

## Chapter 108: You Don't Have the Strength

Emir Bahadir's cloud palace was a sprawling, monstrous edifice. Floating just offshore on the north side of the Island, it was fully exposed to the waves and currents, yet remained as immovable as solid ground. The entire structure was made from cloud, dyed in colours of blue, purple, orange and gold. Laid out in multiple wings and towers, it was a fairy tale brought to life.

Just walking on the cloud floors gave a sense of serenity, gentle and floating, yet supportive at the same time. Jason and Emir were strolling down a great, long balcony, looking out over the Adventure Society campus.

"I can't thank you enough," Jason said. "There's no place in the city I can hide her from Elspeth Arella."

"This is why I like outworlders," Emir said. "You have a knack for drawing a large amount of trouble in a small amount of time. Something to do with not recognising the dangers, perhaps, or simply an unwillingness to waste a second life on caution and worry. It has been my experience that helping an outworlder in their moments of early need pays off handsomely down the road. Ten years from now, I have no doubt that being owed a favour by you, Mr Asano, will be a valuable commodity indeed."

"You haven't earned a favour here, Mr Bahadir. You've made a friend, and friends don't count favours. If you need me, I'll be there."

"I'm starting to see what Rufus was talking about. I am curious as to why you're throwing away so much for a pair of thieves that, if I'm not mistaken, you hardly know."

"I don't really see it as a choice," Jason said.

Following the balcony to a terrace, they sank into the welcoming embrace of a pair of chairs made of clouds. Jason let out a contented sigh.

"I don't think I'll handle going back to regular furniture well."

Emir chortled.

"It is easy to become accustomed to the finer things," he said. "We must always remember, though, what we do to get them. You were saying that you didn't feel you had a choice."

"I was the one who caught this young woman, which makes her disposition my responsibility."

"I'm not sure I agree," Emir said. "She set out on her own path."

“Yes, because orphans with a debt to a crime lords have so many options in life. If you placed someone in the hands of a filthy degenerate, would you feel that your own hands were clean?”

“I suppose not. I’m not sure I’d go so far to protect them, though.”

“A responsibility isn’t just a responsibility so long as it’s convenient,” Jason said. “I can live with burning bridges, if the bridges are rotten. If I lose my Society membership, so be it.”

“My understanding is that you did everything according to the rules,” Emir said. “Outside of ‘losing’ the young lady in your custody, of course, but incompetence is not grounds for expulsion. I would expect a demotion, however. Do you have your second star?”

“And a third,” Jason said, “but I’m wondering how much of that was to keep me distracted. I imagine I’ll be left with just the one when this is over.”

“I think, perhaps, it is coming on time to put Greenstone behind you, Mr Asano. Has Rufus broached the idea of joining him when he returns to Vitesse?”

“He has,” Jason said. “That said, he still has work to do, here.”

“Yes he does. I will be here a little while, and he should be returning with me. Allow me to extend that invitation to you and the young women taking sanctuary here. I believe a new city, far away, is exactly what they need.”

“From what they’ve been willing to tell me, that was very much the plan. Until I intervened. I did have another thought about how to keep Miss Wexler out of Lucian Lamprey’s grasp.”

“Oh?”

“Elspeth Arella can hand Lamprey a thief and no one will care less. If she tried to hand over an adventurer, though...”

“You want to make this girl an adventurer?”

“Why not? She a lot more ready for it than I was. She’s probably more ready than I am now. I’ve pooled together money enough that I can afford some low-rarity essences at auction. There’s one in a few days, and hoping the absentees let me get a good price.”

“Finding the essences is not the largest obstacle to that course of action.”

“But it an obstacle. You go through walls one at a time, Mr Bahadir.”

“You mean *over* walls.”

“I use my words with care, Mr Bahadir.

Emir laughed.

“You certainly run full-speed at a problem, Mr Asano. The perspective of youth.”

At a glance, Emir didn't look to be more than thirty years old. There was an agelessness to him, however, that Jason had seen to a lesser degree in Danielle Geller and Thalia Mercer. Most of Greenstone's other silver-rankers showed more of their age.

"I would hold off on that auction," Emir suggested. "With patience, opportunity may find you."

"That's right," Jason said, remembering something. "Farrah told me not to rush to pick up my last awakening stones. I got the impression it was something to do with what sent them here in the first place, but they wouldn't tell me more. I assume that's why you're here as well."

"Indeed I am. I've been looking for something for some time, across seas and continents. It's what I do. People know that something exists, somewhere, and they pay me to find it. And they pay well. Usually it's long-time gold or even diamond-rankers. The interests of those who live for centuries are far-reaching, sophisticated and esoteric."

"You work for diamond rankers?"

"I do. Not many people have met so many as I, let alone be given the chance to perform a service. They pay in more exotic currency than mundane coins."

