

Chapter 527

Band of Misfits

The northern end of the Storm Kingdom was the coastland of the northern continent, much of which was barren desert. This was quite different from the equivalent area in Jason's world, which was the southern United States. Compared to Earth, the region was significantly more arid; not just the counterpart to Texas but everything from Louisiana to Florida was barren and dry.

The other difference was the presence of pockets of odd magic. Frequently these were located in canyons and gorges, many of which hosted fortress towns, utilising the local conditions as the basis for efficient defences. Developing such bespoke protective systems was the speciality of the Irios family and Jason had encountered such towns in the past. He once fought a massive army of monsters in a gorge whose magical winds were turned into a weapon by the local fortress.

One particular desert canyon was incongruously filled with the kind of thick jungle that typified the Storm Kingdom's more southern regions. The jungle was a dense wall of green, the air so humid there was a visible haze. That stopped dead at the canyon's mouth, none of the lush plants reaching beyond its boundaries. The climate around the canyon was the complete opposite of what lay within; nothing but rocky desert and air as dry as old bones left under the scorching sun.

Jason's team, with the exception of Jason himself, were standing near the mouth of the canyon where the jungle stopped precipitously as the magic supporting it ended off. Before heading into the jungle alone, Jason had noted that it was quite like the gardens of the Vane estate. There, verdant greenery had likewise sharply met desert in one of the first examples of large-scale magic he encountered. That had been an artificial situation, where the jungle-filled canyon was a natural magical phenomenon.

The team were lingering casually, chatting as they kept an eye on the jungle. Belinda had conjured a parasol for herself and Sophie, offering a spot to Humphrey but he stood vigilant in the sun, his common sense outweighed by his sense of duty. Clive was more than happy to take the offered place, unconcerned about being the second choice. Neil moaned happily as he tipped a canteen of water over his head. His silver rank was more than enough to endure desert heat but that didn't stop it from being unpleasant.

The team was one of three groups operating in close proximity as part of a large-scale monster eradication contract. Such clear-and-sweep operations had become more common following the terrible casualties from the battles with the Builder. The reduced

adventurer numbers had led to dangerous accumulations of monsters as the monster surge continued unabated.

A large flying carpet approached carrying the other two teams, one of which was Farrah, Gary and Rufus. The other was a local guild team they were working with. The carpet stopped close to Humphrey and the others, floating over the ground for the passengers to step off.

“What are you doing?” Rufus asked Humphrey. “Where’s Jason?”

Humphrey nodded in the direction of the jungle-filled canyon.

“That whole area has been infested with light-eater vines and now some umbral rakells have spawned in there too,” Humphrey said. “A large pack, by all accounts. We’re waiting for them to come out.”

The leader of the other team was a woman named Rosalie Peresda, who gave voice to the confusion Humphrey’s explanation had given her team. They had all studied the monsters that commonly spawned in the Storm Kingdom and knew their behaviour.

“Why would they come out?” she asked. “Umbral rakells are smart, cunning and thrive in the shadows. What makes you expect them to come out and fight?”

“Because there are worse things in the dark than monsters,” Neil said ominously. “You have no idea of the horrors taking place in there, even as we speak. Just thinking about it gives me the chills. At this very moment, those poor monsters are probably hearing a story about a flying carriage with spinning blades that is also somehow a wolf-shaped air elemental. It makes no sense.”

“I wouldn’t call that an accurate representation of *Airwolf*,” Farrah said.

“It’s so tedious,” Neil bemoaned.

“That I *would* call an accurate representation,” Farrah acknowledged.

“Don’t be mean,” Humphrey chided.

“It’s alright for you,” Sophie said. “You went off to that team leader meeting and didn’t have to hear about the talking carriage and the man with the leather jacket. Did anyone ever figure out what a Hoff is?”

The rest of the team shook their heads.

“What is it with Jason and stories about magical carriages?” Belinda asked.

“They’re not actually magi...” Farrah started before trailing off. “Why am I defending *Knight Rider*? I spent too long with Jason and his sister.”

From above the jungle, a beam of glorious light shot down from the sky, mixing gold, silver and blue transcendent power.

“I guess that’s the signal,” Belinda said.

"They'll be coming soon," Humphrey told the guild team that had arrived with Rufus. "We'd appreciate the help since you're here."

"Of course," Rosalie said. "You generalists will get to see how proper adventurers do it."

"We appreciate that," Humphrey said congenially. "It's always good to see how well things can go so long as nothing goes wrong causing everyone to die because they're overspecialised and don't have a gold-ranker protecting them anymore."

"Oh, it's like that, is it?" Rosalie said with a grin. "Watch and learn, Geller."

Rufus shook his head, being familiar with the friendly rivalry between the Vitesse and Rimaros approaches to adventuring.

The three teams all turned their eyes to the jungle. They were all silver-rankers but the stealthy monsters were neither heard nor sensed before they started gushing out of the canyon in a torrent, blanketing the ground. The rakells looked like six-legged black panthers but smaller, the size of medium dogs. They moved with swift and silent grace. They did not hesitate after seeing the three teams, charging towards the line of adventurers.

The adventurers exploded into action, unleashing powers that swept over the monsters like a tidal wave. The might of silver-rankers had been overshadowed of late by the gold and diamond-level conflicts around the Builder war but the three elite teams demonstrated just how powerful they could be.

Farrah swung her obsidian sword that broke up into segments connected by a stream of lava, becoming a chain whip of ragged, razor-sharp stone and searing heat. Traps already set out by Clive and Belinda detonated as monsters ran over them.

The guild team were area-attack specialists, which is why they had been chosen as the centrepiece of the clear-and-sweep expedition. Whatever Humphrey might have said, no one was under any illusion of competing with the magical carpet-bombing carried out by Rosalie and her team. The more melee-oriented members of the group didn't even bother moving in, lest they be caught up in the sea of destructive power.

The other teams were responsible for making up for the shortfalls of the specialists in the case of an unexpectedly dangerous encounter. This was not the case against the rakells, who were swift and stealthy but small and frail by silver-rank standards, ill-suited to a direct conflict. Even so, the monsters did not turn and flee, to the surprise of the guild group. Instead, they charged recklessly to their deaths.

