

Chapter 671

The Better Adventurer

One building on the Adventure Society campus of Yaresh was older than all of the others. It had been the entire headquarters for the Adventure Society in the early days of the city, and the defensive measures built into it were formidable. As Yaresh grew, and its branch expanded from a building to a full campus, the building and its defences had been repurposed. It now served as a set of secure residences, for those who needed to be kept safe, along with those who needed to be kept secure, but the campus prison tower was not appropriate. This was the case for Zolit Kreen.

Zolit was not just an outworlder but one that had originally been a valash; a species that did not natively appear on Pallimustus and looked like a humanoid chihuahua. Both of these things made him very attention-grabbing, and he had spent years working very hard to undo that damage. Zolit had been a run-of-the-mill adventurer by intention, slowly but surely ranking up to silver while remaining as unremarkable as he could. He did his part during the monster surges while doing his best not to stand out.

After attaining the wealth and extended lifespan that came with being silver rank, he'd retired and found a comfortable niche as a fight promoter. It was an environment where everyone was a little bit strange, looking for a gimmick so his idiosyncrasies didn't stand out as much. Everyone had their thing, and being a valash outworlder was his.

It had all gone wrong the moment he set eyes on the other outworlder. He'd become complacent, forgetting the importance of being ordinary. The next thing he knew, Adventure Society enforcers were dragging him out of bed in the middle of the night and locking him up in an admittedly lavish suite that was, nonetheless, a prison. They were asking him about the outworlder and, for some reason, his assistant, Benella. They were talking nonsense about messengers and Zolit had no answers to give.

What was worse was that he was starting to feel ill and he didn't have any more of his medicine. One of the problems with not being native to this world was that there was an incompatibility between himself and the magic of Pallimustus. It was something he was sensitive about, as he was always wary of the Adventure Society grabbing him and handing him over to the Magic Society for experimentation. He'd decided to reach out to the other outworlder about it, except that he didn't get the chance. Benella disappeared and he'd been snatched up by the Adventure Society.

Benella's disappearance had been the biggest problem as she had been the one procuring his medicine for years. He didn't know which alchemist she used or what exactly

was in the medicine; it was one of countless things he'd relied on her for in the early days. His memories of that time were hazy at best, and the ones from his old world were gone entirely. This was another side effect of the magic incompatibility for outworlders, according to the expert Benella had found.

Zolit groaned, pacing around in the secure but opulent suite, barely dressed. For as long as he could remember, Benella had been managing his life. Without her help in the beginning, when he didn't even speak the language and his magic incompatibility kept leading to blackouts, he never would have managed at all.

Now she was gone, and some kind of traitor? She was the main thing that the Adventure Society interrogators asked about. They didn't call themselves interrogators, but that's what they were. And Zolit was terrified to talk about his medicine lest they turn their attentions on him rather than her. Or worse, hand him over to the Magic Society. They might claim that they didn't do unethical research on innocent people, but he knew what obsessed researchers did behind closed doors. It was one of the main things Benella had warned him about in the early days.

He needed them to let him go so that he could track down the medicine for himself. He was feeling worse and worse by the hour, his thoughts increasingly scattered. He couldn't sit still and his body was releasing sticky sweat. He shouldn't sweat at all, as a silver ranker, let alone this strange, tacky substance. Three showers with little more than an hour between, scrubbing the residue from his body. He should ask for some crystal wash, but he didn't want to draw attention to his condition.

Sleep wouldn't come, his mind racing and scattered. He was hungry, too, more and more as the night moved into the early hours of morning. At least they were feeding him properly, and he'd just asked for another meal.

An Adventure Society functionary, Argrave Mericulato, pushed a trolley of food down a hall of the secure residence building. His aura mask hid the seething anger that was always inside of him at being reduced to such menial tasks, while he kept his expression easy and friendly. He never used to suppress his emotions, but it was something he had to learn. Fortunately, no one paid that much attention to servants, which was what he amounted to, in spite of his silver rank.

He wasn't a traitor. Any reasonable person would see that the Adventure Society were the traitors, having been the ones to turn on him. They didn't care that he had been a celebrated adventurer in his own right; the moment his father had died in the One Day

War, everyone had turned on him. They treated him as if only his father had any value, ignoring his own accomplishments.

His team had just up and left. It wasn't his fault that the right tactical decision in the moment was to make a strategic withdrawal without them. He was the most important team member, so obviously they should be the distraction that let him go to safety. There was a flying attack fortress, gold and diamond rankers battling about, and the dimensional pocket device his father had given him only had room for one. His father had died in that battle, so waiting it out in safety was the responsible move, for the family. Not that his sister saw it that way.