"Like castles made out of clouds?"

"Exactly like that. You know, Mr Asano, if your attempts to convince people to kill you don't pan out, I think I can find some work for you, once you rank up once or twice."

"I'm not sure I'm willing to wait around for months while you check false leads. Rufus and his team are convinced what you're looking for is here. Presumably somewhere more intact than that complex out in the swamps."

"Yes, it was disappointingly empty of content. "Did you happen to take anything?"

"We took some combat dummy parts. My friend wanted to try and reassemble them."

"Did he?"

"Not yet. So what is this mysterious event you have coming up? Another complex, like I found, but more intact? I imagine going untouched for centuries would mean a good chance at essences and the like, with no one wandering through to nab them. Clive said we were unlucky not to find any in our find."

"I really shouldn't say more at this point, but you are very much on the right track. There are some unusual nuances to the exploration that mean I will require local assistance, which should be lucrative for everyone involved. From what I've been able to put together, anyway."

"Tantalising," Jason said. "You're certain I can't tease more out of you?"

“I’ve said more than I should already. After all, don’t they say the anticipation is better than the meal?”

“Only if all the cooks they know are terrible,” Jason said.

One of Emir’s staff approached them. From Jason’s limited experience, Emir’s people were an eclectic and casual bunch, but that did not extend to his chief of staff, Constance. The silver-ranker was Emir’s right hand, and exuded professionalism each time Jason encountered her.

“Sir. Elspeth Arella is at the entrance and has asked to see you.”

“She’s here personally? Not a messenger?”

“In person, sir, yes.”

“I’ll be right down, then.”

Constance nodded and left, Emir wistfully watching her depart.

“I’m rather desperately in love with that woman,” he said wistfully. “She wants nothing to do with me, of course. She’s seen me at my worst.”

“She’s aware of your affections?”

“Oh, yes.”

“She’s still willing to work for you, which is a good sign. I imagine she would have no problem making her way in the world outside of your employ.”

“Very much so; I have no idea why she stays with me. Except for the pay. And the travel. And the accommodations.”

He sighed.

“I’d best go see to the branch director,” he said. “Care to come along? You haven’t seen her since before you absconded here, have you?”

“I haven’t,” Jason said. “I don’t see the problem with tagging along.”

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Sophie and Belinda were in an opulent, two-bedroom guest suite. The entire wall in front of them had turned into mist allowing them to look out over the ocean as they relaxed in plush cloud chairs.

“I don’t understand what’s happening anymore,” Belinda said. “Those cloud beds. I’ve never slept like that in my life. A week ago we were wondering if we’d still be alive right now, and look at this.”

“It’s nice,” Sophie said, “but what is Asano’s goal? What does he get out of bringing us here?”

“Maybe he really is just trying to help us,” Belinda said, drawing a flat look from Sophie.

“Yeah,” Belinda said. “It sounded stupid as I was saying it.”

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Constance was waiting for Emir and Jason at the palace exit that connected to the shore by a cloud path. Emir matched across the walkway with Constance and Jason flanking him. Elspeth Arella was waiting on shore, alone.

“If your goal is to convince me to disgorge my guests,” Emir said without preamble, “then I’m afraid you’re wasting your time.”

“That can wait,” Arella said, not sparing Jason so much as a glance. “The expedition your fellow Vitesse adventurers are on. There’s been a problem.”

“What kind of problem?” Emir asked.

“Less than an hours ago, its members started dying. All we have is their tracking stones, so we don’t know anything else, but we’ve lost a silver ranker, multiple bronze-rankers and a slew of irons. Everyone we could use to send support in time is already on the expedition, so I’m here to ask if you or your people can help.”

Emir frowned unhappily, Jason matching his expression.

“Constance?” Emir asked.

“Hester has been to a number of areas in the region. I can see how close she can get us.”

“Do it, and ready the field team,” Emir ordered. The usual undertone of casual amusement absent from his voice. Constance immediately marched back toward the palace.

“I want to be part of this,” Jason said.

“You don’t have the strength,” Emir said. “Protecting you would cost us more than having you would help.”

“I know an alchemist with a stockpile of medical supplies and connections with the Healer. We could set up a recovery station outside the astral space while you go in and get them.”

Emir gave Jason an assessing look, then nodded.

“How fast can you get things together?”

“I can lend him some Adventure Society authority to speed things along,” Arella said. “I’ll have your friend Vincent meet you.”

“He still has a job?”

“He does today.”

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Chaos reigned as the expedition campsite was attacked. There were very few living people amongst the attackers, all of whom were silver or bronze rank. Their features couldn't be seen under sandy-coloured robes, not even race. Only their auras gave away their nature as living beings.

