

Chapter 925

A Long Time Coming

“This,” Anna said, “is not a professional environment.”

“What are you talking about?” Jason asked.

Anna gestured at her wife who was just then entering the cabana having changed into her new swimsuit. She also had grilled meat on a stick and a drink with a little umbrella in it.

“What?” Susan asked.

“Your wife doesn’t think we should have this meeting at a water park,” Jason told her.

“Well, I think it’s a great idea. But you can’t properly enjoy it right? With that avatar body?”

“Sadly, no,” Jason said.

“Because your real body is in the other universe.”

“That’s not technically my real body either, but for practical purposes, yes.”

“What are you doing over there right now?” Susan asked. She moved to the cushioned bench next to Anna, who was doing her best to treat a folding picnic table and chair as office furniture.

“I’m currently working with my new bartender to try and reproduce Earth cocktails using Pallimustus alcohol. We just made some dirty Shirleys, and there’s a princess who can’t get enough of them.”

Zara slammed her empty glass on the counter of the cloud ship’s rooftop bar.

“Another one,” she demanded, wobbling slightly on her barstool.

Jason arrived on the elevating platform just in time to overhear. The look Jamar threw Jason from behind the bar was a clear plea for help.

“Zara, we only have so much of each liquor in stock,” Jason told her. “We have a lot more drinks to try out, so maybe let Jamar try something else. We’ll restock once we know how much we want of which types of plonk.”

Zara picked her glass up again and slammed it forcefully back down. The counter turned squishy so it didn’t break, and the glass became stuck. Zara glared at it for its rank betrayal before wheeling on her stool to glare at Jason, almost toppling off in the process.

“Portal off and get more!” she demanded.

“Zara, have you, by any chance, been talking to the Storm King again?”

“Stupid Emiliano,” she slurred. “Yes, I could have been more diplomatic with that stupid princeling, but he wanted to buy me like I was cattle at market.”

“Far be it from me to tell you to be more diplomatic,” Jason said. “Not with my history. And the guy did have it coming.”

“Exactly,” Zara said as she jabbed a finger in Jason’s direction. “Father has been so good about it. He’s says I did great. He’s much more relaxed, now that he’s not king anymore.”

Sophie flew onto the roof from a lower deck, not bothering with the elevating platform.

“Sophie!” Zara exclaimed. “Tell Mr Evil Stabby to go buy more... whatever it is I was just drinking.”

Sophie looked at her with an amused expression.

“You drank out the bar?”

“No. Yes. Maybe. Shut up.”

Sophie slowly coaxed the drunk princess towards the elevating platform and an inevitable nap. Jason sat down, giving Jamar a sympathetic look.

“How much of the gold-rank stock did she go through?”

“Enough that I could work for a year without being able to afford it. Before this job, anyway. Are you sure you’re happy paying me that much for kitchen and bar services?”

“It shouldn’t be a dangerous job, Jamar, but you might find yourself danger adjacent, from time to time. More than that, you’re probably going to see some things. Like a drunk princess whose brother is stuck with a diplomatic disaster after she inserted some outside magic into a draconian prince’s very inside place. This needs to be a place where my friends and I can relax without being worried what we say or do. When I interviewed you for this job, I told you that the most important parts of this job are loyalty and discretion.”

“Yes, sir, Mr Asano. No one will hear anything that goes on here from me.”

“And that is what your remuneration reflects, Jamar. It’s not about slinging the best drinks or managing food service efficiently, although you do need to do that. It’s the fact that you are going to be around powerful people who do very important things. Not just my people, but anyone we host here. Betraying our trust could be very lucrative, should you pick your moment well. In appreciation of that, I want to make sure that you don’t feel like your discretion is being undervalued.”

“I’m very grateful for the opportunity, sir.”

“Good. I should warn you, though, that you won’t need to go looking for someone to sell information too. You’re going to be approached more or less any time you’re away from the boat.”

“I would never—”

“I know. But not everyone will just come up and offer a bribe. You might find that an attractive young... lady?”

Jamar nodded.

