

Chapter 68: Good News For Clive

The common room of Jason's inn was a sprawling, luxurious space, with dining area, bar and lounge. Jason was in the lounge area with Rick Geller, who had sought him out in the early hours, eager to discuss their fight. Jason was quickly realising that Rick was obsessively dedicated to training, even compared to other Gellers.

To Jason's surprise, he bore no animosity against Jason for the loss or wariness over his tactics. Instead, he was excited to encounter a style unlike any he'd encountered before.

"It was incredible," Rick said. "Sometimes people can get lax in the mirage chamber because it isn't real. The way you got in our heads, though? You had me making rush decisions, panicking. I've watched the recording at least half a dozen times, and I just keep screaming at myself to do something different."

"There's a recording?" Jason asked.

"There certainly is," Rick said. "It's all from our perspective, so you're barely in it until the end. You're always this crazy threat, lingering just out of sight. That crazy laugh, that creeps me out. It really felt like you'd lost it."

"A lot of guys ignore the laugh," Jason said, "and that's about standards."

"Hannah thinks you're amazing."

"Isn't she the one I ambushed, cut her throat and strung her up to use as a shield?" Jason said uncertainly.

"She saw most of it from the control room," Rick said. "She had copies of the recording made and she's been showing them off to people."

"Why would she do that?"

"Hannah's very spirited," Rick said. "Always ready to go, ready try anything. She'll take almost anything, good or bad as an experience worth having. She's kind of amazing."

"Oh?" Jason said, arching his eyebrows meaningfully.

"Not like that," Rick said.

Jason shook his head. It wasn't that long since he was a teenager himself, but it had been a hard exit, relationship-wise.

“Don’t let it just sit there,” Jason said. “Tell her and find out one way or the other. Trust a guy who didn’t for far too long.”

“The others are mixed in their reactions,” Rick said, forcibly steering the topic in a new direction. “Henry is a little scared of you, I think. Claire is ready to stake you out and leave you to the marsh ants. More for what you did to her sister than her, but she didn’t like those leeches. Were you actually controlling them?”

“That’s may familiar, Colin,” Jason said.

“Colin? Wait, your familiar is a swarm of leeches?”

“That’s right,” Jason said.

“Swarm-type familiars are really rare,” Rick said. “I’ve seen more dragon and phoenix familiars. The only other swarm type I’ve seen is a gold-ranker back in my home city. He has these fire hornets that suicide attack to inflict a burning condition, and when they kill something, a bunch more hornets burst out of it.”

“Nasty,” Jason said. “How did Jonah take how our fight turned out?”

“Jonah can be obnoxious and strong-willed, even to his own detriment,” Rick said.

“I won’t hold that against him,” Jason said. “I’ve been guilty of that more than once myself.”

“Well, you’ve earned his respect,” Rick said.

“Seriously?” Jason asked. “How does that work?”

“Jonah can be prideful, and quick to look down on people,” Rick said.

“He respects strength, though. He doesn’t care if you’re a king or a commoner; show him you’re capable and you have his respect. He just needs to stop making snap judgements about people before he knows what he’s talking about.”

“Also something I’ve also been guilty of,” Jason said.

“I think you might have startled Humphrey quite badly, though,” Rick said. “I don’t think he realised you had that in you.”

“I’m not sure I did either,” Jason said. “I think that might have been bubbling up for a while. I’m really surprised you don’t have more of a ‘burn him, he’s a witch’ attitude.”

“You’re not actually some kind of blood-thirsty lunatic, right?” Rick asked.

"Of course not," Jason said. "It was just a persona. I might have got carried away with it, a bit, though. I felt so... free, afterwards. Like I finally started pushing back on all the pressures I've been feeling. Still, you really aren't freaked out?"

"You don't know a lot of adventurers, do you?" Rick asked.

"I know a few," Jason said.

"Once you know more, you'll understand. As long as the Adventure Society isn't sending people to hunt you down, anything is on the table. Fear, misery, despair. If those are your weapons, use them. If you have them and you don't use them, you're an idiot. Of course, that's a generalisation. Everyone has their own opinion."

"Humphrey?" Jason asked.

"Humphrey," Rick said.

"I should talk to him," Jason said. "I don't have enough friends to start scaring them off."

"In my experience, it's best to just leave him be," Rick said. "He'll work things through and then come find you."

"Alright, thanks," Jason said.

