

Chapter 526

The End of the World

Some of the neighbourhood kids watched from across the river as Rufus and Jason sparred. Stripped down to plain pants, they matched their swordsmanship furiously until even their silver-rank endurance was spent. The children observed with fascination, some trying to imitate them, others engaging in their own spars using sticks.

Jason lost repeatedly, despite all his advancements. Rufus had trained under what many considered to be the greatest swordsman in the world since he was a boy. For all of Jason's practical experience, it would take more than a few years and a few skill books to catch up. After exhausting themselves, they took a refreshing dip in the river.

"I'm sure it would be different if we were using our powers," Rufus reassured Jason.

"Uh-huh," Jason said sceptically.

The Livaros mirage chamber had been shut down indefinitely. There were more important places to use the resources required to operate it.

Rufus emerged from the water first and went into the cloud house. Jason extricated himself more slowly, picking his sword up from the grass and meandering back to the house as he looked around. He stopped, spotting someone outside another house, further up the river.

Estella Warnock was standing outside the house that had belonged to her grandfather, staring at it blankly. Jason hadn't sensed her, one of the few people that could go unnoticed by his formidable senses. She didn't much bother with the polite restraint of aura, instead completely hiding it from everyone around her.

Jason shot a delicate and supporting tendril of aura her way and she turned. They shared a nod before she went into the house that was now hers. Jason looked at the house for a long time before Arabelle came out and stood beside him.

"We don't have long before you'll need to head off again," she told him. "No skipping sessions, remember?"

He nodded absently, still staring at the house that had belonged to Warwick Warnock.

"It's strange, being on the outside of events like this," he said.

"Outside?"

"I didn't fight. I didn't lose anyone. This isn't my kingdom and this isn't my home."

"And where is your home?"

“My home is people. They all came back safe. I’m told it wasn’t planned to keep them out of the city depths, but it was probably Dawn’s doing. I’m so used to being in the middle of these events and losing things to them. It’s strange to be on the periphery of someone else’s fight.”

As with Jason’s team, Arabelle had never been sent deeper into the city than the surface, due to her valuable role as a healer. When the signal to evacuate came, she was able to escape safely.

“You may not have fought the Builder cult,” she told him, “but you did your part. You took lives again, and I know you want to avoid that.”

“I know that it’s inevitable, with the choices I’ve made. The choices I’ll make again.”

He looked at the sword in his hand, gripped halfway down the scabbard.

“Maybe I could have crippled them with this, instead of dosing them with afflictions. The bronze-rankers. They might have lived long enough to get healing.”

He shook his head.

“Mercy is good when I can afford it,” he said. “I’m not going to take chances to save people like that.”

“It sounds like you’re starting to find your balance.”

“Maybe. People are dealing with a lot more than I am right now. It feels like so much is happening all at once. The people of this kingdom don’t even have time to grieve.”

It had been a month since what was variously being called the War of Four Cities or the One Day War. The history books would decide which one stuck. The Storm Kingdom and the Adventure Society were still scrambling to adjust to a new status quo. Between the Rimaros battle and the battles to the northwest, the adventurer population had suffered massive casualties amongst their mid and high rankers. This included more than a third of the royal family’s most powerful members, with the royal guard – the Sapphire Crown guild – suffering similar losses.

Despite their drop in numbers, both the royal family and the royal guard became more active in meat-and-potatoes adventuring in the wake of the battles. With their drop in numbers being reflected across the adventuring population, the Adventure Society was struggling to meet the requirements of monster surge activity. Once more, the royal family had stepped forward in the kingdom’s time of need.

Across all Adventure Society activity, minimum action quotas had been raised and safety standards lowered. Bronze-rankers had not had their number diminished, having been kept out of the war. They were now having their teams combined into larger groups,

and being sent on missions that would normally be tasked to silver-rankers. All of these measures were leading to more losses, but the results of not doing so would be worse. Reports were already coming in of fortress towns having their defences overrun as monster-clearing rates had dropped.

Jason and his allies were no exception to the increased activity. They had been worked to the bone since the battle but were holding up better than most. Their experience of spending months in an astral space in a ceaseless stream of battles, back when they were iron and bronze-rank, left them mentally better prepared than most for the revolving door of contracts.

For many Rimaros adventurers, the current adventuring climate was a very bad fit. The Rimaros adventuring ethos was predicated on turning situations into best-case scenarios, using their plentiful adventurer population and specialised teams to pick the right group for the right job. That was a rare luxury in current circumstances. While it was being done where possible, there were too many jobs and not enough adventurers. Many teams had lost members and been forced to amalgamate as best they could.