“You might encounter an attractive woman who finds you more charming than you’re used to being found. Or someone who skips the money offer and goes straight to more physical means of compulsion. In preparation for such eventualities, we’ve taken precautions to secure your safety for when you aren’t on the ship. You won’t notice them, but you will be one of the most protected individuals in any place you visit. I want you to feel secure, and not worry about people targeting you for your connection to us.”

“To be honest, sir, I wasn’t really worried. Until just now, when I find myself quite worried. What exactly do you mean by ‘physical means of compulsion?’”

“Oh,” Jason said as he stood up. “Sorry. Still, I’m sure it’s going to be fine. Do you need me to portal off and pick up some more drinks?”

“Uh, yes, sir.”

“Make me a list.”

“This has been a long time coming,” Jason said.

The magic around Vitesse was more than strong enough to let the cloud ship fly, but Jason left it on the water. Most of his friends were with him on the rooftop bar, having just enjoyed a lunch under the hot equatorial sun, cooled by the fresh sea air. Nik and Jason stood at the front railing, Jason waiting for his first glimpse of the city.

For many of his friends, it was home. It wasn’t the capital of Estercost, but many considered it the adventuring capital of the continent. The high level of magic meant that monster manifestations were powerful and frequent, not just in the around the city but across the entire region. That was a critical threat when Estercost was filled with towns, villages and smaller cities, due to the idyllic climate and rich natural resources.

As with many high-magic zones, the local Adventure Society was much better at intercepting monster appearances than somewhere like Greenstone. Instead of leaving notes for wandering adventurers, they had something akin to the grid on Earth that detected magic across a wide area.

The grid on Earth was based on the same principles as natural arrays, using the geography of the planet for its structure. On Pallimustus, their detection networks were less advanced, requiring towers that were subject to weather and monster interference. They needed regular maintenance and replacement, but they also had advantages over

the Earth grid. Where the grid only gave the exact information it was designed to originally, the Pallimustus equivalent could be tuned and calibrated to a variety of purposes. That was how Jason's cloud ship had been detected on its first approach to Rimaros, and how it was again on its approach to Vitesse.

Nik pointed out the city's famous flowering towers, their tops just coming into view. Jason looked over at where he was pointing, but his real attention was on the essence user he sensed approaching. The same thing had happened on his approach to Rimaros, a local official heading out to greet — and check up on — approaching powerful visitors. It was a normal process, affecting every boat, sky ship and caravan emanating enough power to be a potential threat. In Rimaros, that was how Jason had first met Vidal Ladviv. That man's nephew was now one of Jason's growing entourage.

"Shade, would you ask Miguel to come up? It's time our new Adventure Society liaison made himself useful."

Jason's first visit to Vitesse quickly proved to be everything he had hoped for. The City of Flowers lived up to the name, with skyscrapers draped in flowering vines. Trees lined every street, heavy with blossoms. Social programs and labour laws meant that even the poorest sections of the city were safe and relatively prosperous. This was made possible by an economy thriving in multiple sectors, especially agriculture and the growth of alchemy supplies in the magic-rich soil.

Adventuring was likewise lucrative, with a steady stream of silver and gold-rank monsters to harvest with efficient looting protocols. Vitesse adventurers were also in high demand around the world, many places paying generous fees to have experts deal with intransigent problems. The Magic Society likewise offered lucrative services, such as portal travel and airship construction.

Jason's favourite aspect of the city was that it was full of extremely powerful adventurers. This meant that if some crazy monster or lunatic cult showed up, he could relax and hear about it all later, just like everyone else. The only sad undertone was that most of his companions had friends and connections in the city to catch up with, even Nik. Each new introduction, every fun anecdote, reminded him of all the time he had missed. The years of joy and trouble that he'd missed while supreme beings were using his soul as a battlefield.

He forced himself not to dwell on a past he couldn't change, and instead focused on making new memories. He finally got to see the Remore Academy, finally proving that Rufus' family did, in fact run a school. He met Kenneth, son of Brian, now one of the most

celebrated adventurers in Vitesse. While Jason was more than happy to hear all about the famous duel where he defeated a young Rufus, Jason was more interested in having him speak with Nik.

Kenneth's monster-tracking skills were highly vaunted. Rather than have a permanent team of his own, the Adventure Society regularly attached him to teams in need of his specific skills. Nik's ability to coordinate teams had put him in a similar situation, but Jason knew that he had some insecurities around not having a team of his own. Nik had confessed as much as he watched Jason and his own tight-knit team during their travels.