As more of the monsters emerged from the jungle they were looking increasingly miserable even before encountering the adventurers. Their bodies were feeble, slow and

marked with ugly rot. More and more moved out of the jungle in terrible condition, with some glowing from within as transcendent light ate them up from the inside.

The increasingly stricken monsters pushed out of the jungle and into the meat grinder of silver-rank adventurers who massacred the rakells in relatively short order. In the wake of the one-sided extermination, Rosalie looked at the slaughter field in confusion.

"Why would they run out to die like that?" she asked. "The only times I've seen monsters that way was to escape worse monsters. The kind of things they'll charge into death rather than confront."

A figure wandered out of the jungle wearing a bright floral shirt, tan shorts and sandals. He was carrying a long, thin tree branch that had grown twisted over itself.

"Hey, guys!" Jason called out. "I found a stick that looks like a giant's spectacles. Do giants make spectacles out of big sticks?"

"We don't have spectacles here," Farrah called back. "Anyone who can afford them can afford magic."

Rosalie's team rode their flying carpet just above ground level as it flew over the flat desert terrain. Without Rufus, Gary and Farrah taking up space they were sat comfortably, the carpet shielding them from rushing wind. Jason and Farrah's teams rode in a pair of large black land skimmers. Rosalie kept throwing glances over at Jason, who was gesturing effusively as he said something to his team that had them rolling their eyes.

The team had heard various rumours about the man, but he seemed like just another member of what was quickly becoming known as Humphrey Geller's band of misfits. Gellers were known for building extremely powerful teams, but Team Biscuit was building a reputation as oddities both socially and professionally. Only Geller himself seemed normal amongst the pair of thieves, the sarcastic and muscular healer and the respected magic researcher known for detesting the Magic Society.

As for the last member, Asano, all manner of rumours were swirling about. When checking out the other teams assigned to the expedition, he had proven to be the centre of many conflicting stories. When truth and rumour were that mixed up, Rosalie preferred to defer judgement and judge for herself. She had been confident that with a Geller in charge of the team they at least wouldn't be completely hopeless.

She hadn't exactly seen Asano in action now; only the results. She wondered what he had done to spook the monsters so badly they had charged into the cataclysmic powers of her team, who were wondering the same thing.

Jason could sense their attention on him through their auras but paid it no mind, guessing the reasons behind their interest. He had the answers they were looking for but no interest in handing them out. His essence abilities, while quite imposing once their effects began to show, were not enough to put the kind of fear into monsters that had affected the rakells. The secret to that was one of the many elements of his complex aura that he normally kept locked away.

Title: [Giant Slayer]

- Overcoming a much stronger enemy has left a permanent mark on you that can be sensed by others. This may trigger a fear reaction from the unintelligent and the weak-willed if your aura is significantly stronger than theirs. Your actual rank being lower than theirs does not diminish the effect.

Jason's aura was the strongest weapon in his arsenal. Not only was it his most potent power but also the one he was the most skilled with. It was also arguably the most versatile, with the effects of his aura power only the beginning of what he could accomplish with it. What Jason could accomplish with his aura was a representation of what Rufus had taught him from the very beginning: that experience trumping isolated training. Jason's aura techniques went way beyond what any system box had ever told him about it.

Noreth, Jason's sometimes-ally, sometimes enemy, once advised him to make his aura the centrepiece of his adventuring toolkit. While he had never trusted Noreth, he did believe the former familiar's general intentions were good. He had more than lost his way, spending lives by the million to achieve what he believed was necessary, which was something Jason sometimes feared in himself.

Jason's enemies list included beings whose very nature was beyond his ability to comprehend. How far would he be willing to go to stop their schemes? Jason had learned important lessons in the transformation zones where he had leveraged power much greater than himself to accomplish what would normally be impossible. He understood that the best he could do against cosmic forces was find a point where he could be a fulcrum and apply what strength he was able. If it came down to it, would he make the same choices Noreth had if that was what it took to stop a god or great astral being?

Jason shook his head to clear it, seeing the concerned looks on his companions as he fell into dark contemplation again. He was back in a world of magic and power, now. He had no illusions of being done with the Builder or Purity's minions but the big picture was

the concern of kings and diamond-rankers. Jason had done his part and it was no longer his fight. He'd told himself exactly that over and over, and hoped he'd eventually believe it.

Putting those thoughts aside, he grinned as he watched the desert landscape rush by. He felt like he was riding a speeder across Tatooine and was struck for the first time in a long time with the pure joy of the adventuring life.

Chapter 528

The Pile of Disturbing Things

The fortress town was a tragic disaster. The gates were intact but the high stone walls were coated in deep gouges where the monsters had scrambled over them. Once the magic dome atop the walls had failed, the monsters had swarmed inside, turning a safe haven into a meat grinder. Inside the fortress town, buildings made of sturdy desert stone were half-collapsed, blood painting macabre murals across the pale yellow brickwork.

Jason's group of three adventuring teams searched the ruined fortress town for survivors but didn't find a single living aura. It was hard to sense anything at all with the pall of death left behind by so many souls departing their bodies in quick succession. The two healers, Neil and one from the local guild team, Paola, had been given the grim task of checking the dead for survivors hidden amongst them. That much death could mask the living aura of a normal ranker who themselves were barely alive. For that reason they also took Jason who had the strongest aura senses of anyone in the three teams. In the unlikely scenario of there being survivors not rooted out by the monsters before they left, Jason had the best chance of finding them.

Most of the dead were gathered in the town dormitories. The thick walls had held up for a time but eventually, the monsters had torn down doors and smashed through the heavy brick to get inside. For Jason and the healers, it was a painstaking and grisly task to sort through the bodies but their efforts paid off when they found a single survivor.

It was a young man on the verge of death, even Jason barely detecting his waning aura amongst the corpses. Neil and Paola performed a powerful healing ritual that brought the man back from the edge of death but left him comatose. Forcing that much healing magic into the body of a normal person was almost as dangerous as the wounds the magic healed. Neil and Paola successfully dragged him from the brink of death without overloading his body but he would remain unconscious for hours, possibly days.

