

Chapter 626

Rage, Authority and Otherworldly Power

Jason moved through the night-covered city, flickering unseen from shadow to shadow. There was no shortage of them under the light of the twin moons, allowing him to make a blistering pace. With the blanket of stars, the city was relatively bright, given the early hours, making it a shadowy realm that was perfect for Jason.

He didn't expand his senses too far as his magical senses were an expression of his aura. Pushing them too far would broadcast his location to any aura-sensitive being in a wide area. He wasn't worried about nocturnal monsters but the adventuring teams patrolling at all hours that hunted them. He neither wanted to explain his presence nor be mistaken for one of the monsters being hunted.

Even retracted, Jason's senses were still excellent over shorter distances, allowing him to avoid any teams he encountered. Unlike him, they were blasting their senses out to detect monsters and attract the aggressive ones. That made them easy to avoid by withdrawing the moment his senses encountered theirs, as their perception was weakest at the limits of their range. He was careful nonetheless. Not only was letting himself get sloppy a bad habit, but there was every chance an elite scout would notice him, despite his caution.

Jason's goal was the inland side of the city, the opposite end from where his ship was docked. His day spent working as an auxiliary had proven fruitful in terms of information gathering for the simple reason that if you show up, get to work and don't be a tool, people will talk to you. He had spent the day surrounded by Adventure Society and Magic Society functionaries, along with a few other auxiliaries as well. This had given Jason plenty of opportunities to learn about the situation in the camp.

Estella Warnock's job was to scout out civilian locations for the team, but she was a bad fit for a work camp at a ruined city, which is why she had gone ahead to the team's next destination. Jason himself was much better suited to the specific circumstances. Despite Humphrey's concerns about Jason fighting the power against people who didn't have any, Jason had always been good at getting along with regular people.

It took Jason very little time to fit in with the primarily low-ranked workers organising resources, logistics and food. With conditions tight, essence users were mostly getting by on spirit coins, with the food Jason and his new co-workers produced being shipped off to the surrounding areas. Jason's looting ability was useful for producing fresh meat from

monster carcasses, along with other materials. His cooking magic took that fresh meat and turned it into preserved meat.

There were already resources on site that allowed Jason to get a lot of work done quickly, with smokehouses and salting sheds designed for use with cooking magic that massively accelerated the process. While Jason's mastery of such magic came from skill books and was fairly basic, it was perfect for the setup in place. The learning curve was low, and by the time he was pumping out preserved meats, the people around him had gotten chatty. The bulk of what Jason learned wasn't wildly useful to the team, although it would help them. Knowing who to go to and who to avoid in camp leadership was always valuable.

The most important information was not about the base camp but the city the camp was set up to manage. One of the tribulations that had brought the city low was the wide-scale destruction following a local astral space getting torn off the side of reality. Such devastating events had been the end-goal of the Builder, and when a cell of cultists managed to accomplish this task, they usually evacuated their bases in the area.

Usually, cult evacuations would be carried out quickly and quietly, as the local adventures were generally on the warpath at that stage. As a result, there were frequently Builder cult lairs hidden around that contained large and dangerous construct creatures that the cult had been forced to abandon.

From what Jason picked up, there was likely an undiscovered Builder base somewhere beyond the city's inland border. Late in the night, Jason had moved to investigate in secret, to preserve his secret identity. Jason Asano was not meant to be around, and a cook shouldn't be able to find what teams of adventurers had not.

After reaching what should be the right general area, Jason started directing his senses down, careful not to let his aura spread in any other direction. Aside from his superior aura strength fuelling his senses, Jason was also sensitive to Builder-related energy. Since losing the Builder's magic door, he could no longer manipulate that energy. His ability to sense the touch of the Builder, however, predated Jason's acquisition of the door by some time. It was something Jason had been sensitive to ever since the Builder tried to steal his soul with a star seed.

Jason turned himself into a magical ground-penetrating radar as he started sweeping the area. He moved from the outer city into what had once been farmland, but was now a mix of withered crop remnants and bare soil. The land bore the marks of the destructive shockwave that had swept over it in the wake of the astral space being removed. The force had pushed everything out and away from the epicentre in a violent blast that had

thrown boulders, flattened portions of the city and uprooted trees. And this was just the shockwave area, not the blast zone.

The dimensional scar was something that Jason could clearly sense. Even more intimate than his sensitivity to the Builder was his sense of dimensional forces. The closer he drew to the former site of the astral space aperture, the more he was horrified by the gaping wound in reality left behind.

“This has left a scar on the side of reality,” Jason said. “It’s already starting to warp the ambient magic seeping through the dimensional membrane. I don’t think this city will be liveable for a long time.”

“It will have to be rebuilt from the ground up.” Shade agreed. “There is almost nothing left to repair.”

Magic came into the world from the astral through the dimensional membrane that separated their physical reality from the astral. A monster surge was the result of temporary damage to that membrane, but the damage always, eventually, recovered itself. That had already happened, ending the monster surge, but to Jason’s perception, an ugly scar had been left behind.

“This is going to impact the magic in this area for some time,” Jason judged.

“You believe the effect will linger?” Shade asked him.

“Without intervention, yes,” Jason said soberly. “It’s going to affect the monsters here, I suspect, and the people using magic, too. It’ll be slow, over time, like a taint in the groundwater that slowly accumulates toxins in the people using the land.”