Jason hoped that spending time with Kenneth and discussing their experiences would help Nik come to terms with his adventuring career. If not, he would make sure Nik found an excellent team, regardless of what the Adventure Society wanted. If nothing else, Rufus had been training up the Asano clan youth, and had several excellent silver-rank prospects.

While Jason spent time with all of his friends, most of it was spent touring around the city with Nik. Jason enjoyed the anonymity, and Nik likewise luxuriated in not being the centre of attention. He did get looks because of his inescapable cuteness, but Vitesse was the most metropolitan and multicultural place Jason had ever encountered. There were all manner of people, from every essence-using species and some that weren't.

The brighthearts weren't the only people with enough inherent magic to have their own unique powers, many of which were visibly apparent. Jason and Nik spotted a variety of them, from a group of nine-foot humanoids with green skin and red tattoos to elves with wings who would likely be mistaken for short messengers.

All that was without even counting the adventurers with their exotic magic devices, wonderous familiars and flashy powers. During their days in Vitesse, Jason and Nik spotted all manner of strange and wonderous people. One woman had fire for hair and rode a bat made of crystal, with a visible skeleton inside. Another man was in a constant state of shape-shifting. His hair was always in flux, changing length, colour and style. His skin was pale one moment and red the next before turning into iridescent fish scales.

Countless different transport methods were also on display, from flying carpets to a giant hamster wheel making short teleport hops. The familiars were of such frequency and variety that places close to the Adventure Society campus felt like they were under monster invasion. Jason, with glowing eyes and an adorable companion didn't warrant a second glance.

Jason carefully avoided any entanglements with the various societies and associations, but he did have a few appointments to keep. One was to join the same guild as most of his companions, the Burning Violet guild. Another was an invitation to afternoon tea from what was arguably the most famous and prestigious citizen of Vitesse, Roland Remore. The last was to pick up his new wardrobe from the shop of Gilbert Bertinelli, now operating out of Vitesse.

Jason had taken a day all to himself to go and visit Bert. They had lunch together and discussed all they had been through since their Greenstone days. In the end, Jason left behind an exorbitant amount of money, and took with him an extensive wardrobe.

The Burning Violet guild house was a large but unassuming building, directly across from the Remore Academy. This was the location it had moved to following the takeover of the guild by Roland Remore long ago, and while the diamond-ranker no longer managed it, his presence loomed large.

The building was centuries old, but the magical reinforced stone was barely weathered. Like most buildings in Vitesse, it was decorated with living plants, although more sparingly than most. There were a few balconies with planters from which vines draped, and ivy climbing sections of the walls. Most of the greenery was around the sides on the building, expanding into what looked like gardens around the back, only partially visible from the street.

There were no less than four sets of double doors in the front, all of which were busy with messengers and functionaries coming in and out. There were quite a few adventurers as well, the others giving them a respectfully wide berth. This included Jason, who modulated his aura to a polite expression of his genuine rank. It was not an occasion to be deceptive and, while gold rankers always stood out, they did so less in Vitesse. Wearing one of his new suits, he entered the cavernous lobby.

Several staff members were approaching people as they entered and directing them variously to different reception desks, any of the several stairs or internal doorways, or occasionally sending them back out entirely. Jason, being gold rank, was attended to immediately. He was approached by an immaculately dressed young bronze ranker before he had a chance to get anywhere near a queue.

The man had no trace of cores in his aura, so Jason assumed he was an adventurer in training. Unlike Greenstone, the more dangerous Vitesse environment meant that no adventurers below silver operated unsupervised. Rufus, Gary and Farrah had roamed abroad in search of adventure without minders watching over them.

“What can I do for you, sir?”

“I was hoping to apply to your guild.”

“An excellent choice, sir. Are you looking to transfer from an existing guild?”

“No, I’ve never been in a guild before.”

“That should simplify the application process, then. I will warn you in advance that rank is no guarantee of acceptance, however.”

“Understood.”

“Then please go through that door over there and the receptionist inside will take your details.”

“Thank you.”