

Chapter 661

Triage

In the worm-breeding facility hidden under the town, Jason and his team gathered around as Belinda prepared to open the hidden door. Inside could be anything from an empty room to a wildly dangerous entity, so they were prepared to spring into action. When she finally triggered the door, a whole section of the slate brick wall shifted backwards and to the side, revealing a large opening.

The room inside was dark, with only the floating lights from the main chamber outside the door providing any illumination. That didn't stop Jason's eyes as he took stock of the room. The chamber was large, at least half the size of the facility's central space. Cages were set out in rows, overstuffed with squalid, miserable elves.

Motes of starlight lifted off from Jason's cloak and floated into the room, filling it with a soft, silvery light. Not only did this allow the rest of the team to see, but caused a stir amongst the prisoners. Few of their auras flickered with hope, however, and the sounds were mostly fearful whimpers.

The elves were dirty from living in their own filth; men, women and children with barely room to sit, their knees pulled up against their chests. Their auras shouted out their misery and suffering, but also that they were alive and not worm hosts. There were dozens of survivors, all crammed into cages.

Jason noted that if the cages were absent they would have been no less trapped, but conditions would have been far more humane. They would have had room to lay down for what sleep they could manage of the cold slate floor. They could have relieved themselves on one side of the room and stayed on the other, instead of being forced to go where they sat.

Jason felt his rage echo through the auras of his companions, but none of them let it leak out. They were not going to spook the prisoners that had been through more than enough already. Instead, they took joy in the fact that anyone survived, even if it was just a fragment of the town's population.

The team immediately went to work, Neil taking charge as the team healer. Humphrey and Neil used their superior strength to pull open cages. Sophie heavily pushed out her aura while the others withdrew theirs. Out of everyone in the team, Sophie's was the most reassuring and calming of the group.

- Aura (recovery).
 - Base cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Silver 4 (12%).

 - Effect (iron): Allies within the aura have increased resistance to curses, diseases, magic afflictions, poisons and unholy afflictions. Cleansing abilities used on allies within the aura have increased effect. Toxins are purged from the air within the aura.

 - Effect (bronze): Allies within the aura are continually cleansed of curses, diseases, magic afflictions, poisons and unholy afflictions. Mana and stamina recovery effects on allies have greater effect.

 - Effect (silver): When this ability cleanses an affliction from an ally they gain an instance of [Integrity].

 - [Integrity] (heal-over-time, mana-over-time, stamina-over-time, holy): Periodically recover a small amount of health, stamina and mana. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
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Despite the name, Sophie's aura didn't create a literal breeze. Instead, a refreshing spiritual wave passed over the caged prisoners, purging the toxins and diseases that had accumulated while they were all crammed in together. It was an incongruous power within Sophie's set, which primarily focused on speed and violence.

The aura was the most direct expression of her soul, but also shaped by the tools used to unlock her aura power. The essence and awakening stone involved were large factors, but even so, aura powers were considered to be the ones most impacted by the nature of the person awakening the power. For Sophie, most of her power set reflected the face she showed the world; swift and untouchable. Yet the power that should represent her the most was nurturing and protective.

An awkward expression crossed Sophie's face as she pushed her aura out, as if exposing a vulnerability. Belinda gave her a quick, reassuring hug from behind and Humphrey flashed her a beaming smile.

The others also employed the power of their auras, careful to avoid being imposing. Sophie's aura turned the diseases and toxins the elves suffered in their squalor into healing boons, and Belinda's aura enhanced those boons. Humphrey's aura gave them a much needed boost in strength and stamina. It seems they had been fed and watered, but just enough to keep most of them alive. The team found dead amongst there number as well, two elderly people and a young child.

The team's auras were far from enough to settle the prisoners after all they had been through. Even though the team was clearly not the messenger, the prisoners became agitated at the new intruders into their hell. Sophie's aura especially at least managed to prevent things from escalating; a panicked stampede could easily have led to deaths. Most of the people in the cages were normal townsfolk, without the constitution to endure such conditions for long.

The way the team had been built from the outset, back in Greenstone, meant that leadership did not always fall to Humphrey. The team took Neil's directions as he started the process of triage. His abilities, along with Sophie's aura, would help the initial management of the prisoners as they extracted them from the tight cages.

Neil specifically had Jason not help, despite the usefulness of his cleansing power. The nature of Jason's powers would do more harm than good when dealing with these people, already teetering on a ragged edge. What they very much did not need was an ominous man feeding on their sins.

Jason joined the others, helping to clear space in the main room. Jason, Rufus and Humphrey shifted tables and equipment under Clive's direction, as only he and Belinda could point out which things were dangerous to move. Belinda started by conjuring tarps that she tossed over the worms vats, now empty courtesy of Colin. They still contained sickly yellow fluid, streaked with red.

They made a space at the side of the room near the stairs, where Belinda conjured bunks and a treatment table for Neil to use. The team was not ready to lead the people up those stairs, for two main reasons. One was that many or most of the prisoners weren't in a state to climb them. The other was that the space upstairs was filled with dead, which was bad for both mentality and hygiene.

Despite the horrifying conditions, and the doubtless horrifying circumstances that brought them about, the prisoners were the lucky ones. The people above, who had already been implanted with worms, would never get any chance to recover.

Most of the people the prisoners knew were scattered around the town above, not just dead but violently torn apart while fighting the team. Jason and the others were not going to let them see that, and a gruesome stew of pity, anger and shame sat heavy in their bellies.

Aside from one special group that Neil had quickly assessed as being in no danger, they started moving patients to the treatment and recovery area the team had set up. Neil went to work in earnest as he directed the rest of the team to manage patients. First step was a cursory assessment by Neil, followed by a quick shower. A simple cistern shower

was about as much complexity as Belinda could conjure, but it was enough. Jason pulled out a barrel of crystal wash to fill it, making the shower cool but effective. Priority went to the next person on Neil's triage list for focused treatment, followed by anyone else who had been through his initial assessment. A few he determined too weak for the shower, so Belinda conjured a bath. While she managed the shower, Jason washed the more delicate people, his telekinetic aura more gentle. It didn't disturb those being washed, because they were the ones too far-gone to notice what was happening to them. As for the onlookers, it was hidden by the deep bath.