"So when are we having a rematch?" Rick asked.

Jason went downstairs to the common room. He was dressed in cool and comfortable clothes; loose tan pants, colourful shirt and sandals. He was about to set off on a contract, but there was a decent travel time and he could change clothes in little more than an instant. He might as well travel comfortably.

"Mr Asano."

Clive Standish stood up from where he had been quietly sitting in the common room, under the baleful eye of Madam Landry.

"Jason is fine," Jason said as he walked past Clive and out the door. The sun had yet to rise, the predawn light washing out all the colour from the world. Jason observed the similarity to how things looked with his ability to see through the dark.

Clive followed Jason outside and down the street.

"Uh, Mr Asano. Jason. This was the agreed-upon time for our meeting."

"I've got some good news for you, Clive," Jason said, walking down the street. "Our meeting is going to be extra long."

"Why is that?" Clive asked warily as he followed along.

"I have a contract," Jason said. "Probably take me a few days. We'll have a nice, long meeting on the way."

"On the way where?"

"There are some villages, deep in the delta," Jason said. "They're being menaced by something called a mangrove snatcher."

"A large lizard-type creature," Clive said. "It attacks by ambush after hiding in waterways or burrowing itself into mud or wet earth. Unusual for a monster prone to such tactics, it doesn't have the ability to hide its own aura. That makes it bad at hunting animals, which are sensitive to auras."

"So it goes after people?" Jason asked.

"It does," Clive said. "Any essence user who has reached iron rank will sense its aura, making it a minimal threat to adventurers. To ordinary people, on the other hand, it can be quite the danger."

"You know your stuff," Jason said. "You've dealt with them before?"

"Oh, goodness, no," Clive said. "I may ostensibly be a member of the Adventure Society, but I am not an active one."

"Well, you are this week," Jason said.

"What?"

"Your coming with me," Jason.

"No," Clive said. "No, I'm not."

Jason pulled out a folded piece of paper from his pocket and handing it to Clive, who read it as they walked.

"This is the contract," Clive said. "What does that have to do with me?"

"Four different villages in the area sent word that the mangrove snatcher came right into the village. Aggressive little pricks. The messengers all came in overnight and the contract was assigned to me. I was told to head out at first light."

He waved an arm at the sky.

"And here we are," Jason said. "First light."

“I realise that being assigned a contract pre-empts our appointment,” Clive said, “but it does not mean that I am going to participate.”

“You might want to take another look at the contract,” Jason said. “Down the bottom.”

Clive looked over the contract again.

“It’s been amended,” he read, disbelievingly. “It’s been assigned to me as well.”

“I don’t know if you’re aware,” Jason said, “but the new branch director has kind of a thing about Adventure Society members who don’t actually go on adventures.”

“You did this!”

“Well, I knew we had that meeting,” Jason said.

“Did I do something to offend you, Mr Asano?”

“Just call me Jason.”

“What I call you isn’t the issue!”

Jason stopped walking, turning to face Clive.

“Clive – can I call you Clive? Clive, do you know what an outworlder is?”

“I do,” Clive said. “Astral magic is actually my specialty.”

“I know a little astral magic,” Jason said. “Found this skill book when I first... that doesn’t matter. Clive, I’m an outworlder. I was keeping that under my hat, but too many people know now for it to be a real secret.

Clive goggled at Jason.

“I have so many questions,” he said

“We’ll get to that,” Jason said. “The thing is, I arrived in this world in less than ideal circumstances. Everything was strange, people were trying to kill me and I had no idea where I was or what was going on. So I kind of have a thing about getting ambushed. And then comes you, asking questions, knowing who I am and where to find me. I don’t like it, Clive.”

“I did introduce myself,” Clive said.

“Clive, have you heard of lying?”

“Of the concept of lying?”

“Yes.”

“Of course I have,” Clive said.

“There you go,” Jason said.

Clive shook his head.

“Having a conversation with you is like wrestling an eel,” Clive said.

“When did you ever wrestle an eel?” Jason asked sceptically.

“I grew up on an eel farm out on the delta,” Clive said.

“Really?” Jason said, looking at Clive with new respect. “It must have been a lot of work to get from there to here.”

“I had some good fortune,” Clive said.

“My friend’s grandfather says the great adventurers are the one who turn luck into fortune.”

“Is your friend’s grandfather someone worth listening to?” Clive asked.

