihilating, had essentially deleted a sphere almost as wide as the building itself. Several floors were all but absent while others were damaged to various degrees, including the mezzanine levels. The waterfall was now spilling through a hole rather than over an edge into the pool, which was the source of the shallow flooding.

"Damn," Gary said. "Are you going to deal with the guys who did this?"

High above, one of the intact sections of floor opened up and a small group of rot-black meat lumps dropped out, falling some seven storeys to smack wetly into the floor.

"No," Jason said. "These people were idiots being used by someone else. Liara, you're better equipped to investigate the man behind the curtain than I am, and a revenge spree is a little public for someone who's meant to be in another dimension."

"Now you hand over prisoners," Liara said. "I don't suppose you want to throw in Melody Jain? Assuming she didn't take the opportunity to break out."

"Definitely not," a voice came from above and Melody dropped from a high floor, forgoing slow fall abilities to make a superhero landing before standing up and gesturing at what was left of the gold rankers on the floor. What was left did not include limbs.

"Asano did this to people while attending a party, portal distance away, behind what has to be formidable communication-restricting magic. I decided then and there that not only was I not going to make a break for it without a lot of confidence in my plan, but also that Asano probably wasn't in the best of moods, based on what he did to these poor saps, anyway."

"That was a good choice," Sophie told her mother. "He soul attacked a guy in front of the king until Soramir Rimaros stepped in to stop him."

"And what did the king do about that?" Melody asked.

“Not sure,” Sophie said. “Had another drink?”

Melody looked over at Jason, still shrouded in his cloak.

“You just keep getting scarier, don’t you? Is that a deliberate thing, or does it just happen?”

Jason pushed back the hood to reveal his face, which left him looking like his head was sticking out of a portal.

“That’s creepy, bro. I’m into it.”

“Everyone get packing,” Jason said. “I’m reconfiguring the house to a vehicle, so there’ll be less room to play with.”

Liara was directing Adventure Society personnel to put the beleaguered gold rankers into a secure transport carriage. Once they were clear of the cloud house, its defences stopped ravaging them. The potent recuperative strength of their gold-rank recovery attributes turned them back into recognisable people by the time the magical flying paddy wagon arrived. They were all collared as they were placed inside, completely docile. None of them was acting out or speaking at all, which was remarkable for any group of gold rankers. They just looked relieved, even eager, to be taken away from the pagoda.

Suddenly, Soramir Rimaros was standing next to her. If she’d been silver rank instead of gold, his diamond-rank speed would have been indistinguishable from teleportation. He turned on his formidable privacy screen, cutting off the various observers still watching the pagoda.

“He’s still trouble,” Soramir said.

“If I might ask, Ancestral Majesty, why do you let him run so rampant? I know that there’s no way the king would have put up with his antics without you telling him to.”

Soramir thought about it for a moment.

“The healer from Asano’s team, Neil Davone,” he said. “He’s a capable enough mid-rank adventurer from a minor noble house in some city-state no one would ever have heard of if not for the Geller family. Under normal circumstances, would I even know the name of the person I just described?”

“Unlikely, Ancestral Majesty.”

“Out in the cosmos, that’s me. There is no reason I would ever come to the attention of the First Sister of the World-Phoenix. That’s who Jason’s friend Dawn is. Or was. She’s moved onto some more nebulous rank. In the cosmic realms, I’m just a face in the crowd and she is a blazing sun. But just as I know who Young Master Davone is because of Jason, she knows who I am because of Jason as well.”

"You're saying that he operates in prestigious circles. We knew that from the great astral beings and gods visiting him. Just about where we're standing, in fact."

"I'm not sure you understand how prestigious. He's already at a level where he needs to deal with me instead of the king for his actual objectives, because the king isn't enough. The only reason he's dealing with any of our family is that we dragged him into our politics. And we still failed to marry any of ours off to him; I knew we should have focused on that more heavily. Actually, now that I say it, I heard that your daughter—"

"No."

"No?"

"No, Ancestral Majesty."

"You know I meant your younger daughter, Zareen?"

"And you know I meant that while you can order my family members as part of House Rimaros, you were also acknowledging that you cannot give orders that intervene in my family dynamic. Ancestral Majesty."

Soramir chuckled.

"Asano is a good influence on you. You're an important part of the family, with your position in the Adventure Society, but you let your peripheral position in the royal family make you timid. You're going to need to hold your ground more and more, Liara. I expect to see more of that in the future."

"I'll do my best, Ancestral Majesty."

"My point," Soramir said, "is that the troubles of a royal family are significantly below the level Asano is operating at. There are things I won't tell you; secrets that belong to Asano that would cause him no small consternation should they come out. What I will say is that Asano isn't really a silver ranker. He's a very dangerous diamond ranker that hasn't caught up to his natural rank yet. I'm confident that he'll be younger than you are now when he reaches diamond rank, assuming he survives that long."

"I need to go, Ancestral Majesty," Liara said, indicating the security carriage about to lift off.

"Of course. Please attend to your duties."

As Liara departed, Jason emerged from the building, entering Soramir's privacy screen.

"You know you don't need this thing," Jason told him. "You could just pop inside."

"I'll decline, thank you. And you should be careful about who you let in there, given what you've become."

"I wondered if you realised, given your experiences in the wider cosmos."

“The vast majority of astral kings are messengers, Mr Asano. With a war with the messengers in the offing, that’s not going to make you a popular figure if people find out.”

“I imagine it won’t. But laying low is the plan, so I’ll do my best to avoid standing out.”

“And how good is your best in that regard?”

“It’s probably best you don’t ask,” Jason said.

“Once you send your friends on their way, Mr Asano, come to the palace. Officially, we’ll be in seclusion until our departure is announced. In reality, I will have you portalled to them.”