The recovery beds were bunked by necessity of space. Bottom bunks went to the most delicate patients, usually after Neil was done with them. Others had been deemed by Neil to not require treatment. A few were able to climb the bunk ladders, but most were carefully assisted onto the higher bunks by Humphrey and Rufus.

Clive had been directed by Neil to warm up the cold room with ritual magic. The adventurers were unconcerned by the cold chamber, but the prisoners were mostly normal people covered in filthy rags. Clive drew out a ritual in the air over the treatment area. The golden light of the ritual drawing turned to a warm glow as Clive chanted out the final element of the ritual.

"Is that the Healer's Hearth ritual?" Neil asked him, neither his hands nor eyes leaving the patient on his table.

"Yes," Clive confirmed. "Rather than radiate warmth, it will gently impart it directly into their bodies."

"Good job."

Once they had processed the bulk of the prisoners, Humphrey pulled Rufus and Jason aside to discuss their next move. Humphrey activated a privacy screen so the prisoners wouldn't overhear them.

"What are we going to do with these people?" Humphrey asked. "Those beds will do for now, but we can't leave them there. We can't take them upstairs, though. Should we leave them here until support arrived from the city?"

"I agree we can't take them up into the town," Rufus said. "If they see what's happened to their town, their friends and their families, they'll suffer all the more."

"Their reaction to that would be unpredictable," Jason concurred. "We need to keep them as calm as we can manage, under the circumstances. We got lucky with Sophie's aura power being so out of character for her."

"It's not out of character," Humphrey said. "It's who she is behind all the spikes and walls. She's always wanted to be good, but the world never gave her that chance."

He looked at Jason.

“You gave her that. I wish it had been me.”

“You shouldn’t,” Jason told him. “It sets up an uneven power dynamic. If you’d been the one to get her out of her old life, that would hang over you your whole lives.”

“He’s right,” Rufus said. “It creates an imbalance that I’ve seen poison relationships, but this isn’t time for that conversation; stay on task.”

Humphrey nodded.

“We need to open the floor in case there are more prisoners,” he said. “But we can’t do that while the prisoners we’ve already released are still here. It could be anything down there, and if something comes out, looking for a fight, we can’t guarantee their safety. We also have to deal with any complications from the prisoners we left in the other room.”

“Sending them to Yaresh with your team’s ridiculous number of portals and teleport powers has to be the way to go,” Rufus said.

“Portalling them is the obvious solution,” Jason agreed. “Assuming they can handle the trip.”

Humphrey queried Neil through voice chat after glancing to make sure the distraction wouldn’t be harmful.

“They should be able to endure it, once I’m done,” Neil said. “We can space out the most delicate ones and make sure I’m waiting on the other side.”

They left Neil to his work, resuming their private conversation.

“We need somewhere to portal them to,” Humphrey said. “Somewhere that we all know well enough to set as a destination.”

“That pretty much means the camping ground where the vehicles are parked,” Jason said.

“It’s not a bad choice,” Rufus said. “Open space, away from the heart of the city. We just need to have them make some room and set up a camp. The Church of the Healer are the people to approach for that.”

“That’ll work,” Jason said. “I’ve had to portal survivors out of a wiped-out town before, and that’s how we did it. Shade, you know what we need. Can you get Rufus’ mum to light a fire under the Church of the Healer?”

“I already have, Mr Asano.”

“Good man.”

Chapter 662

Unquestionably Authoritarian

Neil was checking the low-priority patients at his triage station. The more critical cases were already stashed on bunked recovery beds, with the remainder those who were comfortably self-mobile. These were the people that had endured the best and gotten the most from what Sophie and Humphrey's aura powers offered. In most cases, this was the handful of iron-rankers who had lived in the town. Not adventurers, but agriculture specialists with essences like earth and plant.

Sophie continued to assist Neil while the rest of the team returned to the cage room and the last of the prisoners there, where one cage still contained people. Unlike the townsfolk, who were all elves, this group of five had only two elves, plus a human, a celestine and a smoulder. They weren't just caged but unconscious and chained up, with magical seals on the shackles around their wrists, ankles and necks, chaining them to the cage. The cage itself was also the most heavy-duty one in the room.

The shackles were suppressing their auras, which had allowed them to go unnoticed until the team found them while shuffling out prisoners. They were stripped naked and filthy, but the athletic physique and attractive features of essence users shone through. They reminded Jason of when he had first met the infuriatingly handsome Rufus, who had looked good even after climbing out of a cannibal's cage.

"An adventuring team?" Humphrey posited.

"We need to get those shackles off to check their rank," Clive said. "Lindy, think you can pop them?"

"Hold on," Jason said and pushed his senses out. He forced his aura through the suppressive effects of the shackles to touch their souls directly.

"Bronze rank," he said, the others turning to look at him.

"What?" he asked.

"I might have to ask Lord Pensinata if I can join in that aura training," Rufus said.

Belinda entered the cage, the door having already been yanked off by Humphrey. She examined not the shackles first, but the people.

"Drugged, I think," she said. "These shackles seem to be preventing Sophie's aura from purging whatever they've been dosed with."

She then moved on to the bindings themselves.

"Usual suppression shackle situation," she said. "Forcibly remove them and it'll kill the wearer. Straightforward locks, though. Generic keys should handle it."

Belinda took out a set of magic keys, similar to ones Jason had occasionally crafted in the past. In addition to Belinda's being higher rank, the craftsmanship was far superior to Jason's crude efforts. She used the keys on the shackles, setting loose the probably-adventurers. Humphrey took blankets from his inventory to cover their nakedness as they started to stir. Sophie's aura was now affecting them, eliminating the toxins keeping them knocked out.

"Let's leave them to the friendly guy," Rufus said. "Waking up to a bunch of silver-rankers looming over them probably won't be helpful."

"Who's the friendly guy?" Humphrey asked, prompting the others to all turn and look at him. "It's me?"

"Yes, Humphrey it's you," Jason said. "You're nice and handsome in a way that makes others feel comforted. Which is way better than someone so handsome you just look at them and feel bad about yourself as a person."

"That is the single worst compliment I have ever gotten," Rufus said.

"And what makes you think I was talking about you, Mr Vain?"

"They're waking up," Humphrey said. "Go away."

Jason snorted as he turned to leave.

"Rude. So much for being the nice one."

The team had little more to do than wait, trying not to let their minds dwell on the dead, scattered in piles throughout the town. Humphrey got the story from the adventurers, whose tale was as expected. The group had arrived at the town and quickly sensed something off about the residents. Investigating, they were ambushed by the silver-rank messenger and subdued to await implantation.