“Never met the man, so I’m not sure,” Jason said. “He runs a school in Vitesse. I’ve haven’t had a chance to visit, yet.”

“Wait, are you talking about Rufus Remore’s grandfather?”

“Well, best get going,” Jason said, setting off again.

“Wait,” Clive said. “We need to go to the Magic Society first. If I’m going to be gone for several days, I need to make arrangements for my other duties. Also, we can pick up some transport. I’m not riding a heidel; I hate those things.”

That got Jason’s attention.

“Me too,” Jason said. “What kind of transport are you talking about?”

“How has no one told me about these?” Jason called out joyously. They were skimming over the water in an airboat. Instead of a fan at the back, there was a vertical metal ring, around which had been engraved a magical diagram. Propulsion came from air sucked in through the front of the ring and propelled from the rear with great force. Sitting in front of it, the occupants were bombarded by the loud air rushing in. At the front of the boat was Clive’s familiar, a rune tortoise named Onslow. His head was jutting forward like a dog with its head out a car window.

They left the city from a different gate than Jason had previously, as it gave them better access to the waterways of the delta. Although verdant and filled with wetlands, only some parts were completely navigable by boat. Clive piloted the airboat by holding his hand over a glowing blue cube. With tiny hand gestures, he could speed up, slow down, or turn the boat.

He drove it with confidence, sending them careening over the water. Occasionally they would need to pass through one of the artificial embankment roads that divided up the delta. There were many bridges built into them, so as not to obstruct the waterways. The airboat was just short enough to pass under them, with a wide margin on either side. There were handles on either side of Jason's padded seat, on which he kept a white-knuckle grip each time Clive sent the boat shooting through the tiny space under a bridge.

"Can you teach me to drive one of these things?" Jason asked. They had to talk loudly to be heard over the rushing air, almost at a shout.

"You can only drive these if you have the right essence ability," Clive yelled back at Jason. "It usually comes from the magic essence. The same power lets you use magical weapons like wands."

Jason was learning there was a lot more to the gangly scholar than he had initially presumed. Gone were the too-large robes, replaced with more practical wear for the delta, with sturdy-looking pants, shirt and vest. Jason spotted a bracelet on Clive's wrist, identical to the one on his own. It was a cord looped through small blue stones, each with a hole in the middle.

Item: [Oasis Bracelet] (iron rank, uncommon)

A bracelet that draws on the power of water quintessence to bestow the blessings of a personal oasis (accessory, bracelet).

- Effect: When a water quintessence gem is set into the bracelet it keeps the wearer cool and refreshed.
- Effect: Reduces incoming fire and heat damage. This effect accelerates consumption of the water quintessence gem.

There was also what looked like an ordinary stick sheathed against Clive's thigh. Jason realised it must be a magic wand.

"I was expecting you to fight me more on coming out here," Jason called out.

"When I have an outworlder's captive attention?" Clive asked. "There's no way I'd pass that up. As you said, we can have a nice, long meeting on the way. I have so many questions."

“I did say that, didn’t I? Alright, Clive. Ask away.”

They arrived at the first village, where there were signs of the monster attacking. The villagers had reacted quickly, barricading themselves in their homes. There were signs of the monster attacking them, but nothing had been breached the thick, mud-brick walls. The villagers told them that they had been attacked every day while they waited for their messengers to reach Greenstone.

Jason told them to keep themselves locked away while they checked on the other villages. He and Clive got back in their airboat and took off again. As they travelled, Clive continued his interrogation of Jason.

“You killed Landemere Vane?” Clive asked.

“And his mum,” Jason said. “Did you know them?”

“I knew him,” Clive said.

“He wasn’t a friend, was he?” Jason asked.

“No,” Clive said. “The whole family was reclusive. I only knew him at all because we specialised in the same field of magic.”

Jason looked up and around.

“Hey, we’re almost at the next village.”

“You know this area?” Clive asked.

“No, one of my outworlder abilities is a map that only I can see. Places only appear on it when I get close, though.”

“Fascinating,” Clive said. “Have you tested the effects of going to a high place with superior sightlines?”

“I haven’t,” Jason said. “That’s a good idea.”

“This is why you need to let me study you,” Clive said.

“Definitely not,” Jason said. “I get enough of that from Farrah.”

“Who?”

“A friend of mine. She’s Magic Society, too. I’ll introduce you.”