“Rather than that,” Jason said, “you can take one of my familiar’s bodies back with you. He can wear my conjured cloak and occasionally be spotted in the palace after I’m gone.”

“That will work?”

“He can mimic my retracted aura well enough that anyone who can see through it will have to be either rudely focused with their senses or someone like you or Amos Pensinata.”

“That should suffice, then.”

“Which makes this the last time we’ll see each other for some time. I hope that it will be as equals, instead of my stature being propped up by association with the people around me.”

“And by the ones that aren’t people.”

“Gods and great astral beings are people, Soramir,” Jason said firmly. “They’re just weird and powerful.”

Soramir laughed.

“I said something funny?” Jason asked.

“Oh yes, Mr Asano. I think I just understood you a little more, and how you wound up where you are. It’s one thing to say that these vast entities are fundamentally the same as us when you’ve never felt their power pressing down on you. I know from experience that once you have, that perspective is harder to maintain.”

“Almost everyone I deal with dwarfs me in power,” Jason said. “Look at you and me. You get used to it.”

“If I’m not mistaken, neither of us ages anymore. I’m curious about how your point of view has shifted the next time we meet.”

“If I reach that point, I’ll call it a win. I seem to go from one desperate attempt to cling to life to the next.”

“Which is the point of our current efforts, is it not? To put the extraordinary aside for a while and live as much of an ordinary life as you can, given secret identities and secret agendas?”

“It is. But I’ve had hopes like that before.”

Soramir nodded.

“What you’ve faced all came around two ranks too early,” he said.

“Tell me about it,” Jason said, then looked up at an approaching flying carriage, massively oversized and covered in metal plating.

“Preparation continues unabated, Ancestral Majesty; we should go, which means it’s time to drop the privacy screen.”

Soramir nodded. Once it was once again possible to eavesdrop, Jason started the show.

“My cloud flask isn’t developed enough to be useful where we’re going,” he said. “I’m going to leave it here with one of my shadow familiars, because he can use it. He’ll essentially be another auxiliary, in charge of transport and accommodation.”

Jason plucked the cloud flask’s shrunken form from his necklace and it grew to normal size. A Shade body emerged from the pagoda and Jason handed it over.

“It won’t do anyone any good to steal it,” Jason told Shade, “but some idiot probably will try anyway, so don’t let them.”

“Of course, Mr Asano.”

“I left the materials to fix it up after the damage inside, so use them before you break down the pagoda.”

“Yes, Mr Asano.”

After a handful of other instructions, Jason wrapped himself completely in his cloak, such that no one notice him shadow jump and leave a Shade body in his place.

“Have you said your goodbyes?” Soramir asked.

“I did that away from prying eyes,” Jason’s voice came from the disguised Shade.

“Then we’re done here,” Soramir said.

Carlos watched them leave, having disembarked from the heavily modified vehicle that landed during Jason and Soramir's conversation. It looked like a mix of double-decker, oversized tour bus and prison transport. After Jason refused to house the Order of Redeeming Light in his soul space, Carlos had been forced to make custom arrangements. The vehicle was part mobile prison, part hospital and part accommodation for Carlos and his research assistants.

The Shade that had accepted the cloud flask led Carlos into the pagoda.

“I still don’t understand why Jason wouldn’t just accommodate the Order of the Redeeming Light people himself,” Carlos complained. “He’s already holding Melody Jain.”

“Ms Jain is a special case,” Shade informed him as they reached the doors. “Holding hostiles in his own home can have...”

Shade paused as the doors opened and they went inside.

“...ramifications.”

Carlos craned his head back to look at the destruction to the pagoda's interior. Jason's cloak lights had been replaced with an array of floating glow stones so that no one stumbled of any ledges.

“What did this?” Carlos asked.

“Hostiles in Mr Asano’s home,” Shade said. “Do come along, Priest Quildo.”

Chapter 618

A Chance For Some Relative Quiet

In the atrium of his pagoda, Jason had set the cloud flask on the floor and placed a funnel into the neck. He had a large box of quintessence gems that he tipped into the funnel.

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- You have added silver-rank [Air Quintessence] to the cloud flask. Remaining materials required to replenish cloud construct fundament:
 - 274 silver-rank [Air Quintessence].
 - 311 silver-rank [Water Quintessence].
 - 2648 silver-rank [Cloud Quintessence].
-

After the destruction wreaked in his pagoda, Jason needed to top off the base material the cloud flask used to generate constructs. Fortunately, the quintessence types required were extremely common in the Sea of Storms. His current notoriety had uncharacteristically proven more help than hindrance as he contacted a trade hall broker and, in less than an hour, had crates of quintessence waiting when he portalled to the Adventure Society campus.

That had been one of Jason's last jobs before pretending to go off with Soramir. He was now operating under his assumed identity and would not be emerging from the cloud house again before leaving Rimaros. Amos Pensinata arrived, along with his nephew, Orin. Estella Warnock showed up, not having believed for a second that the figure departing with Soramir was actually Jason.

Jason was in his soul space while Shade returned the pagoda to the cloud flask and replaced it with a vehicle construct. Estella, on her arrival, insisted on seeing Jason and, after some deliberation, went through the white archway to Jason's soul space.

Estella was immediately wary of the strange realm. Anyone who entered could feel its uncanny nature, but her senses were much stronger and more developed than most. She looked around the beautiful but unsettling landscape, unsure of not just where she was, but what manner of reality she had found herself in.

"Strange, isn't it?" Jason asked, suddenly standing beside her. She could sense that this was not Jason as she knew him, as he was part of this place. Or maybe it was part of him.

“Your senses will give you more insight than most into this place,” he said. “I would take it as a kindness if you would keep any such insights to yourself. Maybe tell Clive. He’d like that.”

