

Chapter 630

A Matter of What You Want

The convoy left the river, passing by several towns on their way to the coast. From there they followed the coast roads for the most part, but they increasingly needed to find alternatives. Compared to the excellent road network maintained by the storm kingdom, these were not as wide or well-maintained as those to the north. Sometimes the hefty hover yacht needed to float over the rainforest canopy. Others they would ride along the beach, skim over a bay or take to the water, running under a shoreline of cliffs.

Jason found the variety to be very welcome. Their progress was not fast, but for that, they could have simply flown. Jason enjoyed the days of travel as the team interspersed training with the simple joys of luxury travel. They spent large amounts of time on the roof deck for both, especially as they left the monsoon rains behind in their continuing journey south. Jungle and rainforest continued to dominate the terrain, but they escaped the worst of the oppressive humidity.

Delays were made for day trips. If they spotted an interesting mountain, they would often pause to climb it. They explored town markets and misty gorges, with even the urbanite Belinda, sullen from her punishment, unable to keep from enjoying herself. Only Korinne managed to maintain a frown on the leisurely expeditions, muttering 'traitors' and 'mutiny.' The rest of her team were utterly won over by the relaxed approach of Team Biscuit.

Towns and villages started welcoming their arrival. Less resource-starved, their main issue was keeping up with remnant surge monsters wandering out of the wilderness. The overworked local adventurers were grateful for the relief that two elite teams brought. After several welcome receptions, Jason and Humphrey were up on the roof deck, watching the latest town seem to shrink as the convoy pulled away.

"We're doing alright," Humphrey said, "but the extra monsters from the surge are starting to thin out. We're running into the reason most adventurers find their advancement slowing down after reaching silver. It's harder to find regular challenges, which makes other interests all the more enticing."

The teams led by Humphrey and Korinne were having no trouble with the monster packs they were encountering, both being elite groups. Only the most powerful of silver-rank monsters posed any real threat, so both groups had started using only parts of their rosters for individual encounters.

“You want to change things up?” Jason asked. He too felt the urge to push his abilities forward, and not just because Dawn had told him to. His advancement had been stagnant since long before his return from Earth, and the monster surge had only done so much to help. He’d spent large portions of it in recovery.

Jason was conflicted, however, as he was quite enjoying their current pace. Travelling around in luxury, helping people who very much needed it. It was the adventuring life Rufus had promised him all the way back in Greenstone, and it didn't disappoint. Humphrey was fully aware of those feelings on Jason's part, making him hesitant to suggest a change.

“I don’t want to push you,” Humphrey said. “But I think we both know what we need to do to find a greater challenge. I know you've been looking forward to this travelling for a long time, though, and I’m not looking to get you caught up in larger messes all over again.”

“I appreciate that,” Jason said, “but I’m also past ready to push my powers to new heights. These contracts for silver rank monsters aren’t enough. Only a few of them have posed any real challenge at all; not enough to go around if we want the team to grow stronger, let alone the other team. But we aren't ready to go hunting gold-rank monsters, either. Not unless it's a matchup in our favour, and the Adventure Society won't let a group of silver rankers pick and choose gold-rank contracts.”

They were both aware they could likely finagle special treatment by leveraging the Geller name and Jason’s unusual status with the Adventure Society, but neither man suggested it. They both wanted to move away from politics and do some good, honest adventuring work.

“You know that even if we try and act like any other adventuring team, it probably won’t work out that way,” Humphrey said. “It never does with you. Once we start taking contracts related to the messengers, this may well escalate.”

“If it does, it does,” Jason said. “We were always going to have to go after the messengers, sooner or later. Sooner, really; I need to get something from them. Now that the surge is over, I have a job to do, and it’s become more complicated now that I don’t have the magic tools from the Builder and the World-Phoenix. I need the advanced astral magic from the messengers to finish building the bridge between worlds.”

“Clive will be happy,” Humphrey said. “I’m bringing it up now because there’s something in Estella’s latest report. She just got back this morning.”

Estella was taking her job seriously. She spent a lot of time away from the convoy, roaming ahead to investigate their upcoming destinations. She spied potential threats,

scouted potential opportunities and gave an overall assessment of the value of any given stop. Estella delivered an initial report to Humphrey and Korinne before making a broader presentation to the full teams.

"Messenger activity?"