As the members of the three teams finished searching their designated zones, they reconvened in the town square, one of the few open spaces in a fortress town where space was at a premium. With their stricken patient strapped into a floating gurney commonly carried around by healers, Jason, Neil and Paola expected to be the last ones to gather. This wasn't the case with Belinda, Farrah and Clive still absent. Jason could sense their auras, reading curiosity and worry from their emotions but no distress. Like all the adventurers, they were pushing down the horror they felt at the town of the dead so as

not to fall apart while potential danger was still around them. Since Belinda, Clive and Farrah weren't showing signs of trouble, the group discussed what they found from their searching as they waited.

"We have a problem," Neil said after explaining the unconscious survivor. No one else had found one.

"We didn't find anyone else," Paola said, "but every corpse we found in the dormitories was normal-rank. There might have been some amongst them with an essence or two but none with the full set of essences necessary to bring them up to iron rank."

The difference between the physiology of a normal person and an essence user was easy to spot at mid-to-high rank but less pronounced for low-rankers. As healers, Neil and Paola had the skills, powers and experience to reliably tell the difference, which was one of the reasons they'd been sent to the dormitories.

"Some of the silver-rankers might have gone up in rainbow smoke," One of Rosalie's team members suggested.

"Not all of them have bodies like ours," Neil said. "Proper training accelerates the process of the body becoming more magical, but the majority of the essence-users here were civilians. Even the silver-rankers were just core users with no adventurer training. Few, if any, would have their entire bodies dissolve."

"There are corpses scattered all around the fortress," Rufus said. "You only checked the clusters of bodies. Any essence users are more likely to have died trying to push back the monsters than hiding with the normals, so they're likely amongst the individual bodies."

"We had the same thought," Paola said. "We did some checking outside of the dormitories and found a couple, by which I mean actually two. There should have been many more. Even just some iron-rank civilians with farming or ranching powers."

"Unless there are a lot more corpses gathered somewhere I can't sense," Jason said, "they aren't in the fortress. Dead or alive, I would notice a bunch of essence users clustered together unless they're behind something that blocks aura senses."

"But that isn't the worst part," Neil added. "We checked the two essence-users we did find closely to see if we could find any clues as to what happened. At first glance, they looked like they'd been taken out by monsters, but the obvious wounds had been made after death. We think someone mauled their corpses to hide whatever really killed them."

"Why?" Humphrey asked.

“We were thinking necromancer,” Paola said. “Someone may have come in after the monsters came through, killed any survivors and taken away the essence-user bodies. Those are the most valuable to necromancers.”

“Then why leave any behind?” Rosalie asked. “Why not take them as well instead of spending the time to mask how they were killed?”

“We have no idea,” Paola said. “We’re just guessing.”

“Hopefully our survivor can give us some answers once he wakes,” Jason said.

“Will he remain stable if we linger here a while?” Rufus asked.

“He’s fine,” Neil said. “He just needs a lot of rest.”

“Then we go through the whole fortress,” Rufus directed, the other team leaders nodding their agreement. “It won’t be pleasant but we’ll see if there is some kind of sealed area that Jason can’t sense. In the best case, there are survivors holed up inside it that don’t realise we’re here after sealing themselves off.”

“Paola, Neil,” Rosalie said. “Check every single corpse to see if there are any more essence users and if we can learn anything more. If something strange is going on here, any information we take back to Rimaros will be valuable, even if we don’t know what it means yet.”

Paola and Neil nodded as Jason turned to where he sensed Farrah, Belinda and Clive finally approaching.

“We have something to add to the pile of disturbing things I’m sure you’ve all found,” Farrah said as they rejoined the group. “We’ve looked over the defence infrastructure and made an extremely unpleasant discovery.”

The trio had checked the defences because the discovery of the fortress town having been sacked by monsters was unexpected. The information they’d been given in Rimaros was that the town should have had sufficient supplies and resources to hold out for weeks, even in the face of increasing monster activity.

“Someone went to considerable effort to make it look like the defences were exhausted from overuse,” Clive explained. “That isn’t what happened, though. Someone with access to the control nodes drained the power from the defences and falsified signs of excess strain.”

“You’re certain?” Rosalie asked.

“We started by having Farrah map out how the defences should be operating,” Clive said. “We wanted to find out what went wrong. At first, it looked like the protective magic had been burned out through overuse, but Belinda picked up on the signs that not everything was as it seemed.”

“I’ve run enough magic scams to know when someone has been fiddling about,” Belinda said, drawing looks from Rosalie’s team.

“Once Belinda pointed us in the right direction,” Farrah said, “Clive was able to dig out exactly what was done.”

“I took measurements using some tools I have and recorded everything,” Clive added. “I can definitively demonstrate that someone sabotaged this fortress town from the inside.”

“You’re suggesting a traitor?” Humphrey asked.

“Oh, it’s worse than that,” Belinda said.

“What was done to the defences was neither a quick nor subtle process,” Clive explained. “It would take a significant portion of the town’s defenders to be in on it to hide this level of activity over the duration what we found would require. Even then, it would be a huge risk. The more likely scenario is that most of the town’s leadership and their staff were involved or at least complicit.”

No one spoke as the ramifications of what Clive was describing sank in. They all looked around the already horrifying remains of the town that was all the more sinister for what they had learned. There was no sound; neither the dead town nor the desert around it revealing anything but emptiness and death.

“Not a necromancer,” Jason said, breaking the heavy silence. “The essence users betrayed the town and left it to the monsters. The ones Neil and Paola found left behind were probably the ones who didn’t go along with it and fought the traitors. Their wounds were masked to hide the fact that they were killed by other essence users.”

“Let’s start searching all over again,” Humphrey said. “This time not just for survivors.”

“Be thorough,” Rosalie added. “This might represent some new threat. Any piece of information we uncover might be the one that saves lives.”

The teams returned from their expedition and handed their report to the jobs hall. The team leaders, Humphrey, Rufus and Rosalie, had requested an immediate debrief which was swiftly approved when they revealed the circumstances. While they were informing the Adventure Society as to what they found, the rest of Humphrey and Rufus’ team portalled back to the cloud house.

Arabelle took the time to speak with the group, both as a whole and individually. She hadn’t been going out monster hunting as the church of the Healer and Adventure Society had her helping adventurers not lose their minds in the wake of recent events.