“I wanted to talk to you. Before I finally accepted your offer.”

“I hope coming in here hasn’t put you off.”

“What is this place?”

“It’s a space that belongs to me. Sadly, it doesn’t translate into power outside it, except in a few specific ways.”

“Like making a defence specialist fall like a chopped tree in an instant?”

“You heard about that? But no, that wasn’t because of this place. I suppose you could call them fruit from the same tree.”

“I want some assurances before I sign on.”

“No,” Jason said.

“No?”

“No. All I’m offering you is friendship and trust. Where we go from there is something we have to work out together.”

“Does friendship and trust come with a salary?”

Jason burst out laughing.

“Officially, we’ll both be auxiliaries,” he said. “Since I’m just the cook, you’ll get paid more than I will.”

The pagoda dissolved into cloud stuff that swept into the flask over the course of several minutes, like a genie slowly returning to its lamp. Shade then produced a new construct, this one a vehicle. It was different from what the team was already calling the Carlos Crime Wagon, which was a massive bus in plain shades of khaki and grey, dominated by heavy bolted plates.

Until it reached gold-rank, the cloud flask wouldn’t be able to produce the ocean-liner sized vessel that Emir could, but it could still manage something the size of a superyacht. It had similarities to a large leisure craft in design, but instead of tapering to a sleek hull to cut through the water, it spread out like a massive hovercraft.

Being made of magic clouds, it didn’t require the engineering and storage spaces of a yacht from Earth. Along with magical propulsion that did not require an engine room, Jason had fed enough low-rank dimensional quintessence into the cloud flask that it could make modest dimensional storage cupboards. This meant a lot more internal space for accommodation and leisure, and less for cargo and space-eating cabin wardrobes.

There was still a bridge, from which Shade would pilot the vehicle. It was on the top covered deck, along with the owner's cabin, with only an open roof deck above. Open areas featured at the front and rear of the two main decks as well, set up for lounging or launching smaller vehicles. Both Clive and Belinda had obtained skimmers that were parked in dimensional bays by the lower starboard deck.

Most of the cabins were below deck, while the two main decks were defined by purpose. The lower main deck was dominated by a sprawling dining bar lounge, which was the main congregating area on board. It also contained a generous galley. The upper main deck was more for the business of adventuring, mostly taken up by a spacious training room, but also with conference and briefing rooms. It was a small command centre for the two adventuring teams that would be aboard.

Arriving shortly before the cloud yacht's departure had been Arabelle and Callum Morse, whose visible agitation was a long way from his familiar stoicism. Like Carlos, they were relegated to their own transport, with a more modest vehicle. It was a skimmer designed for both land and calm waters, with seating for two and some compact bunks. Jason wasn't going to allow Callum in the cloud yacht, even if Arabelle insisted that Jason hear the man out, sooner or later. Jason had chosen later, leaving the pair to trail behind.

Arabelle was going to be part of Carlos' team anyway, but she didn't trust Callum left to his own devices. For that reason, she stayed with him in their own vehicle instead of joining Jason on the yacht or Carlos in the crime wagon. It wasn't like she and Callum hadn't shared close confines before, in their days on the same adventuring team.

The final arrivals were the remainder of Orin Pensinata's team. Jason had been reluctant to accept their presence at first, as had Orin's uncle, Amos. Orin had proven intractable on this, however, and Jason had sympathy for someone not wanting to be separated from their team. Using the Shade body he had left with Liara for communication purposes, he had her run background on the team before accepting their presence. He had worked with the team before, and knew that while their experience was limited, their training and discipline – at least while on the job – were respectable. They were guild elites, and he'd seen their power and teamwork firsthand.

Finally, not long before the sun was due to rise, the procession of vehicles set out. They left Arnote and headed south, moving over a quiet sea to the mainland. Jason and Carlos' vehicles could both fly in the high-magic zone, but neither did. The crime wagon and Callum's skimmer van hovered a few metres over the water which consumed the spirit coins they used as fuel at a much more economical rate.

Jason had the advantage of feeding the cloud yacht magic from his soul space, but he had no interest in rushing. He had played enough open-world games to know that once you unlocked flying movement, the wonder of exploration became greatly diminished. As such, he let the cloud yacht rest on the surface of the water like a hovercraft, only hovering up to remain level in the face of larger waves.

As the vehicles moved away from Rimaros, Jason sat on the upper rear deck, under an awning, while most of the group was on the roof deck. He sat on a couch to watch out the back window as the island shrank from view. Farrah joined him.

“Not worried about anyone seeing you?” she asked. “There are still a lot of eyes on us.”

“There are invisible screens all around the yacht that only kick in as necessary. They let in a nice breeze, for example, but keep out the rain. It's also how people can have private conversations, since they act as privacy screens as well. I added that function to the cloud flask after seeing their ubiquity in Rimaros. From the outside, anyone trying to see us will only see a blur while the privacy screen is active. And because it's part of my spirit domain, even gods can't see through it, so anyone who can spot me deserves to.”

“Fair enough.”

Farrah would only be joining the trip to the limits of his portal range. Once they reached that distance, he would be portal her back and collect the promised rewards from House de Varco for winning the duels. While Jason and his companions set off, Liara would collect the rewards to hand over to Jason.

“How are you feeling?” Farrah asked as they watched the island shrink in their wake. They were both thinking of their arrival in Rimaros half a year ago. They were now at the start of the wet season in the tropics, and as monsoon rain started coming down, Jason's ability to see through the dark was no longer enough to keep sight of the island behind them. The rain ran off the invisible screen, but with a thought, Jason let the rain through. It pounded onto the deck and off the awning, which shifted from cloud-stuff to mimicking canvas. The canvas started thrumming as the rain hammered it.

