

## Chapter 897

### Like an Adventurer

Rick Geller and his team arrived just as a brothel fire sent a group of scantily clad women stumbling onto the street and right into Jason. Dustin Kettering, from Rick's team, went in and used his ice powers to extinguish the blaze.

"Are you setting these up?" Rick asked Jason incredulously.

"I'm genuinely not," Jason assured him. "Were you cursed by the god of lust or something?"

"No," Rick said, then gave his wife Hannah a side glance. She gave him an admonishing slap on the shoulder.

As Jason's friends arrived in ones and twos, the reunions were everything he'd been hoping for: hugs and jibes and promises of countless stories. More than just his team, many of his friends had gathered. Danielle Geller and her husband, Keith. The Remore family, minus Rufus. Jory Tillman and Gilbert Bertinelli both arrived with Clive.

Neil and Nik were portalled in from the Mirror Kingdom by the Mirror King's own portal specialist, courtesy of Team Shining Scabbard. They were led by Sigrid Freyn, a famously capable leader and healer Neil had been training with. Their teams had formed a friendship years earlier, going through the Reaper trials and training together at iron rank. Not having seen Jason since his first supposed death, Sigrid's now-husband, Prince Valdis, insisted on bringing the whole team along.

"Dad will miss Sigrid more than me," Valdis assured Jason on their arrival. "With how horny and immortal he is, the kingdom's thick with princes and princesses. He'll take a good adventurer over any of his kids."

"Then perhaps you should focus on being a good adventurer, instead of a mediocre prince," Sigrid pointed out. "Also, that is a gross misrepresentation of your father and your king. Be more respectful."

"This is why he likes her better," Valdis confided.

For all the joy of old friends coming together, Jason couldn't help but feel an undercurrent of melancholy. This wasn't the first reunion after events had dragged him away from his friends for years. This time he had missed more in their lives than before, and it would take time to learn who his friends were now.

Belinda was so much more centred than before. She no longer skirted around the edges of the group like an uncertain outsider, instead standing comfortably amongst the others. Estella, next to her, was much more a part of the group now. Their awkwardness

with Jory was noticeable, but also something they'd clearly come to terms with. Just reading body language showed Jason the years-long stories he'd not been around for.

Humphrey had talked with him about his propensity for leaving the team for years at a time. They understood that Jason did not want to leave alone but, however justified, his extended absences came with consequences.

Once everyone had arrived, they gathered around a banquet table in an outrageously expensive shaft-side restaurant. Sitting next to Jason, Humphrey leaned in close.

"Are you alright, Jason?"

"Yep. Why do you ask?"

"Your face is kind of switching back and forth between happy and angry."

"Happy means I'm thinking about being back here with everyone."

"And what does angry mean you're thinking about?"

"What happens to the next prick that tries to make me leave again."

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"And that," Sophie said, "was when he challenged Humphrey to a duel for my hand in marriage."

"I would like to point out," Humphrey said, "that it would have been easier to de-escalate the situation if you hadn't been cheering him on."

"But then he might not have fought you!"

"I didn't want him to fight me!"

"Oh, so you want one of those submissive wives that only do what *you* want?"

"What? No, that's not what I... hey, don't you Jason me. I have Jason for that now."

She grinned and leaned in for a kiss, leaving his expression cranky but appeased.

"I assume you won, and Sophie doesn't have to marry some random guy, right?" Nik asked. He was seated on the other side of Jason from Humphrey.

"I certainly hope not," Danielle said. "I'm not willing to give Sophie up as a daughter-in-law at this stage, and killing her new paramour wouldn't be good for my reputation."

"I could do it," Keith said.

"Of course you could, dear," Danielle said, patting him on the shoulder.

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"No," Jason said.

"I didn't even say anything yet," Clive complained.

"And you don't need to."

"That's just prejudicial," Clive said.

"So, that's not a notebook you have hidden under the banquet table?"

“Uh... no.”

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Late into the evening, the group had left the restaurant and taken over the lounge area of a nearby bar. Jason and Neil were sat together on a couch, a table full of empty glasses in front of them.

“So,” Jason said, slurring his words only a little, “you just told her it was for the best and immediately skipped town?”

“Yeah,” Neil said, likewise slightly wobbly. “I just kind of dropped it on her and left. I knew if I stayed, I’d make some kind of stupid decision.”

“It doesn’t matter how fast you run when you make the stupid choice first. You seriously didn’t go for a discussion before ending things? You just decided for both of you and did a runner?”

“I did discuss it.”

“With Cassandra? You said you blindsided her and bolted.”

“With Nik.”

“Well, I think I’ve spotted where you went wrong there, mate: Nik is a different person. Also, how old was he back then?”

“Um, five, maybe.”

“Yeah, that was a great idea. And this was what? Ten years ago?”

“About that. Do you think I messed up?”

“Well, you dumped her, basically shouted why at her while bolting out the door and then ghosted her for a decade. I’m going to say yeah, you messed up.”

Neil let out a groan and Jason put a commiserating arm around his slumped shoulders.

“Don’t worry about it, mate. We can fix this.”

Neil perked up, eyes full of drunken hope.

“You really think so?”

“No, she’s probably found someone much better. But we can try.”

Neil slumped back and let out another groan.

