

Chapter 664

He Himself Does Not Become a Monster

Jason didn't linger downstairs with the others for long. He had no interest in facing the town filled with dead, but didn't want his aura restricted by the underground facility. His aura could somewhat escape the workshop's inhibition magic with the doors open, but it still greatly impeded his senses. He went up the stairs, through the tunnel into the dirt basement, and then up the ladder to the trapdoor.

This returned him to the building that served as the secret entrance to the underground facility. It was one of the few buildings in the town that did not have open-sided walls, and was used as a storage shed. Based on the layer of grime coating empty barrels and broken farming tools, it was one that saw little use.

Jason went outside, once more taking in the stomach-churning scene of bodies littered around the town. Although he knew they had been worm-hosts, dead before the team even arrived, it still rattled Jason to look at. It was not the first time he had seen the dead piled high – tragically far from it. Even so, it was not something he was fully used to and he desperately hoped he never would be.

He would rather have stayed downstairs. He could join the others in distracting themselves from the dark reality with light banter, pushing the dark thoughts away until the job was done. There would be ample time to sit with the horror in the sleepless nights Rufus had warned Jason about, what felt like a million years ago. Rufus had warned Jason that there would be days like these as an adventurer.

Jason thought back to that night, his very first in his new world. He didn't know that person any more, who would go through so much to become Jason as he was now. Idly wondering about the choices he made, he thought about how things could have been different. He'd made a lot of mistakes and seen a lot of death, some of which was on his head.

But the big things had gone well enough. Better than could be expected in most cases. Earth wasn't in precipitous danger. The days of proto-spaces threatening to spew forth dangerous monster waves were over. The monsters would manifest directly now, and mostly far weaker. They would not be contained in the proto-spaces, but it was good enough.

Pallimustus had weathered the monster surge and the Builder invasion. Jason had even managed to push the Builder into leaving at least a little early. He would never know

how many lives even a few weeks without fighting had saved, and while that did not make up for the dead scattered before him now, it was at least some consolation to his soul.

Jason and his friends had to live with cutting down the people of the town, and while they were already corpses, that wasn't how it felt. Even accepting that, they were desecrating the remains of innocent strangers, people they had not been able to protect. This was sadly not new for Jason and Rufus, but the others would need to come to terms with that.

Jason knew that his team would endure, however. He'd done it. Not well, but he'd done it. He hoped he could help them do it a little better. It was the people of the town he felt bad for. The few dozen that had survived were not going to feel like they had. Their world had just been destroyed. Almost everyone that each of them knew was lying in front of Jason, hacked to pieces, burned to ashes or torn apart.

These were small town people and their town was over. How could they ever come back to this nightmare place after what happened? Even if they did, there were not enough of them left to revive it. It was a ghost town, now, and the memories would haunt them. The blood and the bodies could be cleared away, but their presence would linger. The town was done.

A grim future awaited the survivors. Many of them may never have even left the town before, and now their lives would change forever. Compared to them, Jason and his team had places to go and homes to return to. Even when they suffered losses, they had the power to minimise them and seize a path forward. The surviving townsfolk were the pawns of fate, stuck in a world of magic they didn't have and monsters they couldn't fight. Whatever their future would be, it was not theirs to choose.

For all that Jason had faced hard times since arriving in this world, he at least had made his own choices along the way. He had the agency to seize his own destiny, even with forces beyond comprehension arrayed against him. Determination and far more luck than he had any right to expect had carried him along. The survivors of the town had no such agency. Their lives were not theirs to choose and would never be the same.

This was the distillation of something Rufus warned Jason of, on that first night, and why Jason dwelled on it now. That grim days were ahead, but if he ceded control to others, he wouldn't have any choices at all. He would be left only able to wait and see what happened to him, with no power to change it. That was how Rufus convinced Jason to be an adventurer.

Standing, looking out at the dead, Jason started to think about how many lives and deaths had passed through his hands. He remembered the waterfall village where, for the

very first time, he had made the choice to stand between innocent people and the violence that was coming for them. Doing it again in the very same village, he had earned his first and largest scar.