“I always liked that sound,” he said. “When I was a kid we went on a holiday once where it rained every day. I spent the whole time living on snack food and reading as the rain fell against the tent.”

“Does it help? I know that you've set off on a lot of journeys that weren't what you wanted them to be.”

“It’s nice, but I’m just fine,” Jason said. “I’ve got a luxurious magic boat, good friends and maybe even a chance for some relative quiet, at least for a while. Also, if I can avoid getting killed too often, I might just live forever. That doesn’t suck.”

Most of the cloud yacht’s occupants were on the open roof deck until the rain started. It spilled off the invisible dome over the deck that still somehow let in the wind, but most of the people took the stairs to the lower decks. Orin Pensinata and his team did not, remaining outside.

The leader of Orin and Kalif’s team was Korinne Pescos. They had first encountered Jason in a mixed-force expedition. It was a strange group centred around their team of guild elites, but also included non-guild members and a pair of princesses. Kalif had been prodding the non-guild members, to see if they had any spine to them. That included Jason after Kalif noticed that the princesses seemed to at least recognise him.

“What have you gotten us into, Orin?” Kalif asked. His brief history with Jason Asano was making him uncomfortable. Kalif had first caught Jason at a bad time. It had been at the height of Jason’s volatility from the continued absence of his team, even as the Builder, Purity forces and local politics all sought to harass him. His response to Kalif’s provocation had been to sharply demonstrate their difference in soul strength.

Kalif and his team had worked with Asano twice. There was the expedition where they met, during which time Asano went off alone and mind-controlled a bunch of Builder constructs through means still unknown. Asano had been a savage, solitary figure at that time, barely talking and rushing off alone, with no sense of teamwork.

The next time they worked together was very different. Kalif’s team leader, Korinne, had been in charge of coordinating the underwater complex rescue. Asano had been critical to portalling people in and had been with his team at that stage. Although they barely interacted, Asano had been noticeably different. He was more like an ordinary adventurer once he had his team around him.

That day was the beginning of Asano’s public notoriety, in the aftermath of the underwater complex raid. Rumours abounded, ranging from the unusual to the outright insane. Finding a way to portal past magical barriers was one thing, but who would believe that a god would visit Asano for a casual chat, like an old friend?

For many, the previous evening’s ball was the first time they had caught sight of Asano as Princess Liara paraded him like a prized pet. It had deflated many of the rumours about the man until people started causing trouble. The culmination of that was Asano dropping Hector de Varco, famed for his defensive prowess, like he was culling a

helpless animal. Kalif couldn't help but think of the time he provoked Asano and was stopped dead with an aura technique. In that moment, he realised how lightly Asano had let him off.

At that point, Kalif wanted nothing more to do with Asano and was relieved to hear then man would be leaving Rimaros. Then he discovered that their team would be going with him. Orin just looked at Kalif, who repeated his question.

"I'm not joking, Orin. What have you caught us up in?"

"That's enough, Kalif," Korinne cut in. "You know that this isn't Orin. It's his uncle. Our choices were to abandon our team member or to come along. Are you suggesting we should have let him go alone?"

"Of course not," Kalif said. "I course we go. That doesn't mean we go blindly, and you know that Asano and I have bad blood."

"Then why don't we cleanse it?" A new voice said. The team turned to look at Jason moving up the stairs. He moved in front of Kalif and looked up at the taller man.

"We didn't start off on the best foot, did we?" Jason asked. "I was in a bad place and neither of us were our best selves that day."

He held out his hand as a peace offering.

"How about we start over, and put what came before behind us?"

Kalif looked at Jason's hand for a moment before shaking it.

"Alright."

Jason flashed him a grin and moved over to the railing. The rain was thick, cutting off visibility, but he looked out anyway. Kalif and his team watched him, warily.

"I enjoyed Rimaros," he said winsomely. "I'd like to come back during quieter times. I never even met all the AI brothers."

Chapter 619

Surplus to Requirements

Jason and his team, plus Rufus, were sitting around the conference table on the cloud yacht, looking at a projection of a map.

“We’re freer now to make our own decisions than we’ve been in a while,” Humphrey said. “That means literally charting our own path. We have a general plan of moving south, down this continent before crossing over to the Great Southern Continent. We’ll move across there, then cross north again to reach Hornis on our way to Greenstone. From there we’ll continue up to Vitesse and then Cyrion, where the other outworlders from Earth are located.”

As he talked, Humphrey pointed with his finger and a line appeared on the map. The Earth equivalent of the path he drew out would be going from the Caribbean through South America to Antarctica, then back up to Africa before reaching Europe. The Pallimustus version of Antarctica was apparently much more hospitable than the earth version, while the local version of Australia was just the opposite. The most notorious high-magic zone in the world, it was mostly a haven to diamond-rank monsters and anyone fool enough to hunt them.

“It’s not a wildly efficient route,” Rufus pointed out.

“Efficiency is counter to our purpose,” Humphrey said. “It’s time for this team to start seeing the world.”

“Even if it means wandering over most of it like a drunkard who can’t walk in a straight line,” Neil added, raising a fist in the air. “I’m all in. Team Drunkard!”

Humphrey’s eyes went wide and he let out a loud groan.

“I forgot to change the team name after the administrative restrictions came down after the surge!”

“I think that die is cast, my friend,” Jason said. “I think we’re all pretty happy with the team name.”

“Yeah!” cheered the moustachioed mouse dragging a biscuit the size of his entire body from the plate on the table.

“I’m afraid that battle is lost,” Rufus comforted Humphrey. “Perhaps we should just move onto the specifics of our journey.”

Humphrey resignedly nodded before resuming the discussion.

"The first leg of our trip is to move south. There is a great road network connecting the population hubs, whichever way we go, and our general options are the east coast, the west coast or the central regions."