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“So, that’s the plan,” Jason summarised. “Head to Estercost to see how many people from Earth we can round up. Then we head to Rimaros, fix up the link between worlds and then ride it to the other universe. Anyone interested in seeing an alternate reality is welcome to come along.”

“You think it will be that simple?” Danielle Geller asked.

“Yes,” Jason said. “But simple is not the same thing as easy, as Clive is happy to explain.”

Zara’s suite was large, but still crowded with all of Jason friends packed in.

“Actually, I don’t have time for that,” Clive said. “Jason, you and I need to sit down and—”

“No time! We have to plan sightseeing stops along the trip. Definitely Greenstone. I’d love to see this world’s version of Australia, but I’m told everyone would die.”

“Jason,” Clive said through gritted teeth, “we really have to—”

“We can’t just go making elaborate plans,” Humphrey pointed out. “We tried that fifteen years ago and we only got from Rimaros to Yareh. I think we should keep our plans more flexible.”

“Okay, you all need to stop—”

“Good thinking, Hump. Keep our options open, that’s sound tactical thinking.”

“Jason, you need to take this—”

“Don’t call me Hump.”

“Did someone use silence magic on me? This is not—”

“Good meeting, everyone. Give it some thought and we’ll regroup in Yareh.”

“Jason,” Clive warned, “Don’t you dare—”

A portal opened up, then closed again after Jason ducked through. The rest of the group filtered out, leaving Clive, Belinda, Estella and Zara.

“I forgot,” Clive said, shaking his head. “It’s been too long, and I forgot.”

Belinda gave Clive an awkward pat on the back.

“I don’t mean to interrupt,” Zara said, “but I need to go check out of the room.”

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Marcus Xenoria was a massive leonid who liked to wander around with a huge axe slung casually over his shoulder. On meeting him, many wondered how that was helpful when his job primarily involved politics and bureaucracy. By the end of that meeting, they’d usually figured it out. As a high-level agent of the Adventure Society’s continental council, Marcus was a troubleshooter and enforcer. On hearing of Jason’s return, he had once again been dispatched to Yareh.

Technically, Asano has already made contact with the Adventure Society, although that didn’t really count. He’d portalled directly into the — portal shielded — Rimaros branch office, abducting the deputy-director. The higher-ups had not been mollified when Ladiv announced that his nephew would be the society’s contact point for Asano.

Miguel Ladiv was now standing next to Marcus at the Adventure Society campus teleport platform in Yaresh. The boy looked like nervous sweat would make his new suit slip right off his body.

Asano emerged wearing a suit in the Rimaros summer style. It was more than a decade out of date, but he managed to make it look classic rather than dated. He managed this through a combination of excellent design and swagger with enough confidence to knock out a wall.

He stopped, his eyes glancing over Miguel before fixing on Marcus. They were not the eyes Marcus remembered, instead being dark and human. Behind Jason, the group emerging from the portal was eclectic even by Marcus' standards. First came Jason's shadow familiar, who was also a little different. There were flecks of glowing white in his dark form, marking out eyes and what was possibly the outline of some kind of formalwear.

Next came the most alien of the familiars, the avatar of doom. It had more orbs floating around it than before, but was otherwise the same at a glance. It was followed by what looked like Asano again, but with red orbs for eyes. He didn't carry himself quite the same, looking more like a boy trying to imitate his older brother.

Marcus recognised Jason's familiars, but wasn't expecting the last figure to emerge. It looked like a wood carving of Asano brought to life, complete with a coarse hessian version of his cloak. He joined the others in flanking Asano.

"A little high rank for a new familiar, aren't you, Asano?" Marcus asked by way of greeting.

"Not a familiar," Jason told him. "This is Arbour, one of my Voices of the Will."

"That's a phrase you might want to be careful about throwing around. We've been fighting the messengers a long time, now."

"Noted."

"I'm here because the Adventure Society is very eager for a debrief."

"Just the Adventure Society?"

"We made sure the others will leave you alone. For a while, at least, and no promises if we don't get some answers out of you to pass along."

Jason smiled sadly.

"There's a lot of answers I want as well," he said, then slowly turned on the spot while looking around. The Adventure Society campus was one of the few places left standing after the Battle of Yaresh, but he could see the reconstructed city all around. Most of the city was built into living trees, as was normal for an elf city. He could see one section of the city instead made from towers of glass, rising through the trees in the distance.

“Whoever they put me in a room with needs to understand that they get answers when I get mine.”

“They’ll understand. We’re getting used to getting caught in the wake of your chaos. You didn’t see the political tangle as the churches of Liberty and Knowledge fought over those Builder cultists you ripped the star seeds out of. I’m assuming that was one fo your questions.”

“It was,” Jason told him. “Sorry if I’m a little contentious. I was half expecting to find a gaggle of society officials waiting for me.”

“Oh, I imagine they’ll find you soon enough. But for now, I’m here to give you something we’ve been remiss with in the past.”

“And what’s that?”

“You’ve spent your entire career dealing with things beyond the purview of normal adventurers. Well beyond. And every time you do, there’s been someone waiting to give you grief when they should be throwing you a parade.”

He held out his hand and Jason shook it. The size difference was like a child shaking hands with a big furry mascot.

“Thank you, Jason Asano, for saving us from whatever gods-bedamned cosmic nonsense was coming for us this time. And thank you for doing it like an adventurer.”