The one piece of new information was that they were being prepared to host worms that were not the same as the others. As the team had yet to come across any worms outside the norm, they suspected them to be in a lower level of the basement workshop, through the hidden door in the floor.

The team took the adventurers for Neil to give a thorough examination. By the time he was done, Shade had notified Jason that the Church of the Healer had arrived at the Yareh campgrounds and started clearing space for a refugee camp. It was intended to accommodate not just the people rescued by the team but by all the scout teams sent to investigate the towns and villages of the southern region. Reports were already coming in to confirm that worm infestation was not an isolated incident.

Jason portalled through to assist with the setup. The camping grounds where foreign adventurers left their magical mobile homes had ample open space for a camp, once the vehicles were cleared out. The church started kicking people out to commandeer ground and Jason returned the land yacht to the cloud flask.

The church officials were initially not interested in using Jason's cloud palace, as Jason himself was an unknown quantity. Things changed when gold rank members of the church, Arabelle and Carlos, both stepped up. Jason then produced a cloud palace specifically designed for the intake of people into the camp being organised.

The church officials weren't ecstatic about the cloud palace after sensing Jason's aura permeating it. They were quickly forced to acknowledge, however, that the amenities of the palace were exceedingly useful. Also, while Jason's aura was unquestionably authoritarian, the benevolent protectiveness of it proved comforting to people in desperate need of feeling safe.

Jason and Clive started portalling people in, Humphrey not using his teleport. Mass teleportation was less convenient than portals, being better suited to strategic than utility purposes. As most of the people were normals, the two portals were more than sufficient.

Once the former prisoners were all transferred, the team returned to the workshop and the hidden floor opening. The exception was Neil, who stayed with his fellow Healer Church members. Not only had he started building a rapport with the prisoners, but he understood the amenities the cloud palace offered. Even so, a portal was left open so he could rejoin the team at need. The team were expecting more vats with some speciality worms, but if something nasty leapt out instead, they wanted their healer able to swiftly come to their aid.

In the workshop, the rest of the team stood around as Belinda went to work on safely opening the hidden floor panel.

"I'm curious about these special worms that those adventurers mentioned," Clive said.

"I'm just looking to crush them underfoot," Sophie said.

"Assuming they fit under your feet," Jason said. "For all you know, we've got a 'worms of Arrakis' situation going on down there."

"Is that a monster from your world?" Humphrey asked.

"Not my world. It's one you want to stay away from. The worms are bad enough, but what you really have to watch out for is an oily Sting."

"You mean a monster with an oily stinger?" Humphrey asked.

"No," Jason told him. "No, I do not."

The opening in the floor of the worm-breeding workshop turned out to be an elevating platform that descended a long shaft. It came to an end in an alcove set into the wall of another chamber, another plain room with the same slate brick. Glow stones were set into the ceiling, revealing the worm vats they had been expecting. The central vat was too large to fit on the elevating platform, the glass sides filled with murky yellow fluid. This made it hard to see what was inside. The other five vats were smaller, each into its own alcove around the walls.

The team quickly took stock of the chamber, spotting no immediate threats as they swept the area. They then turned their attention to the vats, starting with the large one in the middle.

"This vat is way too big for the platform," Clive observed. "My guess would be that this large worm is some kind of brood queen, brought down here when it was smaller. The vat would have either been built here or carried in dimensional storage."

They saw something shifting inside the liquid and it wasn't long before they saw what they were dealing with. It was a massive worm, forced by its size to coil up, even in a vat several metres across. The lack of room often left it pushing against the glass, which is how the team could see it through the ghastly yellow fluid.

The worm was quite unlike the ones they had dealt with so far, but size was far from the only difference. Where the others had been thin, this one was bloated into obesity, with corpse-pale skin. It also lacked the drill-bit head of its smaller brethren. Instead, it had a flat, fleshy head with a puckered sphincter. The team also spotted a few normal worms swimming in the goo, and they watched as one crawled out of the big worm's sphincter.

"Is that its face or its... other end?" Belinda asked.

"It seems to be some kind of brood queen," Clive assessed. "Not to mention the ugliest worm we've run into, although that fluid it's in doesn't help. It seems to be a more concentrated version of what we saw in the vats above."

He then turned to the other vats, which were smaller cylinders, also with glass sides. Jason found himself ominously thinking they were the perfect size to hold children, but did not voice the macabre thought. Inside each vat was a single worm, much closer to the normal worms than the bulbous queen. Only slightly larger than normal, they retained the drill-bit heads. The most notable difference was that each one was a bright colour: blue, green, red, yellow and green.

"I'm more concerned about these colourful worms than with the chunker in the middle," Jason said.

"Why?" Clive asked.

"My first concern was getting caught up in a gritty *Power Rangers* reboot, but then I remembered something far more terrible. One of the most famous and deadly monsters in my world is called a Dalek. A while back, a bunch of Dalek variants in bright colours like this turned up, and it was... not good. Like these worms, they were created by those caught up in hubris, willing to inflict terrible damage in the pursuit of their own mad ideas. Just took one look at those things and you immediately knew someone had undertaken a truly horrifying act of creation."

"What happened?" Humphrey asked.

"We managed to go on, and eventually, the people behind it were removed from power. But as these things so often go, someone else took their place. Someone who would go on to do worse things than we imagined possible."

Jason turned away, looking off at nothing with a haunted expression.

"Jason," Clive asked.

"Yes, Clive?"

"Are you talking a bunch of crap again?"

"Yes, Clive," Jason said gravely. "Yes, I am."

Clive shook his head and turned his attention back to the vats.

"These are obviously the specialty worms that the messenger was breeding for the adventurers," he said. "It seems that the messengers cultivate different worms for different purposes, and I wonder how expansive that program is. Do they just have these for implantation into higher-rank hosts, or is it more? Are there speciality infiltration worms that can do a better job of pretending to be people? Is Yaresh already facing an infestation?"

"A grim thought, but one for the Adventure Society to explore," Humphrey said. "I'm just glad we didn't face adventurers with enhanced worms inside them while we were cleaning out this place."

"How powerful do you think they would be?" Jason wondered. "According to Carlos, most conversion processes rank-up whatever they convert, but they're relatively weak for their rank. At least compared to essence users."