"What are the differences?" Jason asked.

"The east coast is what you might call the standard route. It's the most populous, the most developed and the most stable, magically speaking. Magic strength there is in the mid-range, meaning primarily silver-rank monsters, with some large packs of bronze and the occasional gold. That's a very good starting range for where we are right now, looking to rank up long-term."

"The problem with that path," Rufus said, "is that the surge just ended. There will be a lot of Adventurers hitting the road, just like us, and that will be the road most of them take. That means more competition for the best contracts at every branch we run into. Also, the locals in each branch can get resentful of all the outsiders coming in to snake the most lucrative jobs."

"The next option," Humphrey said, "is the central region. This, I think we should avoid. There's more wilderness and fewer developed areas, which isn't inherently bad, but the magic levels are. The central region is notorious for inconsistent magic levels, so one day you're fighting iron-rank monsters and the next, gold rank."

"And the west coast?" Jason asked.

"It varies between low and medium ambient magic levels. Not Greenstone low, for the most part, but sometimes it is. There are a couple of areas that, like Greenstone, are major sites for low-rank spirit coin farms. Mostly, though, the monster level is around bronze or silver."

"That's a little too low for us," Sophie said.

"I agree," Humphrey said. "On the other hand, there will be less competition for the best contracts."

"I think east," Jason said. "We don't need the most lucrative contracts. I know the only real experience I have of standard adventuring was in Greenstone, but what I saw there was that the people who needed help the most were often overlooked. They couldn't sweeten the contract rewards over Adventure Society standard rates, so their contracts tended to languish until the society assigned them as punishment contracts."

"You want to take the worst contracts?" Neil asked.

"Worst by what metric?" Jason responded. "The unpopular contracts tend to be the ones that deviate from the standard. To me, that sounds more fun."

"Of course it does," Neil said.

"We should also look at our wider objectives," Clive said. "This is an adventuring tour. If we're going to see the world, let's see it. New towns, new people. There's more to meeting other adventurers than competing for contracts. If we want to spend the whole time slogging through unpopulated areas, we might as well fly over them."

"I'm really liking the sound of this," Jason said. "Coast roads and food markets. Yeah, I'm sold."

Humphrey looked around the table.

"If there are no objections then, east we'll go."

The door to Jason's cabin opened as Korinne Pescos approached. It was the only cabin not below decks, sharing the upper deck with the bridge. It was spacious and ringed with windows, aside from the wall it shared with the bridge. Jason was sitting on a couch that faced starboard to enjoy the panoramic view, watching the vehicle's wake.

"Please join me, Miss Pescos," he said, neither getting up nor turning around. She moved slowly through the spacious cabin, which was more like an open lounge. There wasn't even a bed, but she had seen him manipulate the structure of the ship by changing the cloud-substance it was made of, so he could make one at need.

Korinne moved around the long couch and sat, the impossible plushness of it slightly leeching the hard edge with which she had entered. She wondered if this was incidental or something Asano did deliberately to engineer his interactions. She had been warned that his seeming frivolity would often hide deceptively deliberate manipulation.

"What can I help you with, Miss Pescos?" Jason asked. "Refreshments?"

"No thank you. Spirit coins are food enough for me. The plainness helps keep me sharp. It fosters an efficient mind."

"I can't argue with the results," Jason said. "I've seen you in action. I'd been told about the strength of guild elites for some time, but yours was the team that truly showed me what that meant, when we went on that expedition together. It was deeply impressive. If I'm being honest, even with my full team around me, we couldn't match the overwhelmingly comprehensive speed and power with which you tore through that pack of monsters. It was a large pack, too, yet you were clean and controlled the entire time. The benefits of an efficient mind, I imagine."

"You don't consider your own mind efficient?"

"Oh, I don't think anyone does, so I might as well indulge."

With a gesture, a low table formed in front of him and he pulled items from his storage space to place on it; a tray of assorted baked goods and a pitcher of iced tea. He took out

two plates and two glasses, but only filled one, which he sipped from appreciatively. He then moved one of the colourful baked slices from the tray to a plate, which he picked up. Korinne watched in silence as he went through the slow and deliberate motions of setting out snacks. Finally, Jason bit into his slice with an appreciative moan.

"I'm so glad this world turned out to have coconuts," he said. "I do hope you won't begrudge me indulging."

"It's fine."

"So, what brings you to my cabin?" he asked.

"Do you genuinely not know?" she asked. "I was warned by your team that you know everything that happens on this ship."

"I'm not a god who can pay attention to every follower at once, Miss Pescos. I might realise that your team is discussing something, but unless I give it my direct attention, I don't know what it is. Think of it like looking down from a tower. I can see what the people below are doing in general, but without paying closer attention, I can't see the details. Did my team also tell you that they've started using privacy screens in their cabins for private moments?"

"They did, but also that they couldn't be sure if the screens actually blocked your power to observe. Do they?"

"I don't have an answer that can satisfy you, Miss Pescos. Be it yes or no, I have reasons to lie either way, which means that you can't trust what I have to say."

She nodded, acknowledging the point.

"This was all very last-moment, Mr Asano. If I'm being honest, I would prefer that my team had our own, separate transport."

"That is between you and Amos Pensinata. My understanding is that you are here because his nephew is here, and Orin being here was the condition of his uncle being here."

"And why exactly is Amos Pensinata joining you?"

"A friend of mine asked him to teach me some things. He agreed, in return for help giving his nephew some seasoning as an adventurer."

"And what makes your team qualified to instruct mine?" Korinne asked. "By your own admission, we are guild elites that can outstrip your team."

Jason smiled with infuriating self-indulgence, but didn't answer immediately. He took another bite of coconut slice, then washed it down with a sip of iced tea.

