

Chapter 647

Stories About Fungus

Urman Vohl had pulled back to throw the folder full of papers across the room when he stopped himself, closed his eyes and put the folder back down on his desk. His sons, Valk and Emresh, stood anxiously in the middle of the office.

“Another one,” Urman snarled. “That’s two in the time it’s taking the broker to get here. You are certain he’s coming, aren’t you, Valk?”

“Yes father,” the older brother said.

Urman’s office was midway up one of the inner city towers; prestigious but not overreaching. Understanding where to headquarter oneself was an important part of maintaining a reputation in Yaresh. It demonstrated a self-valuation that could hurt one’s interests if they were to over-or-under-evaluate their position in society.

A knock at the door was followed by some of Urman’s less thuggish men escorting a small elf in a well-made but not ostentatious suit. Like Urman’s office, his clothes were carefully aligned with his societal position. Despite being in Urman’s office and surrounded by his people, the elf looked unperturbed. He was a silver-rank core user, but his aura was sharply controlled, giving away none of his emotions.

“Mr Vohl,” the small elf said. “Your people bringing me here is pushing quite firmly against the boundaries of propriety.”

“Jasich Tovill,” Urman said with a glower. “You’re going to stand there and talk about pushing boundaries when you have been interfering with my business?”

“I have nothing to do with your business, Mr Vohl.”

“In the last three days, no fewer than nineteen of my debtors have paid their loans in full, immediately after getting loans from you.”

“You are incorrect in two regards, Mr Vohl. Firstly, the loans facilitated by myself have nothing to do with your loans, simply because they went to the same people in several instances. If you disagree, you will find my legal advocates downright eager to explain the difference before a civil magistrate. Secondly, they are not my loans. Loans have been executed through me, but it is my client from whom the loans are issued, not me.”

“And who is your client?”

“None of your business, Mr Vohl.”

“Father,” Emresh said angrily. “Let me—”

“Quiet,” Urman dismissively commanded.

“Yes,” Jasich greed. “You’ve done your father quite enough damage.”

"What does that mean?" Urman asked.

"I apologise," Jasich said. "I spoke out of turn."

"My father asked you a—"

"Shut your mouth!" Urman snapped at Emresh, then turned his gaze on Jasich.

"I have no patience for your games, broker. Tell me who your client is or you'll find unfortunate coincidences starting to befall your interests."

Jasich sighed.

"As it happens," he said, "My client anticipated a scenario quite like this and issued directions accordingly. I have been given, should I be put under duress, permission to reveal that my client is a member of the Nareen family, out of Rimaros."

"The Storm Kingdom?" Urman asked. "What do they want with a handful of businesses in the Yaresh entertainment district?"

"My client, as it happens, is also a go-between. She has no interest in the entertainment district or the business involved."

"She's doing this for someone else?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"She has only involved herself to protect someone."

"Protect who?" Urman asked. "My debtors? This mysterious person behind her?"

"No, Mr Vohl. She's doing this to protect you."

"Me? Who and what do you think I need protection from?"

"Someone within your organisation has offended a person they very much should not have."

Remembering the broker's earlier statement, seemingly made offhand, Urman looked to his younger son before turning back to Jasich as he continued his explanation.

"Mr Vohl, the offended party knows that if they retaliate against this member of your organisation, events would escalate to the point where they would be required to kill you and everyone around you before there were no more people to come seeking revenge."

"Even if this person could do that," Urman said, "the city authorities wouldn't just sit back in the face of that much killing."

"I don't know the identity of the person in question," Jasich said, "but I am assured that he is unconcerned about any authorities. It seems an outlandish claim, but given the identity of my client, not one I can entirely dismiss. However, doing all of that would go against the person's current desire for anonymity. He, therefore, decided that he shall satisfy his need for revenge by interfering with your interests rather than melting down your

flesh and carrying you around in a bucket. That is a direct quote, by the way, and one I am assured can be taken quite literally, other than potentially requiring multiple buckets or perhaps a drum. My client is attempting to prevent that person from deciding you are worth casting aside their anonymity over. She knows that going through me is something you would be willing to do, but going through her is not.”