"Well-trained essence users," Rufus corrected. "These world-taker worms would tear through Greenstone like a sickle through grass."

"I have to imagine these specialty worms are stronger than the ones we encountered thus far," Humphrey said. "They were little more than corpses being thrown at us. Most likely, these would be closer to vampires, or the Builder's clockwork converted."

"Which would have made fighting through the worm hosts an uglier affair," Rufus said. "If we had to deal with anything that posed an individual threat, we could have been easily overrun."

"It would have been uglier for the adventurers in question," Belinda pointed out. added. "They aren't in great shape, but these worms look fully grown, or close to it. It might not have been long before implantation."

"Maybe," Clive said. "We can't be sure how large they are fully grown."

"Carlos said that the hosts they occupy are for a secondary incubation cycle," Jason said. "It wasn't relevant to the fight, so I didn't bring it up, but they are inside people trying to turn into something else. He didn't know what, though. Anywhere that finds out tends to be eradicated."

"Perhaps something to do with how the worms self-propagate," Clive guessed. "Something that will allow them to spread without needing breeding centres like this one."

"Or maybe they just turn into fatties, like this one," Belinda said, tapping on the glass of the tank. She placed her palm against the glass. "It's warm. Feels gross."

"We know that the worms can consume heat," Clive said, also shifting his gaze to the central vat. "It might be part of the reproductive cycle."

"That would make sense," Jason said. "Did you notice how all the buildings had been magicked-up to radiate heat? I bet that's part of the incubation cycle."

"I wonder if the aspects of intelligence we saw all came from the larger worm," Clive said. "Colin has a decentralised hive mind, but I suspect the world-taker worms operate differently. My guess would be that any higher-order mental capacity comes from this queen worm, and she directs the worms like a general."

"But we didn't see a lot of intelligence from the worms," Belinda pointed out. "They made one strategic move the whole time, and it was a very simple one."

"Maybe it needs these," Rufus suggested, tapping one of the smaller vats. "Maybe they serve as officers under the general."

"Relay nodes, able to mediate between mindless worms and the higher mind of the queen," Clive said. "That would make sense. But this is all speculation. Whether the queen is truly sapient or just possesses some level of animal cunning I can only guess. With study—"

"No study," Sophie said. "We kill every one of these things we can find."

Chapter 663

Voice of the Will

Sophie was taking a firm stance against studying the worms rather than eradicating them on site.

“Do you want some lunatic researcher trying to do what the messengers did and use them as a weapon?”

“It’s a good point,” Belinda agreed. “Imagine what Evil Clive could do if he got his hands on these things.”

“Evil Clive?” Clive asked.

“Lindy, I thought you *were* Evil Clive,” Jason said.

“Oh, that’s sweet of you,” Belinda happily replied, touching his shoulder briefly.

“Sophie’s right,” Humphrey said. “All it takes is some Duke who is long on ambition and short on both morals and sense. They set up their own breeding program, somewhere no one finds it. It gets out of control, the worms get loose and by the time anyone realises, it’s too late. The world-taker worms have too much momentum and live up to the name. Even if they can be stopped, the price in lives is high. I’m not saying that our actions alone will be enough to avoid that outcome, but I’m not willing to do anything to make it any more likely.”

“Do you practise portentous monologues in the mirror for when these situations come up?” Jason asked. “Because seriously, that was on point. I’ve tried practising sinister lines that I can use later, but I had to knock it off because I’m waaay too melodramatic. It should be simple and concise, like ‘I’m Batman,’ but I always end up veering into ‘I am the terror that flaps in the night’ territory. So now I just wing it so I don’t get carried away.”

“You still get carried away,” Belinda said.

“I do?”

“A bit.”

“A bit nothing,” Clive said. “Do you want me to play the speech you gave that messenger?”

“Play it?”

Clive pointed to the mana crystals floating over his head from his Crystallise Mana ability.

Ability: [Crystallise Mana] (Magic)

➤ Conjunction (restoration).

- Base cost: Low.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Silver 4 (04%).

 - Effect (iron): Create a crystal that floats around you, accelerating mana recovery. Crystal is impervious to damage, but vulnerable to dispel effects. If dispelled, crystals grant an immediate burst of mana. You can have a single mana crystal at a time.

 - Effect (bronze): Crystals can intercept magical projectiles, negating their effect. For a period after negating a projectile, a crystal becomes inactive, unable to produce mana or intercept further projectiles. Maximum crystal count is increased to three, with each active crystal cumulatively increasing mana recovery.

 - Effect (silver): Each crystal can absorb one projectile while negating its effect. Crystal with an absorbed projectile will consume the projectile's energy to increase mana production. Absorbed projectiles can be redirected at enemies, with the effects diminished based on the amount of projectile energy converted into mana. Maximum crystal count is increased to five.
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Humphrey had the same, with he and Neil both sharing the very common ability with Clive. But where five crystals were floating over Humphrey's head, Clive had a sixth. When he pointed this out, they all recognised it as a recording crystal.

"Do you want me to show the others?" Clive asked.

"It wasn't that bad," Jason insisted.

"Why don't we let the others see it, then?"

"Because it's embarrassing, and they know how dramatic I can get. And we need to deal with these worms, which leads to an important question: Do I feed Colin the colourful ones first or the big one?"

"There's a lot of Colin to go around," Belinda said. "Why not both?"

Jason shrugged and started moving from vat to vat. They each had a sealed opening on the metal top that Jason presumed was for extracting worms and feeding nutrients. He used it for dumping in leeches, most of which went into the central vat. The smells that came out from the vats as he opened the seals were rancid.

"Ooh, that's rough," Jason said. Then he took a step back as the obese worm in the central vat banged against the inside of the glass.

"Are we okay with it doing that?" Clive asked. "Things breaking containment in magical laboratories have historically had less-than-ideal results."

"I'm open to suggestions," Humphrey said.

"Is running away on the table?" Belinda asked. "I did not like the smell coming out of those tanks. Couldn't we just go back up the entry shaft and drop stuff down to kill the worms?"

"I'm not running away from what amounts to a giant sausage," Sophie said. "A sausage that is being enthusiastically devoured, no less."

As Sophie said, the leeches in the vat were aggressively chewing into the worm. Red blood was staining the sickly yellow fluid, making the contents of the vat murkier with each passing moment. Gaping wounds were easy to spot as the worm slammed itself against the glass of the vat, sometimes squashing leeches in the process. The life force Colin was consuming allowed him to reproduce faster than he was losing leeches.