"Are you sure I can't tempt you, Miss Pescos? These refreshments are well-described in this humidity."

“Your boat does a fine job of keeping that outside, Mr Asano.”

Jason nodded.

“Your question was what my team has to teach you,” he said, finally getting back to the point. “As your tone so clearly implied, we have nothing to teach. What I would like to correct is your claim that I have admitted the inferiority of my team. What I said was that we could not equal the speed and power you demonstrated in destroying the large pack of monsters that attacked our expedition. That is not the same thing.”

Korinne let out a snort.

“You’re going to talk about Rimaros-style adventuring versus Vitesse-style, aren’t you? Specialisation versus generalisation.”

“I’ve only ever been to Rimaros. Once we reach Vitesse it will be my first visit, so I won’t go speaking to the way they do things there. For that, you should seek out Rufus Remore. He trained me, and is steeped in the Vitesse approach. You know his family runs a school there?”

“He mentioned.”

Jason smiled.

“What Amos Pensinata asked was not training, but seasoning. Be it in Rimaros or Vitesse, the problem with training low-rank adventurers is that their experiences must be heavily curated or the local monsters will kill them. Forgive me if I’m mistaken, but my understanding is that you and your team were quite orthodox in that regard.”

“We spent the majority of our iron and bronze ranks under gold-rank supervision,” Korinne conceded. “But we’re silver rank now. We operated alone through most of the surge.”

“And that’s what Lord Pensinata wants more of. Experience, away from the safety of your guild. Facing the consequences of your choices with no recourse but yourselves. He will be there if you truly are in need of rescue, but he won’t be following you around and is likely not to make it in time if you find yourselves in truly desperate straits.”

“We’re hardly free of gold-rank supervision, Mr Asano. There are four of them in just this tiny convoy.”

“Yes, but the only one you need to concern yourself with is Lord Pensinata. Carlos was never an adventurer, and while Arabelle Remore certainly was, she’ll only help my team, and even that’s a maybe. I think you’ll find both she and Pensinata giving us all enough room to live with our mistakes. They have the resolve for that; ask Arabelle’s son.”

“Even accepting that we are on our own, or close enough it, how exactly does being with your team benefit us? Why does Lord Pensinata see value in bringing Orin on this journey?”

“It’s a matter of experience.”

“And why do we need your experience? You already said you aren’t going to teach us.”

“And we won’t. Don’t look at myself and my team as instructors.”

“You don’t have to be concerned on that front,” she said, making Jason laugh.

“We are peers,” Jason told her. “Avail yourself of us as such, and expect us to do the same. Advice from those who already have experience is always valuable when going out to have those experiences yourself. I met Rufus Remore because he and his friends realised that they needed experience they could not get in Vitesse. He ended up founding a satellite school in a low-magic zone based on that very principle.”

Korinne didn’t respond for a long time as she processed what Jason had said. For his part, Jason ate baked goods and watched the rain pouring down outside, heavy enough that he could barely see the other vehicles.

“I’ve heard things about you,” she said finally. “The veracity of what I’ve heard seems spurious at best.”

“Try living through them,” he said, shaking his head. “I can’t speak to what you’ve heard, and telling my own story doesn’t seem helpful. Words are easy, after all. All I’ll say is that my team and I have faced situations where we had no one but ourselves to fall back on, even when the stakes were high.”

“That’s what Orin intimated.”

“Intimated?”

“He’s not a big talker. But he said he saw into your aura once, unfiltered. He said it told a story that he believed.”

“Right,” Jason said. His first encounter with Orin was when Vesper Rimaros had arranged a ‘coincidental meeting’ with Kasper Irios. It was part of her political machinations that, like Vesper herself, died when the Builder conflict reached Rimaros. Orin had been a friend of the man and Jason had picked him out as the sensible one of the group, showing him a glimpse of his real aura so they would back off quietly.

“Actually,” Jason said, “I didn’t show him the full thing. But if you’d like to see it, I can show you.”

“You’re a skilled aura manipulator,” she said. “That much I’ve heard and believe. You could put up a façade to impress me.”

"I don't need to impress you, Miss Pescos. Not to put too fine a point on it, but your team's presence is a favour for a favour for a favour. Surplus to requirements. Officially, I'm going off with Soramir Rimaros, but you and yours can't be here without knowing that's a lie, so you've been brought into that circle."

He grimaced.

"I didn't want you here, Miss Pescos, but to get Amos we needed Orin, and to get Orin we needed you. Apparently. Someone who means a lot to me left this world recently. Literally left; not a death metaphor, but I won't see her again for some time. She was the one who wanted to connect Lord Pensinata and myself. Otherwise, I'd cut my losses and take none of you. I don't need what Pensinata has to teach that much."

"Then why put up with us? Why not stash us in the bottom of the ship in our cabins instead of letting me in here to question you like this?"

"Because you're on my boat, which makes you my guests. If you're more comfortable buying a vehicle of your own as soon as we reach a place that will sell one, you are welcome to do so. I might recommend it, in fact."

He leaned back into the plush couch, laying his arms along its back and letting them sink in.

"Cloud furniture can be hard to give up," he told her with a grin. "And if your team will be eating spirit coins, watching what the rest of us enjoy will be bad for morale."

Korinne looked at him thoughtfully, then picked out a baked slice, put it on the other plate and claimed it, taking a bite. She contemplated the taste for a moment.

"You're right," she said. "I don't want my team getting used to this."

Chapter 620

Bad at Crime

The small convoy carrying Jason and his friends turned east as soon as it hit the coast, hovering along the wide and well-maintained network of roadways. The immediate turn east was to Belinda's disappointment, as she was interested in heading further south. That way led to the famously sketchy nation of Girlano and all the opportunities it offered to an enterprising and open-minded young lady.