Most of Jason's companions had seen massive casualties amongst adventurers before. Many of them had been through the disastrous expedition where Farrah was counted amongst the dead, so the deaths during the Builder battle were still shocking, but something they could handle.

The massacre of civilians in the fortress town was something else. These were the very people whose protection was the core tenet of being an adventurer. Farrah and Jason had seen the massive death toll at Makassar on Earth and had already been working with Arabelle to process that lingering trauma, but it was new for most of the others. In the moment, in the fortress, they had been able to push it aside, but it struck them once they had downtime to spend in safety.

Clive was one of the hardest hit. He hadn't been part of the expedition where Farrah died or seen the population of a whole town fall to undead like Gary, Farrah and Rufus. The worst he had seen was the loss of his mentor during the previous monster surge and that had pushed him off the adventuring path for years until Jason pulled him back onto it.

Coming from a long talk with Arabelle, Clive entered Jason's spirit realm to look for him. Jason left an archway up permanently in the cloud house for his team and Jason himself to come and go as they liked. Unlike earlier iterations of the spirit vault, the archway that led into it emerged not at the centre of the realm but the outskirts, set into the dark walls by the bridge gate. The high walls were darker than obsidian, almost seeming to devour light.

Overhead, the sun shone from a clear tropical sky, a reflection of the day outside the spirit realm. Through the pair of massive gates forged of dark metal, Clive could see a bridge of shifting rainbow colours extended into the distance. It moved beyond the light coming from the sky and extended into a dark void, reaching further than even Clive's silver-rank eyes could make out.

Clive turned his attention to the realm inside the walls, which was set out like a garden palace or expansive parkland neighbourhood. Cloud building throughout looked friendly and inviting, linked by garden paths and covered walkways with open sides. Some pathways were made of clouds and others wood, while some were cool stone. There were even walkways that were ponds with stepping stones set into them.

Looming at the centre of the realm was a tower of dark smoky crystal. Within the crystal speckles of gold, silver and blue light shifted about, visible even from the outskirts like blood flowing under translucent skin. Atop the ominous tower was a massive cloud nebula in the shape of an eye; a larger version of the one possessed by Jason's avatar of doom familiar, Gordon. It was also a reflection of Jason's own eyes.

Turning his gaze from the sinister sight, Clive set out along one of the garden pathways. The gardens had different sections that he realised were derived from Jason's four essences. They were not split into simple quadrants but intermingled, running into one another across the span of the realm. Areas inspired by the blood essence were narrow, long and marked with vibrant red flowers, winding through the estate like veins in a body. There were arching trellis tunnels covered in the flowers, letting in just enough light that, walking under them, Clive felt like blood passing through an artery.

Moving into a cave entrance set into the ground, Clive descended into a natural stone tunnel on a wooden staircase wet from cave damp. Coarse sand had been adhered to the wood, providing plenty of grip. The dark essence was represented by a network of natural tunnels and caverns below the ground, offering alternate pathways around the spirit realm. The subterranean network was accessible through many cave entrances around the gardens, as well as stairways within the various buildings. The tunnels themselves were dotted with luminescent fungus that dimly lit the tunnels like stars in the night sky. Underfoot, more of the grippy wood was set in pathways over the natural stone floor to provide reliable footing.

The caverns were larger and brighter than the tunnels, the walls coated in luminescent fungus glowing with radiant, rainbow colours. The air was thick with polychromatic, glowing butterflies that would land on anyone who entered. The tunnels were like passing through the starry expanse of space, while the chambers were glorious nebulas, giving the underground areas a sense of space exploration. That was how Jason felt when he used the tunnels but Clive hadn't seen any *Star Trek*.

Clive roamed through the estate, more exploring than trying to find Jason in any hurry. Jason's presence was everywhere, giving an odd sense of him always watching, his presence looming like the tower at the heart of the realm. Although he had no reason to, Clive had the sense that if he wanted to find Jason quickly, he would do so almost immediately, as if the realm knew and understood his intentions.

Heading out of the subterranean tunnels, Clive found himself in one of the sections based on Jason's sin essence. It was a carefully manicured garden of black and white flowers with regimented pathways that navigated around with an oddly inefficient design. The layout seemed to be tempting the walker to step between paths that ran close to one another, which could easily be done by stepping over low flowers without causing any harm. The moment the mind drifted in that direction, however, an intense sense of danger welled up for no discernable reason.

The final kind of garden making up the vast estate was a complete contrast to the rigid landscaping of the sin essence garden. These areas were wild and untamed, with tight, meandering paths under a heavy jungle canopy. A sense of dread permeated and Clive was constantly seeing movement in the periphery of his vision; shadowy shapes amongst the dense trees and undergrowth. Whenever he tried to look at them directly they were gone. More than once he half-convinced himself he imagined it only for the movement to once more tease at his eyeline.

Of all the areas of the garden, the wild areas based on Jason's doom essence were the most ominous. While Clive felt completely safe, it was the safety of a man just found not guilty in court who had yet to be released from the shackles and jumpsuit.

Clive was taking the chance to properly roam about Jason spirit realm, which he had not yet done. Part of that was that it was an intimidating place. Jason had been evasive about the nature of it, simply claiming it was a power he had picked up somewhere. Amongst the team, however, Clive was the only one who had yet realised its true nature. He was roaming around inside Jason's soul.

Chapter 529

Information Exchange

Clive had already been aware that in Jason's time away his soul had undergone some extreme changes. While he had no knowledge of what a spirit domain was, he understood that something had saturated Jason's cloud house with his presence in a way that Emir's cloud house did not replicate. Jason's spirit realm escalated that feeling drastically. Where the spirit domain was Jason imprinting himself on reality, the spirit realm was a reality forged from Jason himself.

The rest of the team had various responses to Jason's spirit realm, but none had spent a lot of time in it. Mostly they seemed to look at it as a personal power that operated like a cloud house. Even so, they all got a sense that spending time in the spirit realm impacted their feelings in ways that Emir's cloud house did not.

Other than Clive, Humphrey was the member of the group who had the best sense that Jason's new ability was more than just a storage space that could hold people. Humphrey had encountered abilities of that nature and knew that Jason's spirit realm was something very different. He had felt it the moment he stepped into the spirit realm and felt Jason's presence pervading everything, even while Jason was outside it.