"There's a lot of life force in that worm," Jason observed. "I don't think I've ever felt Colin quite so enthused. You show them who's the best apocalypse beast, Colin! Also, please don't eat any planets."

The others all turned to look at him.

"What?" Jason asked. "I said *don't* eat any planets."

"Are we all sure we aren't the villains here?" Belinda asked. "Am I Evil Clive?"

The worm slammed its torn and bleeding body against the vat again, causing spiderweb cracks to appear.

"That's not good," Jason said as the cracks rapidly spread. The team all floated off the floor and away from the cracking portion of the vat.

Any well-trained silver ranker could slowly move themselves around, just without the speed, power and control of Jason or a messenger. They also had to maintain careful concentration or they would drop.

The vat broke, spilling yellow liquid onto the floor. It was thick, almost slime, and heavily streaked with red. The worm only half emerged, getting caught on the broken glass and cutting itself open. A foul smell emerged the moment the vat broke, but when the worm suffered deep lacerations, it became excruciatingly pungent. The only stench any of them had encountered that was worse was rainbow smoke. They all shut off their sense of smell as soon as the wall of stench struck them.

"Okay, Lindy," Sophie choked out. "I was wrong. We should have run away."

"I have no expertise in magical research, or in eating worms," Rufus said. "I'll leave this to Jason and Clive."

With that, he floated himself up through the elevating platform shaft in the ceiling, Sophie, Belinda and Humphrey following close behind. Jason looked at Clive, whose

expression was torn. There might be something to learn if he stayed, or it might just be some leeches eating some worms which he could happily imagine in the fresh air.

“I think whatever’s in those vats is making my eyes sting,” Clive said, making his decision. “Tell me if anything interesting happens.”

Jason shook his head with a chuckle as Clive made good his escape. The leeches in the side vats had finished their meals and he let them out, but didn’t absorb them immediately.

“If you think I’m letting you inside me while you’re covered in gunk,” he said, holding up a leech with his thumb and forefinger, “you’ve got another thing coming.”

With the elevating platform still downstairs, the shaft was open and Jason was able to extend his aura through it. He used it to grab the barrel of crystal wash, leftover from cleaning off the prisoners, and float it down the shaft. A little of the wash went a long way, so it was still mostly full. While Jason was moving the barrel, Colin finished off the large worm.

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- Familiar [Colin] has consumed [World-Taker Worm Matriarch].
 - [Colin] can use the devoured power of the [World-Taker Worm Matriarch] to awaken as a Voice of the Will. This will require extended hibernation in the astral kingdom to which it is connected. Only passive, unmanifested abilities will be available during this time, and manifestation will be impossible
 - Familiar [Colin] must fully return to the Astral Kingdom to initiate awakening.
-

“Voice of the Will? I keep adding to the list of things I need to ask the messengers. I’ll have to leave one alive. Eventually. If I can find one that isn’t in the middle of committing war crimes. Still, far be it from me to look a power upgrade in the mouth. Come and get cleaned up buddy.”

Jason started floating individual leeches into the air with his aura until they surrounded him like a swarm of bees.

“Hey, I think we might have just found a great new tactic, Colin. This is going to scare the crap out of people.”

While holding the leeches in the air, Jason used his aura to start lifting droplets of crystal wash from the barrel to clean them.

“You know what? This is pretty good aura manipulation practise. You’re so useful, Colin. Good boy.”

Jason emerged from the shaft into the workshop. Belinda and Clive were exploring the messenger's work while Sophie, Humphrey and Rufus stood around. The underground workshop was hardly pleasant, but it was a better place to wait for the Adventure Society than the town full of corpses. Just as Jason reached the top of the shaft, Neil appeared through the portal Jason had left open.

"Lindy," he said. "We could use some logistical aid. The Adventure Society has been expanding the refugee camp in the camping grounds with people evacuated from other towns and villages. The cloud palace is being used for assessment and treatment, but we could use some housing."

Belinda nodded and followed Neil back through the portal. Neil had grabbed Belinda for her ability to conjure simple items. That ranged from tools like a sword, a pickaxe or a wall to soft items like curtains or bedding. With Belinda being silver rank, she could conjure a vast number of simple objects that would last for a considerable time. Knocking out what amounted to a series of pre-fab dormitories would be well within her abilities, freeing up time and resources that local authorities could expend on longer-term solutions.

At the same time, more adventuring teams were heading for towns like the one Jason's team had purged. Following close behind were support teams from the Adventure Society, Magic Society, various churches and the Yaresh civic authorities. Reports had come in quickly, from Carlos and others connected to alternate scout teams. Once the magnitude of what was going on had been revealed, resources and personnel were deployed in far greater numbers than the original scout teams. More towns needed to be checked, some teams required backup and everywhere would require management in the aftermath.

The other major concern was what the messengers would do now that what was clearly meant to be an invasion force had been discovered.

"What will the messengers do, now that their plans have been revealed?" Humphrey mused.

"I don't know," Rufus said. "Given the scale of this operation, though, they had to have known that exposure was inevitable. The question is what they planned when that happened. This isn't anything the Adventure Society won't have considered, though. They'll be reinforcing the operation sites for the clean-up in case the whole idea was to bait out teams that could be taken down in isolation by messenger strike groups."

"But doesn't that draw a lot of forces out of the city?" Jason asked. "What if that's the whole point of all this?"

“It’s not like the city will be emptied out,” Rufus said. “I guarantee you that forces in less critical operations are being recalled as we speak. Plus, the city’s defensive infrastructure is a massive impediment to even a concentrated messenger assault.”

“Does that make anyone else feel like messenger saboteurs are bringing down that infrastructure as we speak?” Jason asked.

“Now that you say it, yeah,” Sophie said. “Good job, Rufus.”

Rufus gave Jason a flat look.

“Where did you even learn all this about city infrastructure and defence protocols and the like?” Jason asked.

“My family runs a... get bent, Jason.”

The others all laughed as Jason headed for the stairs. As the one with the strongest senses, he would be the one to first notice the reinforcements. As the workshop was impeding his perception, he needed to go outside.

“I could have used a drink, too,” he muttered.

