

Chapter 222

I'm Very Big on Cowardice

As Emir's team came closer to opening the portal, the decision was made to move the team to the site under the lake. Jason's ongoing availability would be useful for the final push to open the portal and the team needed to be ready to go. They weren't exactly sure when Emir's researchers would finally succeed and the team had to be packed and waiting.

Even if they navigated the dangers and returned safely, it would be months before they saw family and friends again. There was a large barbecue party in the park district the day before, friends and family making big farewells before the more private ones that would take place the following morning.

Having been the organiser, Jason played smiling host, shaking hands and chatting with the friends he had made over the better part of the last year. Danielle Geller told him to look after her son, but also himself. Neil's mother harangued him about not getting her boy into any trouble.

The event started before lunch, continued through the afternoon and on into the evening as the barbecues were fired up again for dinner. Over the course of the day, Jason would discreetly slip away, though, watching from afar or wandering through the pretty gardens of the park district alone. Jason had made close, amazing friends, but as he watched them with their families, he was reminded that he hadn't known any of them longer than a year.

Jason's powerful and controlled aura allowed to hide his inner turmoil effectively from most of the people present. A silver ranker would have to rudely explore his aura, and the gold rankers followed decorum and had their auras non-intrusively alert for danger without probing the people around them. This was true for all but Arabelle. Her sensitive and powerful aura senses shamelessly, if subtly, examined Jason's condition. To her surprise, Jason sensed her intrusion and gave her a flat look.

During one of Jason's little disappearances, she sent Gary after him, rather than follow herself. The big leonid was also one of the few with no family present, with even the wanderlustful Emir having his granddaughter. Sophie and Belinda were the others, the pair having considered each other their only real family for years.

The park district was a combination of open, grassy spaces and feature gardens. Gary found Jason sitting alone in a small gazebo in a garden that artfully showed off the more attractive plant life of the delta. It was rather like a small version of the Geller Estate.

“It feels like we haven’t seen so much of each other in a while,” Gary said, sitting down next to Jason. “Even when I’m living in your houseboat.”

Rufus’ reaction to Farrah’s death had been loud and immediate. Gary’s mourning of their friend had been slower, affecting more of a lasting change. He was more sober and withdrawn, and there was still uncertainty about his team, now just him and Rufus. Farrah had been the glue holding their trio so neatly together and, in her absence, they hadn’t really done any adventuring as a pair. Rufus had worked out his anger through a series of solitary monster hunts, while Gary threw himself into craftsmanship.

Gary was older than Rufus and Farrah, like Jory having spent much of his time at iron rank on his profession as a weaponsmith. In the wake of Farrah’s death he had retreated back into his profession, using the hammering of steel and the heat of the forge to still the thoughts in his head. It was a meditative process as he produced one weapon after another.

Rufus had split his time between the academy annex project with the Geller family and the investigation into the Builder cult. Gary had, in turn, spent most of the last few months working with the Magic Society on the Builder cult’s construct creatures, looking for effective ways to combat what seemed to be the cult’s main fighting force.

Gary had made a weapon for Jason that would be effective against construct enemies. His subsequent work didn’t share the same care and time that went into Jason’s sword, instead focusing on volume. Greenstone’s weapons market had become flush with anti-construct weapons that were inexpensive and reliable.

Slowly the pair had started to come back together. Rufus had reached out to Gary to help with the construction of his training complex. It was not high-skill work and it could have been any decent smith, but Gary had taken to the task with enthusiasm.

More recently, with Jason’s team about to enter the astral space, they had come together to help the team prepare. Rufus took them through everything they knew about the cult, while Gary took them through everything they knew about the cult’s weapons. Any advantage they could get over the cult or their construct monsters could be the difference between life and death. Gary had also helped the team prepare equipment for bronze rank. Belinda had received the most help, ending up with a number of Gary’s personal creations at very friendly prices.

Jason and Gary sat together amiably in the gazebo.

“Nothing seems to fit together quite right with her gone, does it?” Jason asked.

“No,” Gary said. “It’s like I’m waiting for things to go back to normal, when it already has. I just don’t like that normal has a big, Farrah-shaped hole in it. I don’t even know

when my team became such a big part of who I am, but it feels like a part of me went with her.”

Jason couldn't find any words to support him that didn't sound trite, so instead he briefly leaned into the big man; a simple gesture of solidarity.

“She'd be proud of you, you know,” Gary said. “The adventurer you've become.”

“I was so bratty to her,” Jason said with a sad, reminiscent laugh. “Moralising at her, when I didn't know a damn thing. She must have thought I was a spoiled child.”

“The thing about children,” Gary said, “is that they're innocent. She didn't want you to lose that.”

“I don't think I've succeeded,” Jason said. “There's a lot of blood on my hands, now.”

“Arabelle told me that there is only so much value to be had in looking at the things we've done,” Gary said. “In the end, all they can do is help us decide what we're going to do next. That's what matters.”