Urman leaned back in his chair, considering the broker's words. Jasich stood in place, patient and unconcerned, while Emresh was agitated, unable to keep his hands and feet still without fidgeting. His older brother, Valk, was more composed, but still showed signs of uncertainty in his expression. During the long silence, Emresh looked like he was about to speak several times before either stopping himself or being stopped by a harsh glare from his brother. Finally, Urman spoke.

“Broker. Sell me the loans you have issued.”

“As I have already explained, Mr Vohl, they are not my loans. I merely carried them out.”

“You’re a smart man, Mr Tovill. I’m sure you can figure something out.”

“What I have figured out, Mr Vohl, is that if you keep pushing, your best result would be humiliating failure.”

“You think failure is the best I can do?”

“If you do anything, Mr Vohl, I am the only person in this room who will still be alive at week's end.”

Urman grimaced but refrained from another outburst.

“Take Mr Tovill home,” he told his minions, who took Jasich out, leaving Urman and his sons. “Emresh, what did you do?”

“Nothing.”

“Don’t lie to me, boy.”

“Really, nothing. It was a normal week.”

“You didn’t hurt anyone?” Valk asked. “Make anyone angry?”

“Of course I hurt people,” Emresh said. “I just said it was a normal week?”

“Who were these people you hurt?” Urman asked.

“I didn’t make a list.”

“Emresh,” Valk said. “You are the only one of us that spends time in the entertainment district. You know the people there, yes?”

“Sure I do.”

“Out of the people you hurt, which ones were strangers?” Valk asked.

“What makes you think it was someone I hurt?” Emresh asked. “The broker said offended, and how would I hurt some death-dealing savage who could take us all out?”

“A not inconsiderable point,” Urman acknowledged. “It could have been anyone he encountered. The best move, for now, is to find out more about the broker's client. Valk, look into any members of house Nareen in the city.”

“What do I do?” Emresh asked.

“Go home,” Urman said. “My townhouse, not your place in the entertainment district. Stay there until I tell you otherwise. I'll have my men make sure you go, and tell your mother you aren't to leave.”

“You're telling mum on me?”

Jason's team was in Clive's skimmer, moving south over the forest canopy. For once, Jason himself had joined them.

“While it's good that we're operating alone so you can come with us,” Humphrey told him, “this isn't a low-stakes contract to slowly get used to working together with. We're one of seven teams, four of which have gold rankers attached. We're all scouting out the region south of the city. No one has heard anything from anyone in that direction for days, including from the first two teams sent to look into it.”

“Why split up all the teams?” Belinda asked. “Isn't that asking to be picked off in isolation?”

“Because the area we're covering is so large,” Humphrey told her. “As far as anyone can determine, the entire southern approach is cut off. The Adventure Society wants this dealt with before a panic starts.”

“*Should* a panic be starting?” Neil asked.

“That's what we're trying to find out,” Humphrey said. “The local teams are checking the main thoroughfares south. We've been assigned to hop between smaller and more isolated communities, along with Korinne's team and another group of out-of-towners.”

“So we get the low priority tasks,” Neil griped.

“Be grateful,” Humphrey said. “The teams with gold rankers are going after the main routes, which is where the most dangerous threats are likely to be. Otherwise, the larger towns would have gotten the word out before going silent.”

“We can handle dangerous,” Sophie said. “Unless it's something gold rank.”

“Rank isn't the only source of danger,” Clive warned. “Yes, we could handle most silver-rank monsters, but the Magic Society's monster almanac is filled with exotic threats. Not everything can be solved by punching.”

“That depends on how good at punching you are,” Sophie told him.

In their own skimmer, Korinne’s team was also moving over the rainforest, trees just below them.

“Why couldn’t we just take the roads?” Polix wondered aloud. “It would take longer, yes, but we could have just left earlier.”

