

## Chapter 648

### Vampire Monster Slaves

Korinne's team paused their progress over the rainforest to fend off a large group of spider monkeys. These were not the spider monkeys of Earth, as they had four extra arms, shot webbing from their hands and poison barbs from the tips of their tails. They also were more aggressively omnivorous, still enthusiastic about fruit while also mixing anyone they could catch into their diet.

The rainforest canopy was an environment that was a mixed bag for the team. They could all get by on silver-rank agility, but some fared better than others in the trees.

Rather than slaughter all the monkeys, the team drove them off with a show of force, with only a few of the creatures dying. They were not monsters but native magical beasts, and the rainforest canopy was their natural habitat, so they were only a threat to anyone roaming the treetops, who would generally be able to handle themselves.

The team were returning to the skimmer hovering over the canopy, making their way up through the shadowy canopy, when Rosa, the scout, froze. She turned to peer into the shadows as the rest of the team readied themselves on seeing her reaction. They took tactical positions, floating in the air or perched on branches. Only Zara was out of step, not having the years of training and working together that had the others in perfect sync.

Two blue and orange, eye-shaped nebulas appeared in the dark. Realising it was Jason didn't do much to relax the team and they remained on alert.

"How did you get so close?" Rosa asked. "You didn't use to be this good."

"The entire reason we're all together like this is so that Lord Pensinata can train my aura use," Jason told her. "It would be a little strange if I wasn't improving."

"But this fast?"

"Wait until you see a messenger," Jason said. "You'll realise that this isn't fast enough."

"What are you doing here, Asano?" Korinne asked. "You should be with your own team."

"I just wanted a word with your newest team member."

"Last I heard, you wanted nothing to do with her."

"Yes, well," Jason said, his voice embarrassed. "I kind of have this thing where I make grandiose statements of principle and intent, only to immediately realise I have to go back on them for practical reasons. Lady Nareen has undertaken a task at my behest and I wanted to discuss it."

“I don’t think now is the best time,” Korinne said.

“Yeah,” Jason acknowledged, “but we’re off to fight evil and I’ve learned it’s best to seize the moment. I die kind of a lot.”

“It’s fine,” Zara said. “I’ll catch up.”

The team shared unhappy glances but made their way up to the skimmer while Zara activated a privacy screen. She was standing on a small floating cloud that roiled like a storm. Jason emerged from the shadows, sitting casually on a branch as he pushed the hood back off his head.

“There are a lot of conveniently strong and horizontal branches up here,” he observed. “Is that normal? I don’t know a lot about trees outside of their use in landscape architecture, and I mostly forgot all of that stuff. It’s what my dad did for a living.”

“Did, past-tense? Your father died?” Zara asked.

“What? No, there was a monster apocalypse and he’s fixing one of my places. A bunch of gold rankers dug it up looking for treasure, the pricks. I’m not sure I was paying him, now that I think about it. I probably should be. He’s going to have some wages racked up by the time I get back.”

“Did you just come here to talk nonsense?” Zara asked.

“It’s generally a safe bet,” Jason said with a disarmingly vulnerable smile. “But this time, I came to thank you for helping me with that property developer thug.”

“You supplied the money,” Zara said. “All it took me was a couple of hours and my name.”

Jason nodded.

“And you got to see what a hypocrite I am,” he said. “I was against you joining the convoy because your background would bring trouble. And then I asked you to flaunt your name the first chance I got.”

“That’s not why you didn’t want me to join,” Zara said softly. “You weren’t thinking of the trouble I’d bring, but the trouble I already had. That my whole family brought you, but you never would have been involved with us, if not for me.”

Jason knew that was wrong, as Soramir had been watching him from the moment he and Farrah returned to Pallimustus. He doubted Zara was faking ignorance, which meant that Soramir had not told her, leading to more self-recrimination than she was entitled to. He knew himself well enough to realise that not telling her that himself was petty, but he could live with being a little petty.

