

## Chapter 466

### Responsible Dad

Two skyships moved side by side through the air. One was a traditional vessel crafted from wood with floatation crystals set into the hull. The other was a monstrosity of rough iron and heavy bolts. Despite their differences, both were running damaged.

The wooden ship had been through rushed patchwork modifications to handle the unusual magic conditions it had passed through. It was too late to undo them now that the magic around them had normalised and the crew were doing their best to keep it running until they reached a port and could put it in dry dock for repairs.

The other ship functioned through wholly different design principles and had no trouble handling turbulent magic. It had suffered battle damage, although the basic functioning of the ship was minimally affected. Clive and Belinda had been careful in destroying as little as possible in shutting off the construct factory that took up the bulk of the vessel.

The wooden ship broke off from the other, diverting from its original destination due to the need for emergency repairs. The passengers and goods aboard would need to be transferred to another vessel before they could resume the journey to Vitesse. The iron ship was not equipped for living passengers, its internal space being taken up by industrial production infrastructure. The closest things to cabins were the storage racks for the constructs aboard.

The iron ship was a prize vessel currently captained by Clive. The other iron skyship sent after them by the vast flying city had been crashed into the ground by the other adventuring party. Rather than deal with all the constructs aboard and the factory producing more, they searched out the ship's flight systems and destroyed them.

Although they had then escaped back to the wooden ship, the other adventurers decided to descend to the ground and get left behind to hunt any constructs still functional after the drop. There was the threat of the floating city and the other airships it sent out, which fortunately had not yet been spotted again. The adventurers insisted on staying anyway, the silver-rankers were confident they would safely make their way out of the badlands.

Below decks in the iron ship, the cavernous, industrial space was lit up by Belinda's lantern familiar, Shimmer. Belinda herself was in the control room, steering the vessel while Clive was making sure none of the damage would send this ship plunging towards the ground as well.

With only the team, Jory and Gary on board, it was good that the design of the ship meant that it could be operated by very little crew. The skyship had originally been piloted by a single cultist using the unthinking constructs for manual tasks, a role Clive and Belinda had passed onto Gary and Humphrey. They also had one more assistant who was more enthusiastic than actually helpful.

“Goodbye, rubbish!” yelled a four-armed, two-headed ogre as he threw a large metal object through a hole in the side of the ship.

“No!” Clive yelled out. “Stash, that wasn’t rubbish. Stop throwing things off of the ship.”

“I am strong and big and strong!” Ogre Stash in a booming voice as he held out four massive hands. “Biscuits please.”

“You ripped a hole in the side of the ship,” Clive complained. “That wasn’t even battle damage.”

“I needed a place to throw the rubbish,” Stash complained.

“IT’S NOT RUBBISH! You’re stripping pieces off the ship and throwing them overboard! HUMPHREY, GET UP HERE.”

A shirtless Humphrey, smeared with dark grease crawled up through a hatch in the floor. He had a large wrench in his hand.

“What?” he asked unhappily. “I’ve almost managed to get that panel off without damaging the thing you said I really need to avoid damaging.”

“Which is pointless,” Clive said, “if your familiar keeps yanking random parts off the ship and tossing them out through the hole in the hull.”

“Gary was meant to be watching him,” Humphrey said. “Where is Gary?”

“Taking a nap,” Belinda’s voice called out from the control room. “I heard a rumbling and thought something had shaken loose, but it turned out he was just snoring really loud. I didn’t have the heart to wake him.”

Humphrey was looking at the hole in the hull.

“That wasn’t there before, was it?” he asked.

“No,” Clive said, his jaw clenched. “No, it was not.”

“What happened?” Humphrey asked.

“What do you think happened?” Clive asked, turning to stare at ogre Stash.

“I’m helping! Poo-head Clive won’t give me biscuits.”

Clive stepped up to the giant ogre, completely unintimidated.

“I’ll give you biscuits, you little—”

“Alright,” Humphrey said, stepping between them and holding up his hands. “Stash, why don’t you go up and see if Sophie has any biscuits.”