"I officially retract my endorsement of you and Humpy," she told Sophie. "This whole 'being a better person' thing has sucked the fun right out of you."

They sat on the cloud yacht's open lower foredeck. There wasn't much to see, with the wall of rain still running off the invisible cloud screen.

"And by fun, you mean elaborate schemes to steal things?" Sophie asked.

"Schemes? Now you're sounding like Jason. This whole team is a bad influence."

"In that, they are against robbery?"

"Exactly."

"Lindy, we're not street rats anymore. We've met the king of one of the most powerful nations in the world."

"But I never got close enough to lift his watch though, did we?" Belinda asked, taking out a pocket watch and turning it over in her hands.

"What's that?"

"It's a watch."

"Whose watch?"

"Remember that guy who tried to provoke us at the ball, not long before Gary bent a tray over some other guy's head?"

"Kind of. He wasn't exactly memorable. Wait, that's his watch?"

"Yep."

"Well, that's fine. Screw that prick."

"Exactly. I lifted his watch while he was busy being a turd."

"You didn't touch him. You didn't even get close."

"I know, right?"

"Damn, Lindy. That's a good lift."

"Is this rain ever going to let up?" Jason asked, looking out the window of the bar lounge.

“It is,” Humphrey told him.

“It doesn’t look like it. How long is it going to take?”

“About four months.”

“Bloody monsoon weather.”

“One of the reasons Rimaros is situated on those specific islands, instead of the larger ones, is that they see the least rain in the Sea of Storms.”

“I thought those windmill-looking things was meant to stop all this nonsense.”

“The storm accumulators only affect storms with a heightened ambient magic level. Regular weather is unaffected. Look at it this way, Jason: we picked a great time to get out of the tropics.”

“That’s why I like you, Humphrey. You look for the best in everyone, even this bloody rain.”

“My homeland is a bone-dry desert, remember?” Humphrey said. “If not for the magical river creating the delta, we wouldn’t get rain at all, so the goddess Rain is always welcome. She’s heavily worshipped in the delta.”

Belinda laughed at Humphrey’s words as she and Sophie came inside.

“Remember that time Sophie didn’t know what rain was?” she said.

“It doesn’t rain in the city!” Sophie exclaimed defensively.

“I knew what rain was.”

“You didn’t tell me.”

“Well, maybe if you actually talked to people instead of punching or porking them, you might have heard about things.”

“I talked to you.”

“Why would I tell you things? It’s hilarious when you don’t know about stuff that children do. Remember the whole woollen sweater debacle?”

“We grew up somewhere very hot! Why would I know about those?”

“Because you didn’t talk to people.”

“I talked to you!”

“You said that.”

“You’re a bad friend.”

Jason and Humphrey watched the pair go below decks.

“You did well, there,” Jason said.

“I was worried,” Humphrey said. “When we heard you were coming back, there was all these unresolved—”

“They’re resolved now,” Jason said. “She latched onto me because I was the first guy who wasn’t a piece of crap to her.”

“Except for Jory.”

“Yeah, well that guy was far gone for Lindy from the start. But Sophie didn’t just need just good, mate; she needed stable. I’ve been called a lot of things, Humphrey. I was called ‘a small tin of marrowbone jelly’ once, but I don’t recall ever being called stable. You’re the anchor on this team. You should have gotten a healing power set.”

“That’s what my mother said. The power set thing, to be clear; not about the tin of whatever that is you said. But she got a good deal on those two wing essences, and the idea of Henri and I getting the phoenix and dragon confluences appealed to her.”

“How is Henrietta?”

“She was fine last I saw her in Vitesse. She made silver rank, but she’s never fallen into a permanent team. She ran around with Cassandra Mercer for a while.”

Humphrey frowned.

“I’m not sure how that turned out, now that I think about it. Henri always had kind of a crush on Cassandra.”

“I heard about Thadwick,” Jason said. “After the Builder possessed him, he turned into some weird vampire?”

“We’re fairly certain he devoured that loose soul around the sword we found. No one at the Magic Society was ever able to figure out what was going on with that whole sword and soul thing, since Thadwick made off with the sword as well. Not a lot left to study. Rufus’ parents were chasing Thadwick for a while, but the trail went cold.”

“I imagine he’ll pop up somewhere. Causing trouble for us, probably. Thadwick was always fixated on me. I think he might have had a sister complex.”

“I don’t know what that is, and I’m confident I don’t want you to tell me.”

“Fair enough,” Jason said with a chuckle.

“Mr Asano,” Shade said from Jason’s shadow. “We will be approaching Rajoras in around five minutes.”

“Thank you, Shade.”

Shade, along with piloting the cloud yacht, was using vehicle forms to scout the way ahead for trouble that might otherwise be hidden in the rain. Rajoras was one of the larger cities on the southern mainland coast, making it one of the southernmost centres in the Storm Kingdom’s territory.

In the wake of the monster surge, Rajoras was a major hub of activity. People needed to return home after far too long boxed-up in fortress towns and often found

destruction waiting for them. Every town and village needed repair, while some had to be rebuilt entirely. That was true in a normal surge, that lasted a fifth as long as this one. People and materials were already streaming through Rajoras like a river, and the road grew increasingly busy as the team drew near, despite the weather.

The massive vehicle that was the cloud yacht did not make for practical city travel, so the trio of vehicles in the convoy stopped. They needed to visit the city, as their sudden departure from Rimaros had left them somewhat undersupplied, and the guild team were hoping to find a vehicle of their own. The convoy pulled off the side of the road, with Shade floating the cloud yacht up and over the jungle so as not to obstruct the road with the giant vessel.