Humphrey and Clive had discussed it a little but where Clive was driven by curiosity, Humphrey's reaction was concern. Jason was clearly not ready to tell them everything about what was going on with him and Humphrey strongly suggested Clive eschew his normal approach of peppering Jason with questions every time he told Clive about his latest absurd power.

Humphrey suggested that Clive explore the spirit realm when he had the time. He pointed out that Jason opening it up to the team was an invitation and that Clive experiencing it for himself might be the best way forward.

Clive strongly suspected that there were caveats to being in Jason's spirit realm that he hadn't told the team about. Having deduced exactly what it was, he realised that opening it to anyone was an incredible display of trust. He doubted that anyone could harm Jason here but it exposed everything that he was, unadulterated and unhidden. The fun and inviting parts. The imperious and threatening. The garden estate was beautiful and welcoming but with dark corners and the promise of terrible things in the face of transgression.

Clive found himself uncertain as to the exact size of the place, suspecting it to be in a perpetual state of change. He had taken a meandering path that wound back and forth, the

looming tower always seeming far off in the distance. Yet the moment he was ready to meet Jason he found himself stepping into an open pavilion at the tower's base, not entirely sure how he got there.

Jason was standing in front of a wide well that was closer to the size of a public fountain. Instead of water, the well contained a starry void in which many items could be seen floating around. Jason's spirit vault had undergone many changes in its progress to becoming a spirit realm, one of which was how it contained his inventory items.

In the spirit realm's current iteration, the items were all held in stasis within the well in front of Jason and Clive found him doing inventory management. Items were flying out of the well and floating around Jason from where he either directed them into a pile next to him or sent them back into the well. The pile was seemed to be mostly leftovers from consumable items like empty potion vials and throwing darts whose one-use magical effects had been expended.

"Wouldn't it be easier to remove the garbage outside of your spirit realm, where you can dispose of it?" Clive asked as he approached Jason.

"You have to remember that this place is a garden," Jason said, "and in a garden, you compost waste."

"I don't understand what that means," Clive said.

"As it turns out, I can take the lingering power from magically strengthened vials, potion dregs and the like and feed them to my gardens. Anything with small amounts of lingering magic is perfect because the gardens can't absorb a lot at once. Feeding them this stuff won't do much, but give it a decade or three and the results will stack up."

"What does that accomplish?" Clive asked. "If you're feeding your soul magic to make it stronger, that's incredible."

"Nothing that helpful, I'm afraid," Jason said. "It just helps with my soul's defences. The soul is inviolable, as you know, but attacks against it are... I'm not sure you can comprehend how unpleasant they are until you experience them for yourself, which I hope you never do. Feeding my garden makes me a little better at enduring them. Or it will, eventually, once I've fed it enough. I have no idea what else this place can do and I'm learning as I go. Maybe you can help me figure things out."

"I'd like that," Clive said. "I'd like that a lot."

Jason gave him a sympathetic smile.

"How are you doing after what we saw out there?"

"I don't..." Clive began before trailing off, uncertain of himself. "Farrah said that you've seen worse."

“It’s not a contest,” Jason said. “Death is death, horror is horror. We’ve all seen the people we couldn’t save and counting the dead doesn’t make one person’s experiences more important than another’s.”

“I feel better for walking around in this place,” Clive said. “It’s calming. Intimate. Is it weird to say that?”

“No,” Jason said with a laugh. “This is about as intimate as it gets. You’ve figured this place out I assume, you being you.”

“The basic idea, I think. Thank you for letting me see it.”

“You don’t know how glad I am that you could,” Jason said. “But I think it’s time I showed you something else. A distraction so that instead of living in your head for a while you can wrap it around a problem.”

“Your mysterious project in the basement of the cloud house?”

“Yeah. I was waiting until we had more time but I don’t think that’s happening any time soon. We’ll have to snatch our moments when we can.”

Jason waved a hand an archway rose from the floor, granting them an exit from the spirit realm.

The three main islands of Rimaros were Livaros, Arnote and Provo. Livaros was the centre of wealth, power and adventuring, with the vast majority of sky islands being in proximity to it. This had come with a price when the Builder’s city attacked Livaros, with many of the sky islands suffering damage in spite of their formidable defences.

Arnote was the least developed, with sleepy little towns and a laid-back lifestyle. Despite the small-town sensibilities, however, it was also a bastion of the wealthy, being home to adventurers and merchant barons who preferred to enjoy life at a more relaxed pace. While individuals like Argy might appear as colourful locals, his name was derived from a massive agricultural industry of which he was a leading figure.

The last island was Provo, the one Jason had yet to visit. This held the vast majority of the Rimaros population as well as being the largest trade hub. Livaros dealt with the kind of extreme cost speciality goods that adventurers desired, but most of the airship trade between the continents to the north as and south of the Sea of Storms passed through Provo.

For this reason, Provo was a bustling place full of strangers, even during a monster surge. Home to one of the largest sky ports on the planet, the Builder attacks had left it largely unaffected, only interrupting the operations for a couple of days. Regular trade had been largely suspended already, outside of necessary supplies, but the Adventure Society

had commandeered the trade fleets to move critical resources. Land travel via the road Network connecting the continents was dangerous without a powerful escort and sea travel was worse. Airship travel wasn't exactly safe but so long as the airships regulated their speed they could make a journey with only one or two monster attacks. Sky transport required fewer adventurers to escort it compared to other means short of portals, which were largely occupied with forming rapid responses to monster manifestations.

The result of this ongoing activity was that Provo was still full of travellers. This was useful to those with less than wholesome agendas who sought to access Rimaros without drawing attention. One such person was the Purity priest, Laront. He disliked being dressed in the typical garb of a moderately successful trader but his preferred white would get people immediately assuming he was a priest of Purity.

The Purity forces in the sea of Storms all belonged to the Order of Redeeming Light. The extremist faction's core principle was to purify the unclean and turn it into weapons against that which resisted purgation. Their methods were highly effective for long-term planning and isolated emplacement as they could grow their forces by turning tainted enemies into purified allies. There were flaws to the methodology, however. In many cases, there were distinctive, telltale signs left on the purified that could single them out to those with sufficiently powerful senses.