"Reports of," Humphrey said. "Maybe two days out of our way, at our current sedate pace. A little way inland, in a magic zone at the high silver level. Even discounting the messengers, we should get stronger silver-rank monsters there. The occasional gold, although I wouldn't expect us to scoop those contracts up. The locals will get priority there."

"What kinds of activity?"

"Estella didn't get much, since she was working with third-hand information. There's a small holy army in the area, though. Goddess of Knowledge."

"Worth finding out more, at the very least," Jason said. "How about I notify the teams for Estella's briefing, and we can discuss taking the detour?"

Shade was serving as cruise staff, including being the primary means of relaying information.

"Very well," Humphrey agreed. "Let's go hunt some messengers."

Following Estella's presentation, Korinne's team returned to their vehicle while Humphrey's went off to pursue their own activities, elsewhere in the yacht. Korinne remained behind in the briefing room to talk with Humphrey.

"Do you object to a course that brings us into conflict with the messengers?" Humphrey asked.

"No. Given the choice, I'm confident that we would make the same one you have. My only issue is that we weren't given the choice. The thing I like the least in this arrangement is that our team lacks self-determination. We are stuck following you around."

"I understand," Humphrey told her. "But while I'm willing to hear you out on any issue, I won't surrender any amount of authority to you and your team. You are, ultimately, passengers. Passengers we will accommodate as we can, but decline when we can't."

"Or won't."

"Or won't," Humphrey conceded.

Farrah found the white archway leading to Jason's soul space, on the yacht's bridge, beside the door connecting the bridge to Jason's cabin. She stepped through and felt Jason's aura wash over her. It did the same on the yacht, but here it didn't feel like an

external force. It was more part of the fabric of the world around her, as inherent as the gravity holding her to the ground. The archway deposited her in an open square, amidst estate buildings centred on a towering pagoda.

“You’ve been spending a lot of time in here lately,” she said, despite being alone.

“Just when I’m doing my meditation training,” Jason said, suddenly standing next to her. “When I’m not doing specific exercises because of Amos, anyway. I’m still coming to grips with this place and what I can do with it, and I’m chasing something specific, at the moment.”

“Oh?”

He gestured and she nodded, and they started walking. They left the square and entered the sprawling gardens of Jason’s soul space.

“I’ve barely touched on what the astral throne and the astral gate are capable of,” he told her. “I need more power before I can truly tap into them, especially the astral gate.”

“Didn’t Dawn tell you to leave the astral gate alone for now?”

“And I have been. Mostly. I’m concentrating on the astral throne, for the moment. I’ve come to realise that I’m going to need time as much as I need power. There is so much to learn about the nature of these items and what I can do with them.”

“Do they affect anything outside of this soul space?”

“Yes,” Jason said. “My spirit domains, being the regions on earth and anything I make with the cloud yacht, are directly affected by not just my power here, but also my understanding. The domains on Earth I manipulated subconsciously. I was able to actively change things, but that was all surface-level alterations.”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“It means I could change a house, not the laws of thermodynamics.”

“Is that an option?”

“I think so. Eventually. When I meditate here, it’s like this whole place is meditating, because it is.”

“Because it’s you.”

“Exactly. But this place is its own physical reality. Kind of. When I meditate here, my senses expand in a way that reflects that.”

“Meaning?”

“That I’m starting to understand physical reality on an intrinsic level. It’s something I only recognised because of all the time I spent in the space opened by the Builder’s door. It was an introduction to how the building blocks of reality work, and I can feel that, sometimes, when I’m meditating here. I don’t know if that’s because I used the authority

that used to be in the door, and affected this place, but the astral throne is definitely part of it. It's designed to govern physical reality, after all, compared to the astral gate which governs dimensional forces."

"It's not a wild surprise that you can sense the space you accessed with the Builder's door, is it?" Farrah asked. "You obtained the astral throne when the door broke down, right?"

"Yeah."

"Do you think you'll be able to access that underlying physical realm again at some point?" she asked.

"Not out in the world, no. I can glimpse it, but it's not mine to change anymore. I can feel that. What I'm looking for now is a more conscious ability to change things on that level here. Right now, I have control, but lack understanding. If you think of this place like a car, I know how to drive a car. I need to learn how to build one."

"And how are the results so far?"