Jason nodded. He wasn't the only one Rufus' mother had guided through dark times.

“What's next for you?” Jason asked Gary.

“Well, Rufus is here for a while, with the training complex he's doing. Our contract with Emir has really been over since he got here. I was thinking it might be time to go home, help them ride out the monster surge. Home, home, not Vitesse.”

“You have family back home?”

“Yeah, I'm thick with them,” Gary said. “Becoming an adventurer has really helped them out, and I've been able to send home essences for more of them. It's kept me away from them too, though. I think it might be time to go back for a while.”

“I squandered my family,” Jason said. “I only really saw my sister anymore. She's a lot older than me and my brother and didn't really grow up with us. She lived close to me with her husband and little girl and tried to mend fences between me, Mum and my brother. I didn't realise what I was throwing away in refusing to let go of the past. Not until I came here and no longer had the choice.”

“Once you're done with the astral space, you can come visit my family,” Gary said. “You'll get all the mothering you could ask for and then some.”

“I'd like that,” Jason said. “Our plan is to go to Vitesse, after we get back out. We're staying focused on the task in front of us, though.”

“The way it should be,” Gary said. “Treasure your team, Jason. Adventuring is a dangerous business, and you're about to face about as much danger as this job has to offer.”

Each of Jason's team members went through their own farewells. For Humphrey, it was an almost formal affair. The Gellers had been sending their young people out into lives of adventure for hundreds of years and Humphrey felt the weight of them all as he took his place amongst that tradition. All his family members were present to wish him well. There might be various factions within the family, but adventuring was a sacred duty to them all.

For Neil and Clive, it was also a matter of large family affairs. For all the differences in the station of eel farmers versus mid-tier aristocracy, they were unaware that each was experiencing oddly similar circumstances at the same time. Their families gathered in boisterous celebration, with both being fussed over by their mothers. Both were also warned not to 'let that Asano boy lead you into trouble.'

"Mum," Clive said. "I know Jason well. I know the things he's been through and the things he's done. You've met him yourself, multiple times. You were talking to him yesterday."

"He does seem like a nice boy."

"Then why is it that you always seem to think that something Aunt Helen heard from some guy is somehow a more reliable source of information than me?"

As those with families were getting their farewells, Belinda spent her last morning with Jory. Sophie roamed the streets of Old City, aimless and alone. Like Jason, she had no family, while lacking his ability to make such fast friends. With her looks she had always been good at getting attention, but with her circumstances, it had rarely been welcome.

If not for Belinda, she would have been completely alone in the world. She had no family, not that she knew of. She didn't even know the name of the city she had been born in, her father having brought them to Greenstone after her mother's death when she was a small girl.

Until the revelation that the martial arts her father taught her was the inheritance of some ancient order of assassins, she had never been curious about where she came from. Now she awaited Emir's investigation into her background, as interested in the results as he was.

The idea of an apparently famous treasure hunter helping her find her background was one of many strange things that had come from falling into Jason Asano's field of influence. He had turned much of her understanding and experience on its head. Suddenly she was surrounded by people who didn't live lives of trying to take everything they could, because they didn't need to. They already had it. She had always resented the rich and

powerful, but being amongst them gave her the unfamiliar sensation of people wanting nothing more from her than companionship. A friend and an ally, rather than a tool or a object of lust.

There was a strange charisma to Asano that affected the people around him. It was like he could obviate social hierarchy through sheer force of personality, putting farmers and thieves shoulder to shoulder with princes and nobles. It had brought her into a strange world of possibility that even now felt delicate, as if it could all be snatched away in a moment.

With a blast of air that startled the people around her, she launched herself up to a rooftop and sat down on the edge. Her dimensional bag took the form of a vest, from which she took out an envelope, worn from handling. Inside was her indenture contract; the symbol of six months during which she was ostensibly enslaved, yet had given her freedom and opportunity. That period had taken her from desperation and hopelessness to a world of potential. She turned the envelope over in her hands, looking at it without opening it, before putting it away again.

She had more friends now than she knew what to do with. Humphrey, righteous and kind, with an unwavering sense of responsibility. Clive, smart like Belinda, but filled with a boyish curiosity. Neil, whose sensible practicality would have blended in most places, but stood out in a group of extreme personalities. Then there was Jason. Strange and unpredictable, yet also fierce and principled. Capable of inflicting terrible horrors, yet would go to great lengths to help not just a friend, but a stranger.

Her feelings about Jason were complicated. He was compelling, yet infuriating. Clever, yet foolish; naïve, but also cunning. He would hide his virtues and proudly announce his failings. He seemed to have neither pride nor honour, yet she had come to realise that he was filled with his own versions of both.

More and more, she found herself wondering what he thought of her. Friendship? Pity? He had always maintained a certain distance, painfully aware of the indenture contract. It was as if he didn't understand the degree which he had turned it from a cage into a tool of liberation, despite it being his plan in the first place.