The result of this flaw meant that with the Purity church under threat of divine sanction, sending the redeemed into populated areas was a risk. As such, Laront, as an ordinary priest who never passed through the flames of purgation, was the only upper-echelon member of the local forces that could safely visit the city. They had a series of low-level infiltrators and informants, many of whom didn't even realise their true allegiance, but sensitive issues required personal involvement.

Many of the cafés around the massive Provo sky port had individual dining rooms for traders to hold private meetings over meals. In one such room, Laront was meeting with a minor Adventure Society functionary assigned to the administrative centre in Provo. He was an iron-ranker named Derian and Laront detested both the man and his perpetual sneer. They sat across from one another at a small table, the food between them going untouched.

"You have the information I asked for?" Laront asked.

"They banished me to this place to spend my days sending second-rate adventurers on third-rank assignments, so I don't have access to the Rimaros records anymore."

"Does that mean no?"

"I have it, but the price has gone up."

“We had a deal.”

“One made before the flying cities started appearing in the sky. With everything going on now, I had to trade some serious favours to get this.”

Laront was confident that Derian wasn't lying about needing to trade favours to get the information. He suspected it was less about access, though, and more about people not wanting to deal with Derian. The functionary was the kind of man who constantly wondered why all the people around him were idiots who somehow failed to recognise his superior talent. He couldn't understand why his career stalled when it was obvious how much better things would work if he were in charge.

“This is an information exchange and I brought all the information you wanted,” Laront said. “If you want more information than all of it I'm going to have to start making things up.”

“I want off this island,” Derian said. “Who knows when the next Builder attack will come? But they won't let Adventure Society staff quit during a monster surge, just because we signed some crap agreement before it started, and now I can't leave the island without getting flagged. How was I meant to know the city would get attacked when I signed that?”

Laront pressed his lips tightly together as if trying to prevent his instinctive response from escaping his lips.

“I don't have the means to get you off this island,” Laront said, his tone carefully measured.

“How do you get on and off the island?”

“The normal way,” Laront lied. “I didn't sign an agreement that I wouldn't. I can't forge documentation or know who needs to be paid to look the other way. You are the one with the contacts, here. What I can do is give you all the money you'll need to bribe your way off the island and arrive wherever you choose to go a rich man. How does that sound?”

“You'll just give me a pile of money?”

“Money is easy,” Laront said. “I have more than I can spend. Information is my coin of the realm, which makes you a very valuable man. If the Adventure Society isn't willing to pay you what you are worth, I'll do it and thank them for the opportunity.”

Laront untied a dimensional pouch from his belt and placed it on the table.

“You could buy an airship with the contents of this bag,” Laront told him.

Derian opened the bag and took out several small, flat wooden cases with sliding lids. Checking them, he each one filled with neatly stacked spirit coins. He eyed them hungrily before putting them back in the bag.

“The information, too,” he demanded from Laront. Laront reached into another pouch and took out three recording crystals.

“This has everything, but do you still need to blackmail your way back into your old job if you’re leaving?”

“No. Now I get to do it for fun.”

“Now, the information, I asked for.”

Derian nodded, picked up a satchel that had been leaning against the leg of his chair, He took out a folder and handed it across the table.

“You’re lucky,” Derian told him. “That team you're interested in has contracts already scheduled for almost two weeks in advance. A couple of sweep-and-clears but mostly investigating the ruins of the fallen Builder cities.”

Laront opened the file, glancing over a few pages before putting the file away in another dimensional bag. Derian was already getting to his feet, which Laront didn't mind. Killing the man in their current location was too traceable.

Derian paused at the door before he left.

“You’re paying for the food right?”

Chapter 530

Tampering With That Kind of Power

Jason and Clive made their way down the stairs in the cloud house and into the waterfall room. The natural stone of the cave it occupied was hidden behind walls, floor and ceiling of cloud stuff which radiated soft, ambient light. Sparkling sunlight streamed in through the waterfall outside the cave entrance that was the only part of the underlying stone that remained visible. The room was empty of furniture, only the staircase in the middle spiralling up into the cloud house through a hole in the ceiling.

The walls were covered in cloud-stuff drawing boards that Jason could write on using his finger like a stick of chalk or even by just thinking about it. Every wall was covered in dense notes and magical diagrams, floor to ceiling, except for the cave where the waterfall rushed past. Between the water feature, the ambient lighting and the walls covered in Jason's writing, it looked like a wizard serial killer had set up his lair in a corporate lobby.

Clive immediately moved over to one of the walls and started skimming his eyes wildly over everything. Jason waited patiently, a smile on his face as Clive slowly made his way around the room.

"Who did this?" Clive asked, not taking his eyes from the walls.

"Me. I've been working on my astral magic for a while."

"Clearly. It's hard to imagine you got this far in just a few years."

"I had the books from Knowledge and Dawn gave me a lot of instruction."

Clive turned from the walls to stare at Jason.

"You had the goddess of Knowledge give you a bunch of books containing astral magic that came from the Builder and were personally instructed in it by one of the most important servants of the World-Phoenix."

"It sounds impressive when you say it like that but they all had their own agendas. None of them came to me out of the kindness of their hearts. They all needed a tool and I was the one sitting on the workbench."

Clive shook his head.

"You know that if it was me, I could have done incredible things."

"Which is exactly why they would never make it you," Jason told him. "When you're using someone you treat them like a mushroom: keep them in the dark and feed them crap. Dawn's a friend but she's still hiding things from me. As for her boss, it doesn't give a wet pile of brown about me beyond the things it needs me to do. Someone like you could peek behind the curtain in a big way so they're never going to give you the chance."

Clive nodded sadly.

“Hey, don’t worry,” Jason said. “I may be a tool, but so was Skynet. I’ll give you that chance.”

“What’s a sky net?”

“It’s a tool that people came up with that gained sentience, went rogue and enslaved what little humanity it didn’t wipe out.”

“I’m assuming that’s a story and not something that happened.”

“Yeah, just a story. The real-life version is called capitalism and it’s way more insidious.”

“Isn’t that a horrifically bad thing?”