The team hadn't even come looking for him in the aftermath. They left Rimaros almost immediately, pausing only long enough to have him listed as missing, presumed dead. The pocket dimension device had messed up his tracking stone and they didn't even come looking to confirm. Instead, they had him formally struck off their team list. By the time he went through the massive amount of paperwork to get himself re-listed as alive, they had a new team member. They had refused every water link request and sent him a letter that read 'Sorry: team full.'

Four years together and they ended it with three words. Years of treating him like a prince, only to reveal their true faces the moment they heard about his father. Finding another team should have been easy, and it had been the first time. Once they heard his now-dead father's name. How was Argrave to know that the incompetents would demand too much, and then blame their failures on him?

After that, teams had been harder to come by, even with so many looking to fill slots in the wake of the monster surge. It was not Argrave's fault that these pathetic adventurers didn't understand how to properly support what should obviously be the new core of their team. Four teams, none of them worth a single damn.

The Adventure Society was worse than no help. Time and again, Argrave went to them with the perfectly reasonable demand of being placed on a team that was worthy of him. And each time, the society was duped, bamboozled by the lying teams that sought only to cover their own incompetence. With each new team that scapegoated him, Argrave's eloquent arguments fell on increasingly deaf ears until he was forced to move on, looking for an Adventure Society branch that wasn't full of idiots.

Unfortunately, idiots flocked together. He moved south, from one branch to another, encountering nothing but fools, incompetents and those who undermined him out of jealousy. They went so far as to poison his name so that each branch already knew of the teams he'd been in, along with the lies they'd told. But did they listen to what really

happened? Of course not. The simple-minded fools believed the first thing they heard and were too stupid to recognise the truth when they heard it.

It was in Yaresh that Argrave realised that he was the one who had been the fool. He should have realised from the start that it wasn't a few bad apples. The entire Adventure Society was made up of petty idiots, saddling him with one pathetic team after another because they were jealous of his talent. They knew they would never reach his potential, leaving him no choice but to roam from one branch to the next, looking for honest people.

Finally, he was forced to admit that there were no good people in the Adventure Society. If they had even a scrap of Argrave's potential they would be adventurers themselves, not bureaucrats using their petty power to bring down their betters. But even in bad teams, Argrave's light was too bright to hide. In the end, they had to strip him of his status as an adventurer, denying him the chance to shine.

Adding insult to injury, they had the temerity to offer him the role of a menial functionary that he only took due to his financial needs. It was not cheap to travel in the manner he deserved, and his pathetic sister had cut him off before their father's body had turned to rainbow smoke. It wouldn't surprise him if the bureaucrats knew this and took shameless advantage.

Argrave did not betray the Adventure Society because that wasn't possible. The Adventure Society betrayed him first. Every snub, every team member who didn't understand how to properly support the hero their team had been graced with. He came into these groups who had lost a member in the surge, and it was little surprise they had. And when he told them as much, they had the gall to get angry at *him*.

The messengers understood his value. He'd only met one briefly, when his aura mask had been applied, and the intimidating being had been brusque, it was true. But they were from beyond the borders of the world and radiated glory; they would learn that Argrave was glorious too. It was only a matter of time until they realised and Argrave stood among them. Their philosophy of superiority resonated with him, and finally, there would be someone to recognise that some people were just better than others.

Of course, being from another world, they would need to see his superiority in action. He had leapt at the chance to use the menial task the Adventure Society had given him, as what had meant to be a humiliation would be the instrument through which he would prove his greatness. They had tried to make him a servant, but the cream would always rise to the top, and there was nothing they could do to stop it.

The fool guard was one of the Adventure Society enforcers who clearly couldn't hack it as a real adventurer. His senses swept rudely over Argrave but didn't penetrate the aura

mask. It was more proof of which of them was the better adventurer, not that any more was needed. The guard looked Argrave over and gestured at him to stop the cart and checked each of the covered trays.

“He’s agitated again,” the guard said. “He hasn’t slept at all, and I think he might be sick. We’re waiting on a healer, but the priority is some kind of evacuee camp. The messengers did something to the towns south of the city. I’d advise leaving the cart and getting out quick.”

Argrave swallowed a retort about the guard looking after himself and instead gave him a smile.

“Thanks for the warning,” he replied. The guard opened the door to let him wheel the trolley in, closing the door behind him.

Through the door was a well-appointed room containing a creature that Argrave found disgusting, but he plastered on a smile. The tiny man with the emaciated dog head was unpleasant to look at, but Argrave didn’t let his disgust show. Fortunately, the aura mask meant he only needed to school his expression.