Many of the young Rimaros silver-rankers were unused to operating without high-rank backup. The guild forces yet to be properly seasoned were revealing themselves as greenhouse flowers, especially at the bronze and early-silver level, shrinking the gap between guild and non-guild adventurers. They might not have the depth of training enjoyed by their guild counterparts, but for most, this was not their first taste of desperation. Their mentality was holding up much better under adverse conditions.

The good news in all the mess was that while the adventurers of the Storm Kingdom had seen their darkest hour, they had fought through and won. The lower-rank adventurers and the population at large had been almost entirely shielded from the battles with the Builder. The region around the rolling land city had been burned into desolation and covered in molten metal and stone, but it was mostly empty desert. The nearest cities had already been evacuated before the land city rolled right through them, keeping casualties low. That made for a lot of refugees, but it was the territory of the kingdom to the north, saving the Storm Kingdom from needing to deal with them.

As for the other two cities, the construct kraken city had sunk to the bottom of the ocean after the most straightforward of the city battles. With the flying city that fell from the sky, the intervention of the gods had managed to shield Livaros. The most that had happened was some minor coastal flooding on the islands of Provo and Arnote, as well as the south coast. The water essence users and the Archbishop of Ocean had protected

Livaros entirely, despite being the closest landfall. The flying city was now a stony island just southwest of Livaros, having fallen into relatively shallow waters.

Jason didn't know a lot of Rimaros adventurers, but he nonetheless went through casualty listings as they came out, along with most adventurers. The young he-who-would-be-Thadwick who Jason had encountered during his first supply contract had died. Although Jason didn't have the details, he liked to imagine that the young adventurer fell heroically, unlike his Greenstone counterpart.

There was no question that Ledev and Vesper had both died saving the city. Jeni Kavaloa had died fighting alongside Vesper as well. She might not have wanted to work with Jason again, after their expedition together, but Jason had respected her a lot. He couldn't help but feel that his own sacrifices seemed hollow in comparison, given that he kept coming back from them. The World-Phoenix wouldn't let Jason go until it was done with him, which was how he ended up safely on Arnote while the rest of the Kingdom was fighting for their lives.

"It feels a little odd," Jason told Arabelle as they sat inside the cloud house. "I'm used to being in the middle of these events. Of being the one to struggle and sacrifice. I've complained about it being me so much, but now I'm at the periphery, it feels wrong somehow. I don't want any part of that, yet I'm somehow frustrated that I'm not. Am I lying to myself? Am I some kind of misery junkie?"

"You're not addicted to misery, Jason. You've become used to having an influence on affairs of a magnitude that you shouldn't even be involved with. Your frustration is from feeling a lack of control."

"I never have control. I'm always dancing to someone else's tune. Always too weak; always desperately leveraging someone else's power just to survive the path someone else put me on."

"I don't believe that," Arabelle said. "And neither do you."

"Excuse me?"

"You have been making choices all this time. You and Farrah have both told me about Earth. You chose to step in, time and again. No one forced you to work with people who betrayed you over and over again. You chose to do that because of what would happen to innocent people if you didn't."

"If it's between letting people die and working with people who suck, that isn't a choice."

“Yes, Jason, it is. It’s just an unpleasant one. And for all that you were kept from the battle, your influence was undeniably felt. It was your intervention that convinced Dawn to move, and you brought Travis into the fold to produce the weapon that destroyed the flying city. You were critical in felling two of those cities.”

“By leveraging other people’s power,” he said. “Again.”

Arabelle gave him a sad, tired smile.

“Jason, we have a long way to go, you and I. A very long way.”

Jason didn’t spend any more time than necessary on Livaros, just picking up and handing in contracts. Events had made his position in Rimaros politics fairly pointless. Anyone playing political games at the moment was being directly and savagely slapped down by Soramir. Even if he didn’t, the Irios family had stepped up in a big way during the defence of Rimaros. Many of their members had fought and died, and their defence infrastructure had been critical. Petty games of young people and marriage no longer mattered.

What little downtime Jason had was spent in training or working with Arabelle, starting the long road to getting his head straight. He spent a lot of his training time working on his swordsmanship with Rufus, who praised Jason’s improvement while trouncing him repeatedly.