Chapter 644

He Himself Does Not Become a Monster

Jason didn't linger downstairs with the others for long. He had no interest in facing the town filled with dead, but didn't want his aura restricted by the underground facility. His aura could somewhat escape the workshop's inhibition magic with the doors open, but it still greatly impeded his senses. He went up the stairs, through the tunnel into the dirt basement, and then up the ladder to the trapdoor.

This returned him to the building that served as the secret entrance to the underground facility. It was one of the few buildings in the town that did not have open-sided walls, and was used as a storage shed. Based on the layer of grime coating empty barrels and broken farming tools, it was one that saw little use.

Jason went outside, once more taking in the stomach-churning scene of bodies littered around the town. Although he knew they had been worm-hosts, dead before the team even arrived, it still rattled Jason to look at. It was not the first time he had seen the dead piled high – tragically far from it. Even so, it was not something he was fully used to and he desperately hoped he never would be.

He would rather have stayed downstairs. He could join the others in distracting themselves from the dark reality with light banter, pushing the dark thoughts away until the job was done. There would be ample time to sit with the horror in the sleepless nights Rufus had warned Jason about, what felt like a million years ago. Rufus had warned Jason that there would be days like these as an adventurer.

Jason thought back to that night, his very first in his new world. He didn't know that person any more, who would go through so much to become Jason as he was now. Idly wondering about the choices he made, he thought about how things could have been different. He'd made a lot of mistakes and seen a lot of death, some of which was on his head.

But the big things had gone well enough. Better than could be expected in most cases. Earth wasn't in precipitous danger. The days of proto-spaces threatening to spew forth dangerous monster waves were over. The monsters would manifest directly now, and mostly far weaker. They would not be contained in the proto-spaces, but it was good enough.

Pallimustus had weathered the monster surge and the Builder invasion. Jason had even managed to push the Builder into leaving at least a little early. He would never know

how many lives even a few weeks without fighting had saved, and while that did not make up for the dead scattered before him now, it was at least some consolation to his soul.

Jason and his friends had to live with cutting down the people of the town, and while they were already corpses, that wasn't how it felt. Even accepting that, they were desecrating the remains of innocent strangers, people they had not been able to protect. This was sadly not new for Jason and Rufus, but the others would need to come to terms with that.

Jason knew that his team would endure, however. He'd done it. Not well, but he'd done it. He hoped he could help them do it a little better. It was the people of the town he felt bad for. The few dozen that had survived were not going to feel like they had. Their world had just been destroyed. Almost everyone that each of them knew was lying in front of Jason, hacked to pieces, burned to ashes or torn apart.

These were small town people and their town was over. How could they ever come back to this nightmare place after what happened? Even if they did, there were not enough of them left to revive it. It was a ghost town, now, and the memories would haunt them. The blood and the bodies could be cleared away, but their presence would linger. The town was done.

A grim future awaited the survivors. Many of them may never have even left the town before, and now their lives would change forever. Compared to them, Jason and his team had places to go and homes to return to. Even when they suffered losses, they had the power to minimise them and seize a path forward. The surviving townsfolk were the pawns of fate, stuck in a world of magic they didn't have and monsters they couldn't fight. Whatever their future would be, it was not theirs to choose.

For all that Jason had faced hard times since arriving in this world, he at least had made his own choices along the way. He had the agency to seize his own destiny, even with forces beyond comprehension arrayed against him. Determination and far more luck than he had any right to expect had carried him along. The survivors of the town had no such agency. Their lives were not theirs to choose and would never be the same.

This was the distillation of something Rufus warned Jason of, on that first night, and why Jason dwelled on it now. That grim days were ahead, but if he ceded control to others, he wouldn't have any choices at all. He would be left only able to wait and see what happened to him, with no power to change it. That was how Rufus convinced Jason to be an adventurer.

Standing, looking out at the dead, Jason started to think about how many lives and deaths had passed through his hands. He remembered the waterfall village where, for the

very first time, he had made the choice to stand between innocent people and the violence that was coming for them. Doing it again in the very same village, he had earned his first and largest scar.

As his powers grew, so did the challenges. Protecting Greenstone from the Builder. Broken Hill, Makassar. The entire Earth threatening to tear apart from dimensional forces. The dangers escalated more quickly than his powers, and he'd had to become something further and further from human to meet them. More than once it had cost him his life. But at least he came back, when so many others did not. This town that he didn't even know the name of was just the latest to host the mounds of dead that he had failed to save.

There was nothing Jason could have done for the people in front of him, but what about the dead that lay behind him? The people who died at Broken Hill? Makassar? His brother, his lover and his friend? How did the ones he saved balance against the ones he failed to? The loss of each had galvanised Jason, prompting spikes in his strength that he used down the line. Were those losses worth the things Jason had accomplished? Were all those people sacrifices or just helpless victims?"

"It's a bleak equation," he pondered.

Shade emerged from Jason's shadow to stand beside him.

"You can count the dead, Mr Asano," Shade said, guessing Jason's mind. "But it accomplishes nothing. All you can do is move forward, doing the best you can with what you have. I've heard you say that many times, and of all your..."

Shade pause was rich with disapproval.

"...*catchphrases*, it is the one I prefer. The one that has wisdom."

"You think I'm wise?"

"No, Mr Asano. No. Dear goodness, no. Which is why you should always remember those sparkling moments when you manage to achieve it."

Jason let out a soft chuckle, not enough to wipe the sadness from his expression.

"Are you alright. Mr Asano?"

"You know what, Shade?" Jason asked, looking out over the dead. "To my own surprise, I actually might be. I don't ever want to get used to scenes like this, but I'm not going to let them break me, either; I'm going to use them. Let them remind me of why I have to keep pushing, of why I have to get stronger. Of who and what I'm going to face, and the lengths they are willing to go."

He bowed his head.

"I've got this voice inside me, telling me that if I become worse than the things I fight, they'll be too scared to do what happened in this town. I've been so angry for so long now

that I don't even remember when I started listening to that voice. But it's wrong. It never works like that, does it?"

"No, Mr Asano. It does not."

"I've been heading down a certain road for a while now, but it doesn't lead anywhere I want to go. It's time to take a different direction. Maybe find some of that naïveté that I discarded along the way."

"Your treatment of that messenger—"

"That was the line. That's how far I can go without losing myself, I let myself go right up against it with her. But I think that's okay. I've been telling myself that's not where the line is for a long time. That I'm a good person who is only doing these things because I have to, and when the world stops dumping on me I'll stop. But the world never stops dumping, does it?"