“Probably,” Jason he agreed.

Zara sat down in her floating cloud, Jason laughing as her legs dangled out of the bottom.

“You know that I can do things for you without drawing too much attention,” she said. “For example, I didn’t need to throw my identity around. The name of House Nareen was plenty to settle the issue.”

“It’s not settled,” Jason told her. “Vohl is looking into you.”

“People, especially ambitious ones, don’t eat a loss quite so willingly,” Zara said dismissively. “It’s in hand. I’m not done with Mt Vohl.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Your plan doesn’t involve marrying any dead people, does it?”

“I learned that lesson,” she said, shooting him a flat look. “I think it’s time we both got back to our teams. I don’t know about yours, but mine is waiting.”

“Oh, mine doesn’t even know I’m gone,” Jason said. “But genuinely, thank you for handling the business with Vohl.”

“It’s not that big a concern,” she said. “It’s not like if I didn’t then you would really go ahead and kill them all.”

“No,” Jason said, his aura showing nothing but sincerity. “I suppose I wouldn’t.”

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Jason emerged from one of Shade’s bodies, arriving back on his team’s still-moving skimmer.

“Where did you go?” Humphrey asked in his best disappointed-mother voice.

“I didn’t go anywhere,” Jason said. “I’ve been here the whole time.”

Humphrey turned his gaze to Jason’s seat. Sitting in it was what looked like a mummy from an old movie, made up of bandages bound tightly around a roughly human-shaped cluster of leeches. Pinned to its forehead was a note with the word JASON written on it.

“In my defence,” Jason said, “I thought he’d take the blood clone form.”

“You thought that you, but red and mute, would be convincing?” Humphrey asked.

“Red, I might believe,” Sophie said. “Mute? No.”

“Come on Colin,” Jason said, gesturing at his familiar. “The cat’s out of the bag.” Colin suddenly lurched to his feet with a burst of enthusiasm.

“No,” Jason said. “I don’t have an actual cat in a bag for you to eat.”

The mummy’s shoulders slumped, prompting Jason to wonder why a bound up swarm of leeches had collective body language.

“I may have a fresh spider monkey,” Jason told him.

“He is not eating that in the skimmer,” Clive called out from the driver’s seat. “Not unless you’re supplying the crystal wash to clean it.”

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When Jason and his team drew closer to their destination they slowed to a stop. Clive carefully descended the skimmer below the canopy but paused high above the forest floor, out of the sun to hide amongst the trees. Jason went over the side, vanishing into the shadows as Shade’s bodies poured from his cloak to do the same.

The rainforest floor was a metropolis of shadows and obstacles; precisely the kind of place it would be foolish to fight someone like Jason. His team was waiting for Jason and Shade to scout the way forward, flickering from shadow to shadow in the gloom. Their destination was a small town, a dozen kilometres ahead, that had not been heard from in days. That was not unusual, being a small and relatively isolated place, but with the region increasingly going dark, Jason’s team had been sent to check. Every location they were scheduled to check was the same.

Jason didn’t go the entire way shadow jumping, as even his mana would suffer without a source of replenishment. He drew on his old techniques for navigating the Greenstone delta on foot, adapted as he ranked up, but never as practised as in his early days as an adventurer. It almost felt like he was back there with the hot, humid air.

One of Shade’s tertiary powers was the ability to be the locus of Jason’s non-combat abilities. Because that included his map ability, sending out Shade bodies was an excellent way to map out an area. It was Shade who first encountered the town, after which his other bodies started sweeping around it.

The town was surrounded by crop fields, divided up by lines of trees rather than fences. Rice paddies featured heavily, with many shade-houses lined up in rows for crops that weren’t as fond of the blazing sun. There were people working the fields, although most of the labour was being performed by construct creatures, built for purpose and directed by elf supervisors.