“The Adventure Society wanted us to avoid trouble on the way to the population centres,” Korinne said. “The comprehensiveness with which the southern region has gone silent suggests that the roads are compromised.”

“But running these skimmers in flight mode consumes a lot of spirit coins,” Polix said. “The Adventure Society is reimbursing us, right?”

“Of course they are,” Rosa said. “Isn’t that right Korinne?”

“It is,” Korinne said. “They will fully reimburse us.”

“Why do you not sound convincing?” Polix asked.

“They will reimburse us,” Korinne said. “More or less.”

“More or less?” Kalif asked. “We’re fuelling this thing out of party funds. What does more or less mean?”

“It means that the society is currently funnelling supplies to the conflict with the messengers,” Korinne said. “They’re still paying out contracts, but non-urgent reimbursements are being paid out in credit bonds.”

“What are credit bonds?” Kalif asked.

“It’s a token that you can use to reclaim an owed amount at a later date.”

“How much later?” Polix asked.

“A year.”

“A year? We won’t be around in a year!”

“You can claim them at other branches,” Korinne said.

“Do we still have to wait the year if we do that?” Polix asked.

“Only if you want the full eighty-five percent,” Korinne said.

“What do you mean, eighty-five percent?” Polix asked.

“There’s a slight fee for claiming the token at a branch other than the non-issuing one,” Korinne said.

“We should never have taken this contract,” Polix complained. “Self-funding a trip into some vaguely defined area where people keep vanishing? Including adventurers?”

“Maybe the whole region is overrun with something,” Rosa suggested. “I’ve heard stories about fungus that can overtake whole towns in one night.”

"I once saw a carnivorous vine the size of a large town," Zara said. "It was in an astral space, part of the mass expedition that Emir Bahadir arranged five years ago. Iron rankers only, with promising young teams from across the world. It was a good chance to meet with other royalty."

"Did you kill the vine monster?" Kalif asked.

"It wasn't a monster," Zara explained. "It was some kind of alchemically modified plant creature that had been left to grow wild for centuries. It had buried itself underground, but had vines on the surface, amongst the regular overgrowth. It would attack anyone that entered its territory. Dozens of adventurers teamed up to deal with it."

"A single giant organism?" Polix asked.

"Yes," Zara confirmed.

"Affliction specialist," Polix said. "Even a whole bunch of adventurers won't get it done. You need someone that can keep scaling damage endlessly to handle something that big."

"Except that it wasn't that easy," Zara said. "We were iron-rank, and you know what affliction specialists are like at that rank."

"Crap area specialists," Kalif said. "Nothing is tough enough to make afflictions worthwhile. Faster and easier to just run around killing stuff the regular way."

"Yes," Zara said. "It's why only a few teams brought them. And they were all specialised in area afflictions, which don't have escalating effects until higher rank. Fortunately, there was one focused affliction specialist, part of a local team."

"A focused affliction specialist?" Korinne asked. "They're even weaker than area affliction specialists at low rank. And as for high ranks, they're just worthless against anything but one giant creature."

"If they really are affliction specialists, yes," Zara agreed. "The person in question became an affliction skirmisher."

Everyone except Polix who was driving turned to look at Zara.

"Yes," she said with a small, weary sigh. "I was talking about him. It was the first time I saw him, although he wouldn't see me until later."

"You need to get over that guy," Rosa said. "I don't think he's especially keen on you, Princess."

"It's not princess anymore," Zara said.

"Which I believe about as much as you not being obsessed with the guy you joined our team over," Rosa told her. "Maybe try to avoid letting out a little sigh when you talk about him and it might come across as more believable."

“You realise he’s probably listening to all of this,” Kalif said. “That shadow familiar of his is sneaky.”

“I keep sensing him skulking around,” Rosa said. As the team scout, she had the best perception amongst them. “I’m sure he’s getting harder to spot, though.”

“I appreciate you saying so, Miss Liselos,” Shade said from her shadow. “I need to refine my skills again with each summoner I am familiar to, and you have been very good practise.”