She wasn't what he was drawn to in a woman, she knew that. He had seen her with his lover, Cassandra, and his flirtations with the sapphire-haired celestine princess. He was attracted to sultry, socially aggressive women, rather than ones who were standoffish and the regular kind of aggressive.

She had felt his gaze from time to time, but she had also sensed him trying to be respectful. He knew that things she had been through and the kinds of men she had

known. He was almost infuriatingly different from the men who had been pursuing her for most of her life.

In some ways, Jason reminded her of Jory. For a long time, Jory been the only decent man in her and Belinda's lives. Even Old Man Silva, whose protection she had enjoyed for years, was a man she had no illusions about. He told her he thought of her as a daughter, but treated her as a pet. Like many men of power, he looked at other people as possessions.

While Belinda was drawn to Jory's kindness and generosity, Sophie had been more compelled by clever, playful men. In her world, though, such men had inevitably been predators, with more than one lover learning the hard way that she wasn't prey.

She stood up, using her powers to climb the tallest building in the area and look out over Old City. For most of her life it had been her whole world, and she wondered when it had started to seem so small. Now, just one world was no longer enough. Soon she would be headed to an otherworldly city of ancient assassins and ambitious cultists.

She checked her watch, which had been annoyingly expensive, but the cheap ones tended to lose time in her dimensional bag. She laughed, thinking about the kind of problems she had now, compared to when she had lived in the streets below. Her thoughts returned to Jason.

Jory had wanted to help her, but Jason was the one who found a way. He looked at her seemingly insurmountable problems and went from hunting her down to transforming her world for no more reason than she needed him to. He did it in the face of her suspicion and hostility and he did it so thoroughly that it rewrote her entire future. She thought about his smug, smirking face, the impish grin and made an admission to herself.

"Damn it," she muttered.

Jason and his team moved into the strange, ruined village at the bottom of the lake, water pressing down on the magical dome above them. While Emir maintained the palace on the surface of the lake above, Jason set up his cloud house under the dome. Rather than the adaptive version he had been using, he tried the more ostentatious version. The result was a large, two-storey building with that same beautiful sunset colours of the cloud palace, without being so vast and grandiose. He had to return it to the flask before each attempt of the portal, otherwise he would have to leave it behind.

Jason had invited Jory along who had elected to join them until they left, spending a few extra days with Belinda. The team even offered him a chance to come along, which no few adventurers would have jumped at but he firmly declined. One trip to the astral space

was enough to confirm to Jory that he was a healer and an alchemist out of choice and only an adventurer out of necessity.

The archway they had used to enter the astral space was still there, a sleek, obsidian object that looked much the same as Jason's shadow gate power. The archway was now surrounded by the largest and most complicated magical diagram Jason had ever seen. Multiple times a day, Clive would trot Jason out to try and activate the portal with the latest permutation of the diagram.

As days became a week, Jason became used to his power fizzling out. When it finally worked, then, he was almost startled. A dark line of dark energy appeared at the bottom of the arch, rising up to fill the archway and establish the portal. Watching on, Emir's eyes glistened with triumph and he congratulated his team, who were standing around with Clive, celebrating their success.

The rest of the team had been on standby for each attempt and rapidly gathered themselves together.

"Jason and I will go first," Clive said, "as we have the best chance of getting back if something goes wrong. The rest of you quickly follow, as we don't know long the portal will remain stable."

"We've all discussed what to do if we're separated," Humphrey added. "If you find yourself alone on the other side, you know what to do."

Jason turned his gaze to Emir, trying to impart all the gratitude he felt in a simple nod, receiving Emir's smiling nod in return. He took a steeling breath, then stepped through the portal, practically pushed by Clive, who followed right after. Humphrey and Stash were next, followed by Neil, all picking their way carefully through the magical diagram on the floor. Sophie looked at Belinda, arms wrapped around Jory.

"You heard the man," Sophie said. "Don't take too long."

Sophie made her own way across the room, glancing back before stepping through the shadowy gate.

"I know you're still thinking about the what Healer asked of you," Belinda told Jory, moving her arms up from his waist to around his neck. He opened his mouth to speak but she put a hand over it.

"You need to stop thinking and just do it," she said. "I don't want to get back and find you where I left you, Tillman."

Jory's eyes sparkled and she took her hand away.

"Yes, Ma'am."

She gave him a lingering kiss and made her way across the circle to the portal, when he called out to her.

“Stay safe!”

“Don’t worry,” she said, flashing him a grin. “I’m very big on cowardice.”

“I’ve heard Jason say the same thing,” he told her. “And he’s a big, fat liar.”

She stepped through the portal and the smile sank from Jory’s face. He sighed, then looked up at the dome above him, holding off all the water.

“How do I get out of here?”