"No, Mr Asano."

"It's time to accept that my line is where it is. To stop deluding myself over who I am and moping over how bad things are. The people of this town, living and dead, have gotten it far worse than me, and I owe it to them to stop this from happening somewhere else. I have so much power. So many good people around me. So many things to be thankful for."

"If what you did to the messenger was the line, Mr Asano, does that mean you'll be stepping back from it?"

Jason nodded.

"Once I accept where my line genuinely is, instead of telling myself where it should be, I feel like it will be easier to avoid pushing up against it. Not unless I need to."

"Do you regret breaking her will before you killed her?"

"I don't know. No, I think. I probably should. It was anger. But I'm willing to go that far, after what she did. She had a rough time, but I was just talking up my power. A bit. The essence ability I used on her is a vulture, picking the bones clean; it can't damage the soul. It might be a little rough-and-tumble on a gestalt entity like a messenger, but she'll find her way to your dad fully intact. It's not like when you stopped me from using that guy's star seed to peel the body off his soul. That would have been over the line."

"Yes, Mr Asano. That would be more than I was willing to tolerate."

"I'm not done giving the messengers a hard time, though. They have a lot of things that I need. Advanced astral magic. Understanding of what an astral king is. Knowledge of whatever Emir is looking for."

"You may need to leave some of them alive for that."

“True. But they also have a power inside them that I can use. If I have to crack them open like eggs to get it, then so be it. They came to this world, looking for trouble. After seeing how far they’ll go to find it, I’ll happily oblige them.”

“Will you dedicate yourself to pursuing them, then?”

“I don’t need to. They came here in numbers, and they came to stay. The conditions they used to get here ended with monster surge, so while I’m sure they have the means to leave, I doubt they can do so easily or en masse. Even just living the adventurer life, I’m going to be hunting them for a good, long time.”

“And if they hunt you back?”

Jason’s grin belonged on a comic book cover, and not on the face of the hero.

Chapter 665

An Egg Starting to Hatch

Standing in the town filled with fallen elves and annihilated parasite worms, Jason looked off to the distance. Something had pinged his aura senses, somewhere out in the rainforest, and he withdrew his magical perception. It was a gold rank adventurer, leaving Jason unsure if he had been noticed in turn, but the person was making a beeline for the town.

“Time to make myself scarce,” he said.

Downstairs, meanwhile, Jason’s team were having a discussion.

“Is he even going to keep up the hidden identity?” Clive asked. “They don’t care here about what happened in Rimaros.”

“He kicked the Builder off the planet,” Sophie said. “I think they might care that the guy who did that is running around.”

“Even so,” Clive said, “the locals have much more immediate concerns. The messengers and these worms are problems now, while the Builder invasion is history.”

“Extremely recent history,” Rufus said. “There are still pockets of Builder cultists scattered around the world. Even here, you know that.”

“We need to finish briefing Korinne’s team,” Humphrey said. “They need to know the complexity of the situation when we go after the messengers.”

“We don’t even know if we’ll still be sent after them,” Clive pointed out. “These worms are going to shake up whatever plans the Adventure Society had. I don’t think Jason will have the luxury of hugging the shadows for much longer. And it’s not like he’s doing a great job at playing nondescript cook. He’s terrible at playing any roles other than lunatic or monster.”

The others nodded their agreement.

“Lindy always complained about me when I was on the job,” Sophie said. “I used to play socialite a lot when we were preparing to rob a place, and she always said I wasn’t embodying the role enough. But at least I wasn’t joining cage fight tournaments.”

“You weren’t?” Humphrey asked.

“Well, once, and she didn’t let me hear the end of it. The job did not go well.”

“Jason isn’t on some infiltration mission,” Rufus said. “It’s not about him maintaining some rigid identity. Most adventurers have secrets; Jason himself is ours. When people see a cook who is obviously more than he appears, it’s not anything to worry about. They’ll assume he’s someone like the princess hiding out in Korinne’s team; some spoiled

aristocrat looking to avoid the trouble that comes with their name. Jason just needs to avoid inspiring too many powerful people into looking closer. If adventurers went looking into every person with obvious secrets, they'd never have time to do any actual adventuring."

"Exactly," Jason said, coming down the stairs. "It's okay to be shady, so long as we don't step on the toes of anyone who can make trouble for us. Where I come from, we call it plausible deniability."

"And when the people we rescued are debriefed?" Clive asked. "What happens when they mention the guy with the starlight cloak that doesn't match any member of our team? It's not a huge leap to someone looking up our team members, present and former."

"Clive," Rufus said. "You were the one who pointed out how busy things will be for the locals. I doubt they will have the time to go looking into Jason with everything going on. Even if they do, Jason's record has been sealed. The whole thing now, not just sections, the way it was in the past. And the classification of those restrictions is high enough that someone has to really want it before the Adventure Society will give them anything."

"Plus, the locals don't know us," Humphrey said. "Any power the prisoners describe will be passed off as belonging to one of us."

"Why are you so keen on me giving up the identity anyway?" Jason asked Clive.

"I just think it would be better if you were back with the team properly."

"I can't argue with that," Jason agreed.

"Also," Clive said, "Colin might be useful to clean up worms in other places. I'm guessing that worm eradication will be a big priority. If you weren't hiding, you could use him more."

"Colin can't replicate enough to be effective on that scale," Jason said. "At best, he can double his standard mass, which he can only maintain while actively feeding anyway. Besides, he's sleeping off Christmas dinner."

"What does that mean?" Sophie asked.

"You never been in a turkey coma?" Jason asked.

"What's turkey?" Clive asked.

Jason looked back up the stairs.

"We can talk about this later," he said. "You're about to get visitors, so it's time for my portal and I to scarper."

Jason and Clive still had active portals that they had funnelled the prisoners through, along with Belinda and Neil. Jason went through his portal and it vanished behind him.

Jason had returned to Yaresh previously, just long enough to reconfigure his cloud construct from land-yacht to palace. He had greater control over the specifics of the design than when he first obtained the cloud flask, and was able to lay it out like a hospital. The palace took the appearance of a hospital as well, with a white, square exterior arranged into three connected wings. The interiors were likewise white, with square tile patterns.

The design was to best facilitate the needs of the camp, being set up to screen, treat and manage the evacuees from worm-infested towns and villages. The ability of the cloud palace to utilise different amenities, as well as clean anything inside it, would be a boon for medical work.