"Preliminary. Not enough to make me confident of successfully helping Carlos or Sophie's mother. I'd say the biggest change is in my ability to control constructs from the cloud flask. They respond to me by design, and that control has become immensely more refined. I deepened the soul bond with my cloud flask, infused it with authority and turned the material it produces into extensions of my spirit domains. The flask has undergone a fundamental change, in more ways than is readily apparent."

"Oh?"

"Let me change the subject for a moment before I come back to it," Jason said.

"While I have been focusing on the astral throne, the astral gate has brought some surprises of its own."

"I thought you weren't meant to be messing with that yet. Dawn told you to leave it alone."

"Dawn's guidance is valuable, but she's not an astral king. There are some roads she can't guide me down, but it doesn't mean I shouldn't walk them. That being said, I haven't been fiddling around with the astral gate. It's just that its power has allowed me to notice something. Bonds."

"Bonds?"

"Magical bonds. I can feel the bonds between myself and my bonded items now. I feel the bonds spanning off into the astral that connect me to my spirit domains on Earth, even if I'm too weak to feel the other end. But these are deliberate bonds. They're strong,

firm and don't disconnect. I've noticed other bonds as well, that I suspect have formed incidentally."

"Such as?"

"Such as between you and me. Farrah, you and I formed a special bond."

"I don't care how powerful you are here," Farrah told him. "I'm not going to sleep with you."

"What? No. I wasn't talking about that. I'd sleep with Humphrey before you."

"It did always seem like there was something there," Farrah said.

"I know, right?" Jason asked. "He's the upright, uptown boy, and I'm the sassy girl who restores classic cars. He gets talked into borrowing a car from his dad's collection without asking by one of his gadabout friends and gets in a fender-bender. I agree to fix it without his dad finding out."

"You've put a lot of thought into this."

"No."

"What's the title of this little story you've got going on?"

"It doesn't have a title. This isn't something I think about."

Farrah gave him a flat look.

"Humphrey's Big Engine," he mumbled sheepishly.

Farrah burst out laughing and Jason joined her. The path they were on led into a cave, running alongside an underground river. Their way was lit by luminescent fungus and flowers, growing out of crevices or on creeper vines.

"I think the bond between us is a remnant of when you came back to life," he explained. "The Reaper somehow bound your soul to mine, but I don't think the bond was intended to last, like string around a delivery package. When our souls entered Earth that bond broke, by design. It's why we didn't arrive in the same place. But the remnants of that bond are there, even now, but the connection is intermittent. Now that I can sense it, I feel it link us, sometimes, and fall away at others."

"What does this bond do?"

"Not a lot, from what I can tell. I've been using the astral gate's power to examine it, but I'm even less well-versed with that than the astral throne. All I've managed to figure out thus far is that I can use the bond to treat you, in terms of my abilities, in a similar way to my familiars."

"You're saying I'm your familiar?"

"No," Jason said. "But it means I can treat you like one in certain respects, while the bond is active. Things like having you use my portals without consuming extra energy

beyond what it takes for me to go through. I think it's been going on ever since Earth, but I've only just realised it was happening, and why. As for what else the bond can do, that's something we'd have to explore. I think that potentially, we could use it for effectively infinite range with my group chat ability. The only limits would be dimensional barriers, although the results would vary by circumstance, I suspect. The same way that Shade can sometimes connect to his other bodies through an astral space boundary and sometimes not, depending on the specific nature of the astral space."

They paused in an underground grotto, sitting on a bench that overlooked an underground pond.

"You can manipulate this bond?"

"I think that I can restore the bond to full strength," Jason said. "Make it permanent. I can also eliminate it entirely. It's a matter of what you want."

Farrah nodded absently.

"You know why I'm here," she said.

"If we're going after messengers, it means that I'm getting down to business," he said. "Which means it's time for you and Travis to head back to Rimaros and get to your own business."

"I worry about you, Jason. We've been constant companions ever since you finished your walkathon on Earth."

"Walkabout."

"Whatever. Are you going to be alright without me?"

He let out a chuckle.

"I wouldn't have gotten this far without you. Not even close. It's why they sent you to me, and if nothing else, I'll always be grateful to the Reaper and The World-Phoenix for that. But I think I'll be okay. It's not just us against the world anymore, and it's past time we stopped acting like it is."

"Oh, I'm fine," she said. "You're the wobbly one. We're here in your magic god realm and you're still anxious."

"I am not anxious."

"Of course you're not."

"I'm not!"

"Uh-huh."