“Hello again, Zolit,” he greeted.

The agitated little man was in a visibly unhealthy state. He had been pacing around the room wearing shorts and a robe left hanging open. His skin was glistening and he looked sticky, although whether that was natural for whatever he was or some odd condition, Argrave didn’t know. He didn’t particularly care, either.

Zolit ignored him, moving to the cart and lifting lids from trays that he awkwardly picked up all together before moving them to a table, spilling bits of food as he went. Argrave shook his head as he watched Zolit sit down, facing the other direction. The idiot could have had him move the trolley to the table and transfer the trays across neatly, but it worked out well for Argrave’s own plans. He opened the narrow panel hidden on one of the trolley legs and withdrew a long needle.

Zolit didn't turn as Argrave approached. The little man was shoving food into his mouth in an agitated frenzy, only letting out a muffled yell as Argrave's hand slipped over his mouth. Argrave jammed the needle into Zolit’s spine, through the slats in the back of the dining chair.

To Argrave’s complete startlement, Zolit shrank to the size of a marble in the time would have taken to snap his fingers, with a wet sucking-slapping sound. The marble fell to the chair and rolled onto the floor.

Argrave turned to look at the door but the guard outside did not make an appearance. The thick walls and heavy doors of the building had long-standing enchantments to

prevent eavesdropping. After waiting an extra moment, just in case, he moved to where the tiny sphere had settled in the carpet and leaned over to peer at it.

He'd been told that the device he was given would make it possible to take Zolit away, but he'd been expecting it to knock the little man out and turn him invisible, allowing Argrave to wheel him out on the cart. Having the man turn into a tiny brown ball was certainly more convenient, although he would have appreciated a warning.

He reached down to pick the ball up and discovered it was astoundingly heavy. Not too much for his silver-rank strength to lift, but the marble-sized object weighed as much as a heavy person. He'd have to keep hold of it as it would weigh down any pocket enough to be glaringly obvious and he hadn't been allowed to bring a dimensional bag.

Argrave held the orb up in front of his face, peering closely. It was warm and leathery to the touch, looking like it was made of tiny leather strips wrapped around one another. Jason would have recognised it as a tiny version of the orb the messenger had used to ward off the world-taker worms.

The door opened and the guard stepped inside.

"You really shouldn't linger... where's Kreen?"

"Uh, shower. He was all sticky with something and wanted to wash it off."

"Yeah, I told you he was sick. He's been showering every few hours. What's that thing you're holding?"

Argrave had done his best to casually move the hand holding the tiny sphere casually to his side, but he'd been peering closely at it when the door was opened, so the guard plainly saw it.

"Just a personal keepsake," Argrave told him, but saw that there was an unfortunate limit to the guard's credulity. The guard placed a hand on his sword hilt and took a wary stance.

"Step back into the middle of the room, Merculato."

"I don't think—"

The guard drew his sword.

"Step back into the middle of the room. I won't ask again."

Argrave did as instructed, moving into the lounge area as his mind scrambled for an appropriate response. He would need to take out the guard quietly and get off-campus before anyone realised. As he was thinking, the guard moved into the room and checked the only other door, which led into the bathroom. He saw that it was empty and levelled his sword at Argrave, touching his hand to a brooch on his chest at the same time.

“Where is Kreen?” the guard demanded. “And what was that thing you were looking at?”

“Oh, this?” Argrave asked, holding up the sphere between his thumb and forefinger. He was careful not to let the guard see how heavy it was, then tossed it at him. The guard moved to intercept it with his sword but the sphere stopped dead, floating in the air between them.

“What is...”

“What the...”

The orb started to grow and pulsate. It looked as if a tiny creature was rapidly growing inside a leathery egg, trying to claw its way out. For all either man knew, that's exactly what was happening. The guard brought his sword down on the sphere and it slid off, not so much as budging it. The growing orb started emitting an aura, silver and weak but rapidly growing stronger.

“I think we might need to get out of here,” Argrave said.

“What is it?”

“I don't know, but I don't want to stay and find out.”

“You're not going anywhere.”

The sphere had grown to the size of a basketball and started glowing faintly with golden light as the aura transitioned from silver to gold. The surface of it, still covered in leathery strands, was writhing and undulating.

“I really think we need to...”

Argrave trailed off as something started pushing its way out of the orb. On opposite sides, each facing one of the two men in the room, something scaly was shoving through the leathery strands. Argrave chanted a quick spell as the guard swung his sword a gain. From either side of the orb, snakes shot out. The sword bow and Argrave's firebolt glanced off harmlessly and the snakes latched their fangs into the two men.