The palace was situated at one end of the space being cleared for the camp, with the other end being near Emir's cloud palace by the wall. Two front-facing wings marked the border of what would become the camp, with one rear wing away from the camp. The rear and one of the front wings each had three storeys, with the remaining front wing having a fourth.

The rear wing contained living space for Jason and his companions. This included Melody, who had remained under Jason's watchful eye while her new secure room was formed. The private wing for Jason and his friends was the only part of the palace that continued to serve as Jason's spirit domain, where his influence was sufficient to impinge upon the natural laws within it.

The front wings Jason withdrew his full influence from, having it operate more like a normal cloud construct. This was critical for allowing in the priests from the Church of the Healer, as they would be cut off from their god's influence in the spirit domain.

This was something that Arabelle and Neil had gotten used to, but they did not have powers directly bestowed through divine essences or awakening stones. They also knew Jason. Explaining why their god was not welcome to a group of clergy while they were busy setting up an evacuee camp was not an efficient use of time. And if they had divinely-granted powers on top, it would be even worse.

Jason knew that leaving the area of a god's influence did not prevent essence abilities with divine origins from working. He had seen that in astral spaces where the influence of gods did not reach. If anything, it might mean that it was harder for the gods to revoke those powers, although Jason couldn't be sure. Another thing he was uncertain about was the degree to which he could interfere with those powers should they be used in an area over which he had dominion. He suspected he could have an influence, but he also suspected that running tests was a bad idea.

The front wings still retained Jason's aura, but he tamped it down to the minimum. Carlos, Arabelle and Neil, all members of the church of the Healer, were already at work and gave him suggestions for facilities he should include. One wing was designed for intake, with treatment rooms and spaces to organise people that were divided by what looked suspiciously like cattle-yard railings. There were also secure screening rooms for checking people for worms, and cells to hold any that did.

The other front wing was designed around secondary services, such as cafeterias and shower rooms that people in the camp would need to visit once or more per day, for as long as the camp was set up. This was the wing with the extra storey, which contained administrative spaces. This was so the people running the camp had a place to retreat to and organise things out from whatever chaos the camp happened to be in.

The palace had only so much space within, however, especially as Jason's palace was smaller than Emir's. Part of that was the rank difference, with his palace being silver-rank currently, compared to Emir's being gold. He suspected that the unique nature of his palace had an effect as well. Given the additional energies being fed into the cloud flask from Jason's soul realm, he guessed that more of the flask's resources were required to contain it.

Because of the size limitation, Jason had abandoned dormitory space entirely to focus on facilities that would benefit from the amenities his cloud palace could offer. Places for the evacuees to live and sleep were being arranged by the churches, civic authorities and the Adventure Society, all of whom had become involved in organising the camp. The Magic Society was also present, but they were in no danger of being put in charge. No one believed that they were interested in the welfare of the evacuees over studying any worms they brought with them.

Jason had no interest in their jostling over influence and had left them to it, returning to the team. Now that he was back, he went to check the results. He had to admit that whoever had ended up in charge worked fast, as the camp had sprawled out in the short time he was away. The area around the palace had been cleared of other vehicles to make room to set up the expansive evacuee camp. That space was already filled with a mix of tents and prefabricated buildings, conjured by Belinda and others with similar powers. The conjured items mostly had a matte plastic look to them, in various colours, with Jason recognising the dark green that belonged to Belinda.

Activity was hectic both inside the palace and out in the camp. People were rushing around, Jason picking up auras that ranged from normal through to gold. He identified the familiar ones, including Amos Pensinata, and Taika who was meditating in the private

section of the palace. Jason was startled to realise that Taika's aura was so close to breaking through to silver that it was like an egg starting to hatch. Jason quietly withdrew his aura and left him to it.

With people hurrying everywhere, it was easy for Jason to tweak his aura such that others overlooked him as he roamed around. This was especially true within the cloud palace, where he could blend into the surrounding aura. He sent Shade's bodies out as well, taking stock of the camp. If anyone was trying to exploit the chaos to work against the camp, the city or Jason, he wanted as much warning as he could get.

After roaming the camp, Jason made his way up to the administrative area on the fourth storey, to a private office he had set aside for his own use. The room was empty and he moved to the front wall, which was a single giant window, overlooking the camp. Shade emerged and floated next to him.

"How are the organisers making use of the palace amenities?" Jason asked.

"Mrs Remore has been appointed facility liaison, to help make the most of the resources at hand. I have been assisting her, naturally, and she has been making sure the palace is being used well. Some assets are unavailable outside of the spirit domain, of course, such as your avatars."

"I don't think a bunch of cycloptic shadow monsters would help the situation, even if they are practical. I'm pretty sure they would just start a panic."

"I concur, Mr Asano."

"Is there anything that would benefit from my personal intervention? In the kitchens, maybe?"

"The procurement, preparation and distribution of food is being handled by the city authorities. They have the cafeterias well in hand and their own personnel in charge. Attempting to take over management would disrupt more than help."

"I don't have to manage things; I could be an extra pair of hands."

"That would require taking orders, Mr Asano."

"I can take orders."

Instead of responding, Shade turned his head toward Jason.

"Yeah, alright," Jason grudgingly conceded. "Just keep scouting the camp outside the palace and let me know if anything crops up. Actually, position some bodies around the city as well, and maybe a few to patrol outside the city walls."

"You are concerned that the messengers will attack?"

"Rufus doesn't think so, but I can't shake the idea."

"Why not?"

"Because that's what I'd do."

"What would you do about the city defence infrastructure?"

"Not sure. I'm guessing readiness levels would make sabotage unreliable. Maybe set up something inside the city to draw defenders from the walls, then hammer one point hard. I'm no strategic genius, so maybe I'm all wrong. It's not like my suspicions are specific enough that I can check them out."

"Mrs Remore is working with the camp leader to help make the most of the palace's facilities," Shade said. "Shall I mention to her that if something does happen, she should be ready to evacuate the palace so it can be reconfigured?"

"That's a good idea, Shade. It's probably nothing. I hope it's nothing, and not just because I don't want to see the city attacked. I don't want to find out that I think like a messenger."

"I suspect, Mr Asano, that they would be more alarmed to discover they think like you."

"Was that a compliment or an insult?"

"Yes, Mr Asano. It was."