Jason had a unique insight into this. His connection to dimensional forces allowed him to recognise the wound in a way that others did not, and his increasing proficiency in astral magic allowed him to at least partially understand it.

“Will you warn the locals?” Shade asked. “They may not recognise the danger.”

“There are Magic Society representatives here,” Jason said. “They likely know what’s happened and what to look for. But I’ll have Clive double-check with them.”

Clive was not on good terms with the Magic Society, but he was an astral magic specialist whose expertise exceeded Jason’s, despite Jason’s insights into dimensional forces and being tutored by Dawn herself. Jason was already sharing his unique insights with Clive and seeing Clive make leaps that Jason himself never realised. Without his advantages, Jason wouldn’t be close to Clive’s level in astral magic studies.

Jason pushed his senses as far as he was willing to risk, but one hour turned into two and then three without result. The sky was starting to lighten when he finally felt a twinge. There was something below him that prevented him from getting a proper sense of what it

was due to some magical screening. Only the strength of his perception and sensitivity to the Builder allowed him to detect anything at all.

“Good,” said Amos, whose sudden presence behind him startled Jason. Very few people could get that close to him undetected.

“What are doing here?” Jason asked. “You liked how I managed to find the place, did you?”

“No,” Amos said. “It’s good that you have so thoroughly demonstrated your shortcomings. There will be new exercises, once you’ve rested.”

With that, Amos walked away.

“You know,” Jason said after watching Amos leave. “He could have at least helped us find the entrance. Shade, spread out and take a look, if you please.”

Shade bodies started spilling out of Jason’s shadow to search the area. The fact that the lair hadn’t been found yet by someone else suggested that the entrance had been permanently collapsed. Only with a narrow area to search was it worth grid searching, even with Shade’s cohort of bodies. In the end, it was under a cluster of heavy rocks that looked like they had been piled up by the shockwave. Instead, they had been placed to obscure a shaft that had been deliberately caved in.

While he knew the right move was to bring in the team, Jason felt a temptation to act on his own. He wanted to send Shade down so he could shadow jump into the base, keeping all of the Builder constructs to himself. He could take his time, buried and hidden under the earth. Pull each construct apart with his own two hands, stripping them down to parts, one by one. Grinding every last trace of the Builder’s power out of them.

“Mr Asano,” Shade said. “I remind you that it is a time for discretion, not rage.”

Jason hadn’t noticed the aura pulsing out of him or the growing luminescence of his alien eyes as he stared at the ground, fists balled at his sides. He drew back his aura, frowning in self-admonition at the loss of control. He concentrated his senses and felt one of the patrol teams moving in his direction.

“Time to go,” he said.

“Might I suggest, Mr Asano, that you seek out Mrs Remore tomorrow, in addition to Lord Pensinata?”

“Yeah,” Jason said, the ferocity that clouded his mind having passed. “I’m starting to think that I might have some unresolved issues.”

“I may have noticed something of the kind myself, Mr Asano.”

The patrol team reached the location where they had sensed the strange aura. The archer, the swordswoman and the guardian specialist watched the darkness around them while their scout hunted for the aura. She pushed out her senses, looking for any trace. Their Adventure Society guide also kept an eye on their surroundings.

“I’m not sensing anything,” the scout said. “It’s like it flared up and then vanished.”

“What was it?” the team ritualist asked as he examined the ground around them. “I’ve never felt a monster like that, but it didn’t feel like a person, either.”

“A priest, maybe,” the guardian said as he watched the moonlit terrain. The relatively bright night and flattened terrain made watching for trouble an easier task than it might have been. “They sometimes use divine power that feels strange.”

“That makes sense,” the guide said. “I saw a priest of Wrath in combat once, and he felt kind of like what we sensed. Rage, authority and otherworldly power.”

“There’s something here,” the ritualist said, crouched over a patch of ground. He pointed out the rocks scattered around “These rocks were moved, and not long ago. I think they were piled over this.”

The guardian and one of the damage dealers stayed on watch while the others gathered around.

“Some kind of filled-in tunnel,” the scout said. “You don’t think..?”

“The Builder cult lair,” the ritualist said. “I think whatever that aura belonged to was looking for this, sensed us coming and made itself scarce.”

“Good,” the guardian said. “I’ve never felt a silver-rank aura that strong.”

“It’s probably just some ability to scare off other monsters,” the swordswoman said. “Some kind of aura flare; more performance than power.”

“More scared of us than we are of it,” the archer suggested.

“I’m not so sure,” the scout said. “That aura didn’t feel scared.”

“Wouldn’t that be the whole point?” The swordswoman asked. “What kind of power to scare people off would let you know it was the scared one?”

“She’s got you there,” the guardian said.

“I don’t think assuming it’s afraid is the right move,” the scout said. “What if the idea is to make us think that it’s gone so it can stalk and ambush us?”

“Well, isn’t that a cheerful thought,” the ritualist said.

“We should go,” the guide said. “We’ll report this in, get someone watching the site and see if it really is the cult lair once the sun comes up.”

“Shouldn’t we check it now?” the archer asked.

“It’s been here for a good long while now,” the ritualist said. “I don’t think we have to worry about constructs spilling out unless we start digging down. If we hadn’t come along, whatever we sensed might have and set off gods know what trouble.”

“I’m worried about what that thing was,” the scout said. “It’s still out there somewhere.”