“Capitalism? Yeah, it’s a shocker. I do like being rich, though, which is how it gets away with it. Way more effective than naked Austrian cyborgs.”

“Just to be clear, I don’t want an explanation about any of what you just said.”

“The point is that it’s a metaphor. Just because they don’t want you to see the secrets of the universe doesn’t mean that you won’t. You may not know this about me but I’m not big on doing what I’m told.”

“Yes, I’m definitely finding that out for the first time now,” Clive said drily, turning back to examine the walls again.

“You know, some of this is brilliant. A lot of it needs significant work, but even so. There are some strange flaws, though.”

“Flaws?”

“Like here,” Clive said, pointing to a diagram. “Look at the values for this dimensional resonance architecture.”

“Those values are correct,” Jason said.

“According to whom? Where did you derive them, because it’s like they’re just shoved in there.”

“They come from me and I did just shove them in there. The values are correct.”

“Where did they come from?”

“I just know them. I promise you they’re right.”

Clive turned around to face Jason again.

“You just know them?”

“Uh, yep.”

“How could you possibly just know that? The only way that could happen would be if, during your time away, you somehow gained an intrinsic insight into the underpinnings of

physical reality and how it interacts with astral forces on a cosmic scale at a profoundly fundamental level. Which would be absurd, even for you.”

Jason awkwardly shrugged as he scratched his neck and gave Clive an embarrassed smile.

“ARE YOU KIDDING ME?”

“Okay,” Jason said, holding his hands up. “So, I found this magic door...”

Clive was pacing back and forth in the waterfall room like he was trying to dig a trench by wearing down the floor.

“You’re saying that you can just feel astral forces?” he asked Jason. “We’re talking about the stuff of which the cosmos is comprised, unadulterated magic itself, and the rules that govern it. You can just shove your fat head out the side of reality and sniff around like a dog poking its head out of a carriage?”

“Fat head?”

Jason assessed his head size with his hands, his expression worried.

Jason had given his team a rundown of events on Earth but had focused on the practical and emotional issues rather than the technical ones. With just Clive present that had changed, Jason going over everything from transformation zones to spirit realms to the magic door and magical bridge absorbed into his soul. With the constant questions, it had taken hours and it was getting on time for Jason to prepare dinner.

“So, I need to go start getting ready to feed everyone,” Jason said. “I’m guessing I’m fine to leave you here?”

“I have more questions. Significantly more questions.”

“Well, just finishing looking around in here while I’m cooking and we can get back to it after dinner.”

Jason made his way up the stairs as Clive resumed examining the walls. Jason went into the cloud house then stopped and went back to the top of the stairwell.

“And no magic theory at the dinner table,” he called out.

On the balcony overlooking the cliff and the lagoon below, Jason and Farrah’s teams were sat around a long table.

“I’m happy with how this turned out,” Jason said. The people at the table nodded but didn’t pause from eating to comment. Shakshuka was a spiced tomato sauce in which eggs were poached. Gary was already digging more out of one of the pots, his first serving having mysteriously vanished.

“It’s not a traditional shakshuka,” Jason confessed. “The spices are mostly different here and the eggs don’t come from chickens. I think I’m finally getting my head around the local spices, though.”

“Yeah, this is terrible,” Neil mumbled around a mouthful of food. “Give me that pot and I’ll take it away for you.”

Rufus conjured a golden blade and sat it on the table.

“Or I could leave it there,” Neil said.

After the food was done and the dishes cleared away, the table and chairs transformed into loungers as the group laid back to enjoy the evening. The exception was Clive who immediately left the moment dinner was done.

“How did the debrief go?” Gary asked Humphrey and Rufus.

“Frustratingly,” Humphrey said. “We aren’t going to be a part of the investigation into what happened.”

“Traitors are always a contentious problem,” Rufus said. “They want to use people they trust rather than outsiders.”

“They should be using outsiders,” Sophie said. “People can’t betray you if you didn’t trust them in the first place.”

“This has to be the church of Purity right?” Neil said. “They’ve been running around doing gods-know-what while the rest of us have been dealing with the Builder.”

“I don’t see how the purity church got almost all of the essence users in a town to turn,” Humphrey said. “Purity adherents are outcasts now.”

“Desperation,” Belinda said. “You’ve never tasted the desperation of being hungry and powerless and there being nothing you can do about it, Humphrey. When you’re huddled behind walls that feel increasingly flimsy with every passing day, you don’t care about the issues of the powerful people beyond that they were meant to send you food that never arrived.”

“So they just turn around and betray their kingdom and their people?”

“The people in the gutter don’t care about the people in the temples and the palaces,” Sophie said. “Take it from someone who spent a lot of time in one.”

“If the people in the fortress towns had power or influence or wealth,” Belinda said, “they wouldn’t be in fortress towns. They don’t care about the Builder or Purity or the king. The conflicts of guilds and priests and aristocrats mean nothing to them. They just know that they’re hungry and probably going to die.”

“If someone shows up and offers them the help they need when they need it most,” Sophie said, “they won’t care where the help comes from. Great astral beings, dark gods.

Those are the problems of people like us, not people like them. They want secure walls and full bellies and they don't care who gives it to them."

"But we're not talking about the regular civilians," Humphrey argued. "They were slaughtered. It was the people who should have been protecting them that turned. They are concerned about aristocrats and guilds and temples."

"I think you might be overestimating the social strata of these towns, Humphrey," Jason said. "I've seen quite a few of them at this point. Some do have mid-tier aristocrats trying to do the right thing but mostly these are rural nobility who maybe visit Rimaros twice a decade. Core users doing the best they can."

"I agree with Humphrey," Rufus said. "I can buy that you might convince some, maybe even most essence users in a fortress town to throw in with the church of Purity if things get desperate enough. You pick the right town with the right people in it and sure, that's possible. But what we saw doesn't support that. We only found four essence users in the whole town, all iron-rank. That means that all the others turned. All of them. And not just reluctantly, either. Belinda, Farrah. The town defences took time to be undermined the way they were, right?"

"That's right," Farrah said. "It wouldn't be quick and there's no way you get away with it without someone noticing what you're up to. Everyone in that place with any knowledge of artifice at all had to be involved."