The bulk of the enemy force were construct creatures that varied wildly varying in design. There were creatures like wooden puppets, awkward but numerous. Lumbering, stone golems walked amongst them, as much as two or three times the size of a person. There were strange creatures made of complicated, interconnecting parts. Some were the size and shape of people, others were more animal like, sometimes serving as mounts for the robed people. Behind them all was a towering behemoth of stone and metal; a ten metre tall, spider shaped, steel behemoth. It apparently had been held back so as not to alert the camp before the surprise attack. As such, it was still making its way forward from a distance.

Danielle quickly discovered there was no ordering the chaos. All she could do was find key people and try to direct them where they were needed most. In between, she stepped onto the field herself. She wanted to go after the robe-wearers she assumed were controlling the construct army, but too many people needed help against the artificial horde.

She paced herself, knowing her own limits. In a short fight, she was confident against any opponent, but her powerful abilities would exhaust her mana quickly. Aside from conjuring her dimension blade, she relied on skills and silver-rank attributes to mow through weaker enemies. She saved her most exhausting powers for critical moments, when the difference was life and death.

Around the battlefield, the more capable adventurers had reached similar conclusions to Danielle and were doing their best to help the others. Those that knew their abilities well and how to use them picked their targets accordingly. Thalia Mercer ploughed through crowds of constructs like a bowling ball, enemies bouncing away without slowing her down. She focused on the golems, which were big, slow and either bronze or silver rank. The bronze ones barely slowed her down, exploding into stone shrapnel as she literally smashed through them with shoulder charges. For the silvers, three times her height or more, she would rip off a limb and break the rest of the body apart by using it as a club.

Farrah and Gary had recruited Beth Cavendish and her team. Farrah had encased herself in obsidian armour and conjured a huge, obsidian sword. The blade was not a blade at all, but a pillar of jagged segments, like horrible teeth. The segments could break up and whip around on a cord of glowing magma. She swept it around, burning and

breaking apart the constructs. Mixing in devastating lava spells, she used her abilities to create space for weaker expedition members to fall back.

Into that space, walls of metal and stone rose out of the ground to form barricades. This was the combined efforts of Gary and Hudson, the human front-liner who was almost as large as Gary. The other members of Beth's team cleaned up any loose ends while Beth used spell after spell to keep feeding mana to Farrah. Her potent abilities were costly and hard to maintain as the battle dragged on, while Beth desperately replenished her as fast as she could.

Rufus, in the meantime, was flickering through the enemy like a ghost. He appeared and disappeared in rapid succession, moving unhindered. In his hand was a silver sword, under which constructs fell as he passed. These were simple humanoid forms, mostly wood on a metal frame. They were essentially combat dummies without the safety features. These were only incidental targets, however. His primary targets were the less common construct creatures, which were many and varied. They were larger than the humanoid, for the most part, and had been built to mimic various animals and monsters. As well as larger and tougher than their wooden, humanoid brethren, they were also faster and smarter. Where the others shuffled along with zombie-like shambling as they sought out living enemies, their forms very much followed function.

Rufus was tracking a specific one; a giant tiger made of intricate steel cogs. The bronze-rank clockwork cat was faster than its simpler brethren, wreaking havoc amongst the expedition's panicking iron-rankers, even claiming some of the bronze.

Rufus stopped his rapid, vanishing run. He dropped the conjured silver sword and a golden one appeared in its place. The cat locked its unliving gaze on him and launched into a high pounce. Its speed, so terrifying to the iron-rankers, was as good as standing still to Rufus.

As Rufus activated his speed of light power, the world seemed to freeze in time around him. The creature was stuck mid-pounce, hovering in the air. The power only afforded Rufus two seconds of accelerated time and he wasted none of it. He ran under the creature, pushing his peak, bronze-rank reflexes to the limit as he lashed out four times with his golden sword. Every movement left a trail of golden light in his wake.

Rufus returned to the normal passage of time and the cat was once again hurtling to the spot Rufus had just disappeared from. The golden trail showed every movement he had made in accelerated time, but it did the cat no good. It landed, helpless on the ground, each of its limbs cleanly severed. The severed limbs all glowed with golden heat where Rufus' sword had passed through.

The creature landed helpless on the ground, limbs scattered around. Rufus plunged his sword into its head, sinking it to the hilt. Then he ran the sword down the length of its body, leaving a trail of hot metal as he sliced it clean in half. He left his sword buried in the clockwork cat, conjuring a new silver one and vanishing.

Danielle kept an eye on the battlefield as a whole. They weren't turning the fight but their key people were sending the unintelligent automatons in to an increasing state of disarray. It was enough that she could start organising a withdrawal. In one corner of the battle, some of her people had erected barricades she could use as a launch point for the retreat. The trick would be holding the rest of the line as she wrangled those behind it. She spread out her aura senses, looking for the expedition leaders she would need to make it happen.