As his powers grew, so did the challenges. Protecting Greenstone from the Builder. Broken Hill, Makassar. The entire Earth threatening to tear apart from dimensional forces. The dangers escalated more quickly than his powers, and he'd had to become something further and further from human to meet them. More than once it had cost him his life. But at least he came back, when so many others did not. This town that he didn't even know the name of was just the latest to host the mounds of dead that he had failed to save.

There was nothing Jason could have done for the people in front of him, but what about the dead that lay behind him? The people who died at Broken Hill? Makassar? His brother, his lover and his friend? How did the ones he saved balance against the ones he failed to? The loss of each had galvanised Jason, prompting spikes in his strength that he used down the line. Were those losses worth the things Jason had accomplished? Were all those people sacrifices or just helpless victims?"

"It's a bleak equation," he pondered.

Shade emerged from Jason's shadow to stand beside him.

"You can count the dead, Mr Asano," Shade said, guessing Jason's mind. "But it accomplishes nothing. All you can do is move forward, doing the best you can with what you have. I've heard you say that many times, and of all your..."

Shade pause was rich with disapproval.

"...*catchphrases*, it is the one I prefer. The one that has wisdom."

"You think I'm wise?"

"No, Mr Asano. No. Dear goodness, no. Which is why you should always remember those sparkling moments when you manage to achieve it."

Jason let out a soft chuckle, not enough to wipe the sadness from his expression.

"Are you alright. Mr Asano?"

"You know what, Shade?" Jason asked, looking out over the dead. "To my own surprise, I actually might be. I don't ever want to get used to scenes like this, but I'm not going to let them break me, either; I'm going to use them. Let them remind me of why I have to keep pushing, of why I have to get stronger. Of who and what I'm going to face, and the lengths they are willing to go."

He bowed his head.

"I've got this voice inside me, telling me that if I become worse than the things I fight, they'll be too scared to do what happened in this town. I've been so angry for so long now

that I don't even remember when I started listening to that voice. But it's wrong. It never works like that, does it?"

"No, Mr Asano. It does not."

"I've been heading down a certain road for a while now, but it doesn't lead anywhere I want to go. It's time to take a different direction. Maybe find some of that naïveté that I discarded along the way."

"Your treatment of that messenger—"

"That was the line. That's how far I can go without losing myself, I let myself go right up against it with her. But I think that's okay. I've been telling myself that's not where the line is for a long time. That I'm a good person who is only doing these things because I have to, and when the world stops dumping on me I'll stop. But the world never stops dumping, does it?"

"No, Mr Asano."

"It's time to accept that my line is where it is. To stop deluding myself over who I am and moping over how bad things are. The people of this town, living and dead, have gotten it far worse than me, and I owe it to them to stop this from happening somewhere else. I have so much power. So many good people around me. So many things to be thankful for."

"If what you did to the messenger was the line, Mr Asano, does that mean you'll be stepping back from it?"

Jason nodded.

"Once I accept where my line genuinely is, instead of telling myself where it should be, I feel like it will be easier to avoid pushing up against it. Not unless I need to."

"Do you regret breaking her will before you killed her?"

"I don't know. No, I think. I probably should. It was anger. But I'm willing to go that far, after what she did. She had a rough time, but I was just talking up my power. A bit. The essence ability I used on her is a vulture, picking the bones clean; it can't damage the soul. It might be a little rough-and-tumble on a gestalt entity like a messenger, but she'll find her way to your dad fully intact. It's not like when you stopped me from using that guy's star seed to peel the body off his soul. That would have been over the line."

"Yes, Mr Asano. That would be more than I was willing to tolerate."

"I'm not done giving the messengers a hard time, though. They have a lot of things that I need. Advanced astral magic. Understanding of what an astral king is. Knowledge of whatever Emir is looking for."

"You may need to leave some of them alive for that."

“True. But they also have a power inside them that I can use. If I have to crack them open like eggs to get it, then so be it. They came to this world, looking for trouble. After seeing how far they’ll go to find it, I’ll happily oblige them.”

“Will you dedicate yourself to pursuing them, then?”

“I don’t need to. They came here in numbers, and they came to stay. The conditions they used to get here ended with monster surge, so while I’m sure they have the means to leave, I doubt they can do so easily or en masse. Even just living the adventurer life, I’m going to be hunting them for a good, long time.”

“And if they hunt you back?”

Jason’s grin belonged on a comic book cover, and not on the face of the hero.