Only remnants of the Builder cult remained in the Sea of Storms, and one of the most regular contracts Jason’s team was given was rooting them out whenever they were found. In case they encountered a clockwork king or other gold-rank minion, they usually did so in the company of Liara or Keel from the Builder-response unit.

Despite this task, the Builder cult was gone from the region for most practical purposes. The same could not be said for the rest of the world as news rolled in of other battles with the Builder’s terrible fortresses. The results were never great, with even victory coming at a heavy price while defeat brought cataclysmic disaster. Stories came in of major cities annihilated, leaving the region’s astral spaces ripe for seizure. That led to even more destruction as those astral spaces were plucked from the world.

There were only a few small mercies in all the destruction and chaos. One was that with the current state of the world’s dimensional membrane, the loss of astral spaces was less destructive than it had been in the past. With the dimensional barrier already weakened and damaged, the removal of astral spaces didn’t create the same level of dimensional disturbance.

The other good news was that the Builder cult was forced to accept the same limits as everyone else. The same low levels of magic in Greenstone that had prevented Emir's cloud ship from flying restricted the power of other things. The fortress cities in the sea of Storms would have fallen out of the sky, sunken to the ocean or even collapsed under their own weight in Greenstone. Each region was only faced with power commensurate with the power already there, making the Builder cult a challenge, but one that could be met on all fronts. They weren't always successful in stopping the Builder's ambitions, but more often than not, they were.

Even in the other high-magic zones, the Storm Kingdom successfully repelling three cities at once was a remarkable feat. Their success buoyed other nations around the world, rejuvenating morale that was continuously being chipped away. If one of the world's great adventuring cities had fallen, the news could easily have led to a dangerous collapse of morale that fed the Builder cult's success.

A month after the Builder's cities in the Storm Kingdom were destroyed, things were getting into some manner of tentative order. Mass memorials had been happening regularly; the fallen deserved better than to be sent off in job lots but there wasn't time for anything more. The jobs hall had adventurers streaming in and out, grabbing fresh contracts the moment they handed in the one they just completed. The old biases between guild and non-guild fell away in the scramble to meet the challenges of the monster surge. Guild elitism fell by the wayside as need and the shortcomings of training only in high-magic zones highlighted the importance of experience.

These were the shortcomings that the Geller family had understood for centuries; the very reason they had maintained Greenstone as their family seat even as their power and influence spread across the world, generation after generation. Rufus had recognised this and had spent most of the last few years working to incorporate this practice into his family's academic institution.

Stories abounded of people stepping up; unknown individuals shining even as young adventurers vaunted for their potential cracked under pressure. This caused problems from both the higher and lower ends of society. In the upper echelons, some noble scions fell short after years of training and countless resources had been poured into them. Most aristocratic families were wise enough to brush the issue aside and quietly work on getting their young people the experience they needed to live up to their potential. The Geller family in Rimaros quietly made it known that they would help in this regard.

A few houses took a different tack, however. In the rush to clean what they saw as stains to their pride, they made bold, short-sighted moves. Some casting out young people

like lizards dropping their tails, while others staged pre-emptive political smears in an attempt to maintain the very reputation their actions were tainting.

That small minority of aristocratic houses that made those decisions were mostly minor ones, panicked by their relatively limited power bases being harmed by the One Day War and its aftermath. Fearful of losing their influence in the royal court, they made moves that only cast that influence away as other houses and the royal family came down on them like a hammer.

Titles were stripped and assets seized from any family that too openly defied the royal family's edict that politics would be set aside through the current crisis. There were always those who thought the rules did not apply to them, or they were too clever to be caught out in their ambitions. In the case of one minor family, their entire sky island was seized by the royal family. The aristocratic house in question mounted protests until Soramir and Zila Rimaros came to the island, smashed through the defences and threw anyone who would survive directly off the side of the island. The rest of the family departed very swiftly.

Adventurers shining bright during dark days were welcomed into guilds hungry to replenish their numbers and add experienced adventurers to their roster. Families whose members had stepped up in the battle or the aftermath, either as adventurers or through more logistical contributions were raised to the status of minor nobility.

At the lower end of the social spectrum were those who saw this and viewed the current conditions as a prime chance to move up in the world. While most realised that those being recognised were doing so through earnest effort, many couldn't see past selfish ambitions or that the old ways were changing.

As with the noble families who had shot themselves in the foot, many failed to see that a fundamental shift was taking place in both the adventuring and aristocratic realms of Rimaros society. They stuck to the old ways of backroom influence-trading and putting more effort into looking like they were contributing than actually doing it. They tried to move up by pulling others down, sowing mistrust at a time when unity was critical. The royal family did what they could to stamp it out but, being less prominent, the lowly and ambitious were harder to notice and identify.