Jason's team and the Rimaros team assembled on the lower starboard deck, rain bouncing off an invisible dome overhead. That open deck was where the vessel would dock when acting as a boat, while doubling as a launch platform for the two skimmers in dimensional storage. Clive and Belinda pulled the skimmers out, each vehicle equipped for travel over land and water, with magical spray screens that would handle the rain. Each skimmer was a decent size, able to seat eight.

"I know that Belinda and I are the designated drivers," Clive said, "but we both need to go with the Rimaros team. Sorry, I didn't catch your team name."

"Team Storm Shredder," Kalif said.

"That's so much better than ours," Humphrey muttered, to the shaking heads disagreement of his teammates.

"Anyone can drive these skimmers, though, so long as we're not in a low-magic zone," Clive said. "They'll run on spirit coins, so you just need some of them. And a local driving permit, obviously."

"A what?" Belinda asked.

"The license I told you to get," Clive said turning to frown at her. "You did get that license, right?"

"Uh, yep."

"Can I see it?"

"I don't have it on me right now."

"You don't have it on you?"

"I do not."

"You have dimensional storage space where you keep all your worldly possessions."

"Not all of them. And I have a cabin. Some things are unpacked in there."

“Then you might want to go get it,” Clive said. “They may be checking them at the city gate. This soon after the surge, they’ll probably be doing extra monitoring.”

“Yeah?” Belinda asked, her voice only a slightly higher pitch than normal. “I’ll take that into consideration. On an unrelated note, does anyone know how local low-level officials respond to bribes?”

“Why do you two need to go with Team Storm Cutter?” Jason asked.

“It’s Storm *Shredder*,” Korinne corrected.

“Storm Cutter was already taken?” Jason asked.

“Yep,” Kalif said, earning him a sharp glance from Korinne.

“Anyway, Clive, why do you and Lindy need to go with them?”

“We’ll all be heading to the same part of the city for vehicle stuff,” Clive said. “They’re looking to buy a proper transport, and since we’ll be here a few days, Lindy and I need a dry dock to disassemble—”

Belinda slapped him on the arm.

“...we need to buy some skimmers,” Clive pivoted. “And that is all.”

Clive’s team all stared at him.

“We already have skimmers,” Sophie pointed out, gesturing at the two vehicles resting on the deck. “These skimmers.”

“We need different ones,” Clive said.

“You are so bad at crime,” Belinda muttered.

“We’re not meant to be good at crime!” Clive hissed at her.

“Speak for yourself,” Belinda hissed back.

“Whatever happened with that submarine Belinda stole?” Neil asked.

Clive opened his mouth and Belinda slapped his arm again.

“What submarine?” Clive asked unconvincingly.

“The one you took when you broke out of the Order of Redeeming Light’s hidden base,” Neil said.

“That sank,” Belinda said. “Or I lost it. Or both. I think it was both. Yeah, I told you that it sank and I don’t remember where, right?”

Kalif leaned closer to Orin.

“It’s your fault that we’re travelling with these people?”

Orin didn’t say anything.

Korinne’s team was with Clive and Belinda in a skimmer, in a queue waiting to move through the city gate checkpoint. The city walls loomed ahead, still bearing the scars of

monster attacks from the surge. Clive was in the driver's seat, with Belinda beside him at the front.

"Can I ask you something?" Kalif said, leaning forward to speak. "Do you find it unnerving that Asano's aura is everywhere in that vehicle? I mean, *everywhere*. It feels like he's watching your thoughts."

"Different auras feel different to different people," Clive said. "To me, it's benevolent. Overbearing, yes, but benevolent, which is very much Jason. It's reassuring, though, after having thought we'd lost him to the Reaper."

"You get used to it," Belinda said. "There's an assurance to his presence. Like a guard dog. You can feel how far he'd go if someone came for us, and we know that feeling is real. We've seen it."

"That's what it feels like to us," Kalif said. "Except that we're the ones the guard dog is watching. It's unsettling. Makes it hard to relax."

"I don't know," said Rosa Liselos, the scout from Korinne's team. "I don't think it's so bad. I can definitely live with it if it means cloud beds and giant dinner spreads. That lunch looked amazing. How often do you all eat like that?"

"That's just normal lunch when we aren't in the field," Belinda said. "Jason has always kind of been the auxiliary member in charge of food. Why didn't you all join in?"

"Korinne," Orin said, with no more explanation than that.

Korinne's five teammates all turned to look at her, to which she didn't react.

"Discipline," Korinne answered Belinda. "Indulgence dulls the wits. Sharp, efficient minds are what we need."

"Well, I need sandwiches the size of my forearm," Belinda said. "But whatever works for you, I guess."

Jason ended up staying behind when his team went into the city. Humphrey, Sophie and Neil went in search of supplies, but Jason gave them a food shopping list instead of going himself. Between the business and the weather, it wasn't an ideal time for sightseeing, and they were close enough to Rimaros that it wouldn't offer a fascinating new culture to interact with. It also meant that Jason knew enough about the local food that most, if not all of his list should be obtainable.

Arabelle came aboard the cloud yacht, still hovering over the jungle canopy beside the road. She found him brewing tea and they sat by the window, watching the traffic below trudge along the road, through the downpour.

“It’s past time we had a talk about Callum,” she told him. “I wanted to do this back in Rimaros, but you decided to leave very suddenly.”

“Where is Callum?”

“He took our vehicle and went into the city. It’s not the smallest, but it’s not that much bigger than a large skimmer. Nothing like this monstrosity.”

“I’m quite happy with this monstrosity, thank you very much.”

He sipped his tea, then set it down on a side table.

“You mentioned some time ago,” he said, “that you had figured out the real reason that Callum was so obsessed with Sophie’s mother.”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“He’s in love with her.”

“I’m sorry, what?”