"What we found wasn't the result of traitors against people who stayed loyal, which is what we would expect if many or even most of them turned to Purity," Rufus said. "Maybe there were signs covered up by the monster attacks but I have to imagine there would be more left behind than four dead iron-rankers, even if the traitors staged an ambush."

"Jason," Gary said. "When you told us about the Purity people that ambushed you, you mentioned that there was an elf, but their aura read as human, right?"

"That's right," Jason said. "It was weird, but I was pretty distracted at the time. She's locked up in the Builder response unit's secure section of the Adventure Society now. Liara kept saying that she'd send me in to talk to them at some point but I think that was put on the low priority list with all the Builder stuff going on."

"That priority is probably about to change," Rufus said. "The Builder threat in the Sea of Storms is largely neutralised so they're bringing Purity church activity into the Builder response unit's scope of operation, just for the Storm Kingdom."

"The Adventure Society thinks it's the Purity church too, then," Neil said.

"They're right," Gary said. "That elf who's a human on the inside; I've seen something like that before. The aura of a human but the body of something else."

“That must have been before we teamed up,” Rufus said.

“It was. Jason, do you remember the day we met, walking across the desert after escaping that sacrifice chamber.”

“You mean the day I was sucked into another universe, found out magic is real, almost got sacrificed by a cult, killed a bunch of people, found a cannibal kitchen and got magic powers? It rings a bell.”

“We were talking about the different races of the world because you didn’t know them. I mentioned that humans can sometimes act superior.”

“I vaguely remember that. It was a busy day and I think my brain was bleeding at that point. I got hit in the head a lot.”

“When I was growing up, this extremist group of Purity people were operating not far from the village where I grew up. There’s a big town nearby, the local trading hub on the river. The Order of the Redeeming Light, they called themselves. They had this thing about non-humans being impure. These were deep in it, you know? The kind that made Anisa look relaxed.”

“That doesn’t sound likely,” Jason said.

“They wouldn’t have even put up with her,” Gary said. “Because she was an elf. Non-human. Unclean. But they had a thing they did. I don’t know the details, but it was some ritual. The fire of purification or something. They were taking volunteers and turning them human on the inside. Only elves and celestines, though. The ones that look pretty to humans. There were deaths around that time amongst the leonids that people said were these priests, but I don’t know. In the end, more of what you’d call regular Purity priests showed up and moved them out of town. Looking back, though, it seems a lot like they only showed up once that extreme order had gotten as much as they were getting.”

“And people volunteered for this?” Neil asked.

“Supposedly,” Gary said. “They went weird, afterwards, though. Joined that order, left their families. It was bad, but I was just a kid so there was a lot that people wouldn’t tell me. I don’t think all those people signed up voluntarily, though. Why would they? Months later, adventurers came through to investigate the whole thing. I never found out what came of it.”

“Great,” Jason said. “Magical pod people. Looking forward to this.”

“It might be time for you to push Liara about getting in to see those Purity adherents,” Farrah said to Jason.”

“You’ll get your chance tomorrow,” Humphrey said. “Liara will be briefing us on our next contract.”

“What is it that you’re attempting to accomplish with all this?” Clive asked as Jason came down the stairs into the waterfall room. “I’ve figured out that you’re trying to boost or link something, maybe both.”

“I told you about the door and the bridge in my soul,” Jason said.

“Yeah. I’m not sure that messing about inside your soul is the best idea.”

“That ship sailed a long time ago, my friend. While Farrah and I were travelling between worlds, my soul was serving as our dimensional vessel. I could feel the astral around me; the dimensional forces washing over me as I passed through them. It’s a big part of where my insights into astral magic come from and I’m still working on merging what I know with theory I understand.”

“That’s what I figured from your explanation earlier,” Clive said excitedly, “and I had an idea about that. These instincts of yours would be ideal for troubleshooting certain astral magic experiments—”

“Hold on there, Clive. Maybe let me finish explaining one thing before you go all Nazi rocket scientist on another.”

“What’s a... wait, why would I ask you that? Just go on with your explanation.”

“I’m happy to explain the reference.”

“No, I’m fine, thank you.”

“Oh,” Jason said, disappointed. “Anyway, while I was passing through the astral, guided by this bridge inside me, I started thinking about what else it could be used for. The whole reason this door and bridge were made was to stabilise the two worlds, but isn’t using them for just that and nothing else a waste?”

“Jason, we’re talking about objects forged by great astral beings. As exciting as these opportunities are, do you want to go tampering with that kind of power?”

“Clive, these objects don’t just belong to me. They’re a part of me and not a part I’m willing to let go to waste. I know that I’ll be gold, maybe even diamond-rank before I can start fully leveraging them to my own ends but we don’t have to be that ambitious right now. Baby steps. What if we just used them to boost my portal power? Nothing over the top; just bumping up the range and number of people who can go through at a time. Not even that much. It might help us get out of a hairy situation but really it’s a test of what we can do with these things in the future. A careful first step.”

Clive snorted derision.

“Careful my throbbing magic wand. Jason, bumping up the power of one of your essence abilities is a bad idea. If it’s operating at a higher level than your soul can handle,

it'll be like a poison or a disease, slowly eating away at you. It would be like the aftermath of eating a spirit coin except the effects would last longer and longer each time you used the power until eventually becoming permanent. I've seen the results of experiments like that and it's ugly. There's a reason the people who conduct them get hunted down."

"That's why we need a medium to channel the extra power through," Jason said.

"That won't work. The door and the bridge are in your soul. It has to be the medium."

"I thought of that."

Jason walked to the edge of the room and patted the wall.

"The cloud house is a spirit domain. I know I explained the concept but I'm not sure I managed to get across the degree to which the cloud house is a part of me now. I'm talking about adding a function to it that lets me create a portal room that will boost my portal power. Maybe even those of other people once we figure out how to make it work for me."

Clive rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"You think that you have enough of a connection to your cloud flask to make it work?"

"Enough that I'm willing to try."

"You do realise that even if we figure out how to add this as an upgrade to your cloud flask, the materials we have you feed it will be ridiculously rare and expensive, right?"

"Yep. I've figured out the obvious ones, though, and I've brought a lot of them already. Did I mention I'm super-rich?"

"How rich?"

"This one time, I killed and looted Dawn."

"WHAT?"