"How long before you're back on a contract?" Arabelle asked Jason.

"We're going in this evening," Jason told her, looking out the cloud house window at the early afternoon sun.

“Not much of a break. You only got back this morning. You won’t even spend a night at home.”

“There’s not a lot of Builder cult left to mop up,” Jason said. “We’ve been getting a lot of missions to reinforce Fortress towns, now that I have a lot of them as portal destinations. I’m guessing they’re keeping you busy too.”

“Yes. With greater risks being taken, the need for healers has risen commensurately. That’s not an excuse to avoid these sessions.”

“It kind of is.”

“We have the rest of the day, then.”

“All day? Arabelle, I need rest and relaxation too, you know.”

“Just a little longer, then, but it has to be about something I want to go back to.”

“What?” Jason asked warily.

“You told me that your family stayed in the cloud house after you lost control of your aura during a flashback nightmare.”

“That’s old news,” Jason said. “They’re back on Earth.”

“Did they ever go back into your spirit vault after that?”

“That takes trust,” Jason said. “We just... we never talked about it again. We all knew they wouldn’t be able to go in anymore.”

“How did that make you feel?”

“Alone. That was when I knew they weren’t coming back with me. It took longer to admit to myself, but that was when I knew.”

“And what about your team?” Arabelle asked.

“What about them?”

“Have they gone into your spirit vault?”

“I haven’t told them about it.”

“Why not?”

“You know why not.”

“Tell me.”

“You’re going to make me say it?”

“Some things you have to go through to get to the other side, Jason.”

He stood up and paced around the room. Arabelle remained seated, patiently waiting. More than once he paused to glower at her before he resumed his angry pacing. Finally, he leaned up against the wall, pressing into it with both hands as he glared out the window.

“Jason,” Arabelle said.

"Because if they can't go in, I'm done!" Jason yelled, wheeling on her. "If, after everything I went through to get here, they can't trust me, I won't have anything left. Nothing to go towards and nothing to go back to. Is that what you want to hear?"

"Yes," Arabelle said calmly. "This fear is what's stopping you from moving forward. But you already know that."

"You're saying I have to do it?"

"Jason, you need to understand that just because something is one way in any given moment, that doesn't mean it's that way forever. My understanding is that your spirit vault requires a deep and unreserved trust in you before someone can enter."

"Yes."

"Then do you genuinely believe it's strange that your team might have some reservations about you coming back from the dead, so very different than you were before? That trust you once had was built over time. Strengthened in fire, like a pot in a kiln. If they don't have that full and absolute trust today, you need to understand that it's not the end. You have the time and the chance to build that trust again. So, yes, I'm saying that you have to tell them about your spirit vault and let them in. You don't have to tell them about the trust component. You can see how it goes."

"You think it's that easy?"

"No. But you're in a place where you have to confront what is, in your mind, the worst possible outcome, before you can see that it isn't the end of the world and you do have a path forward. You've faced the literal end of the world, Jason. Are you going to let a metaphorical one stop you?"

"So, it's not a portal," Neil said. "It's a personal storage space except that people can go in?"

"Something like that," Jason said.

Jason and his team, along with Rufus, Gary and Farrah, were standing in the waterfall room, looking at a portal arch. Rufus looked at Jason, who seemed normal and light-hearted, but saw that Farrah was watching him with concern. He knew there was something about the arch that they weren't telling the rest of them.

Clive was the most eager, curiosity driving him to vanish through the portal first. Gary quickly followed. Farrah nodded at Rufus and he followed suit. Humphrey was next, Sophie right on his heels. Belinda followed right behind, Jason's inner tension loosening just a little. Belinda was one he'd been unsure of, but that just left Farrah and Neil. Neil shrugged, bit into his sandwich and walked through the portal.

Left alone with Farrah, Jason staggered, as if a cord that had been pulled tight within him had suddenly loosened. Farrah flashed him a grin and grabbed him up in a hug. Tears Jason's magical body shouldn't have been able to shed welled in his eyes. Farrah was almost holding him up when Neil came back out of the portal.

"Are you two coming or..."

He saw them holding one another.

"Ha, I knew it. Lindy, you owe me a... oh, she probably can't hear me."

Neil turned to go back through the archway when Jason rushed over and bundled him into a huge hug.

"Uh...?"