It looked normal at a glance, but something was tweaking Jason’s instincts. He kept himself hidden and his magical senses restrained. He made his way forward using the lines of trees that divided the fields, as well as the shade houses. He found a spot close to the town, inside a cluster of shrubbery at the end of one of the tree lines.

The town was unremarkable, with simple wooden buildings, often open-sided. Airflow and minimal obstruction seemed to be key to the design principles, and all of the buildings were painted the same dark green. It looked like the whole town had been repainted

recently as well. Jason could see right through many of the buildings, especially the houses. They were furnished in the same minimalist principles in which they were constructed. The internal spaces were open, with racks instead of cupboards, hammocks instead of beds, and open sides instead of walls.

Once again, the town populace seemed normal, but Jason's instinct that something was off was growing, even if he couldn't figure out what was tripping alarms for him. Before taking the risk of expanding his supernatural senses, Jason enhanced his physical ones. He started by pushing his vision into the thermal range. The immediate thing that stood out was the fact that every building had a heat bloom radiating from the new paintwork. It was counteracting the design of the buildings, making it harder for the airflow to cool them down.

Jason next turned his enhanced vision on the people. Elves were very much like humans under thermal vision, barring essence-related exceptions. The townsfolk all had unstable temperatures, with points all over their bodies soaking heat as if they were feeding on it.

As he focused on the people, it finally clicked for Jason was his instincts were picking out as wrong. Every person moved in the exact same way, from body language to simple gestures to stride. They greeted one another the same way, walked down the street the same way and picked out items at the small market the same way. It was as if the whole town was the same person with many different bodies.

"Bloody Stepford elves," he muttered.

"Mr Asano?" Shade asked.

"I think we've got a pod people situation," Jason said.

"Will you use the technique Lord Pensinata taught you to expand your senses without alerting people to your presence?"

"No," Jason said. "I'm still too inconsistent with it. I'll discuss it with the team before making any moves that could potentially set them off."

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"We definitely need a closer look," Jason said, having just explained what he saw to the team back at the skimmer. "I have an idea in my head, though, and if I'm right, these people might be able to sense me. The outworlder's aide, Benella, was almost certainly wearing some kind of aura mask that was applied from the outside, instead of being created by her."

"Is that even possible?" Belinda asked.

“Not using the magic we know,” Clive said. “But the last few years have seen our world flooded with outside magic. It only makes sense that the messengers have some as well.”

“These elves may be using aura masks as well,” Jason said. “They wouldn’t even have to be as good as the one Benella has. They would only need to hold up long enough to lure unsuspecting people into an ambush. For victims to wander into town and get taken out or taken over by whatever has a hold of those elves.”

“Why would the messengers want a town that occasionally kidnaps people passing through?” Sophie asked.

“To keep everything quiet while they build up a secret army. It prevents anyone from going home with stories about some weird stuff they saw in the town, plus the populace itself is the goal, so a few extra recruits would be welcome.”

“If they’re doing this all over the southern region,” Humphrey said, “then a massive army has formed on the borders of Yaresh without the city noticing. And if enough of the southern region was affected that the city did finally notice, then that army is basically in place. If someone sets them off, they may turn overt and move on the city.”

“Someone like any of seven teams roaming around right now, looking for bears to poke,” Jason said. “Now that the city has noticed something is going on, we have to assume these hidden enemies will move sooner rather than later.”

“Which leaves the question of what we do now,” Humphrey said. “Looking closer may trigger them, but we need to know what we’re dealing with.”

“From what Jason described,” Clive said, “I would assume some manner of body control.”

“Like that spider in the Order of the Reaper’s astral space?” Sophie asked. “The one that turned all those monsters into an army of vampire monster slaves.”

“Oh, great,” Neil said. “I can’t wait to relive the horrifying pitched battle where we almost died after fighting for hours against a relentless horde.”

“It might be worth enquiring with Carlos,” Clive suggested. “Jason’s observations suggest a heat-consuming parasite that takes over the body. As Carlos specialises in things that take over the body, he might have some insight into what we’re dealing with.”