The ogre rapidly shrank into a small bird, flapping its wings as it hovered in their air.

“Clive sucks donkey balls,” bird Stash chirped as it flew out the hole.

“Stash!” Humphrey scolded as the bird made good his escape.

Humphrey leaned out of the breach to look down with trepidation where Stash had been throwing things. They had moved out of the sparsely inhabited badlands and were now passing over verdant lands as they grew closer to Vitesse. Now they had the ship to bring back they no longer intended to portal for the last leg of the journey. News of the city and the skyships it released had already been delivered to the Adventure Society by the passengers of the wooden skyship after it stopped in a major city.

“He was throwing things out of here?” Humphrey asked as he drew his head back from the hole.

“You need to get your familiar under control,” Clive said.

“Yes,” Belinda said, emerging from the control room. “Because dragons are famous for responding well to being told what to do. Especially when they have Jason Asano as a role model.”

“It does feel like he takes after Jason more than me,” Humphrey said. “That doesn’t seem fair.”

Belinda laughed, slapping Humphrey on the back.

“That’s because Jason’s the fun uncle and you’re stuck being the responsible dad. You need to impress the little guy.”

“Little?” Clive asked. “He was a massive ogre. If this deck didn’t have extra height to fit the constructs built in here, he wouldn’t fit.”

“I’m not going to run around trying to impress my own familiar,” Humphrey said.

“You should try impressing someone,” Belinda said. “Has Sophie seen this whole half-naked, dirty workman thing you’ve got going on? If not, you should rectify that immediately because it’s a good look for you. Seriously, I’d find an excuse to head up on deck right now. Maybe tell her that Clive had you down that hatch and you need the space up there to do some stretches. Now that I say it, I might come too.”

“You’re piloting the ship!” Clive told her.

“We’re in the sky,” Belinda said. “It’s not there’s anything to run into.”

“This is hardly the time,” Humphrey said and Belinda shook her head at him.

"I don't know if you've noticed how our week is going," she told him, "but I suspect things will be going this way for a while. If you want time, Humpy, you're going to have to make it."

"Please don't call me Humpy."

"Why not? I think it could catch on."

"That's why I don't want you to call me that. Look, I get it. Believe me, I do. But right now we're on a stolen boat and I'm worried my familiar threw something overboard that killed a farmer."

"Oh, you remember that do you?" the increasingly cranky Clive asked. "Lucky for you and your troublemaking lizard, I've got it covered. Just watch."

Humphrey saw the large metal object Stash had thrown float up from the outside of the ship and he shuffled out of the way as it moved in through the hole. Outside of the hull, Onslow the flying tortoise was matching pace with the skyship, several more of Stash's projectiles floating around him.

"He can control metal with one of his shell runes now," Clive explained. "I had a bad feeling when your familiar tore open the side of the ship, so I sent Onslow out as a precaution."

More of the things Stash had thrown out of the ship were floating around Onslow and started moving back into the ship through the hole.

"Could he use that on armoured enemies?" Humphrey asked.

"It's like telekinesis powers," Clive said. "People can block it with their aura. I normally have him use it to throw things at people or use tools. Now that Stash has stopped lobbing things off the ship I can get my non-useless familiar back to actual work."

"Stash isn't useless," Humphrey said. "He's just been a bit excitable since he found out Jason is still alive."

Clive's expression showed his dissatisfaction but he nodded a weary acknowledgement.

"Haven't we all," he said. "Just don't let the little... don't let him back down here."

"I can probably manage that," Humphrey said.

"When do you think we'll see him?" Clive asked. "Jason, I mean."

"I'm not sure. If the monster surge has really started, Jason's out there somewhere but we'll need to report in at the Vitesse Adventure Society branch. It'll be hard to move around until it's over."

"Can't we just not report in?" Belinda asked.

“No,” Humphrey said, his tone brooking no discussion. “No one shirks, not during a monster surge. Especially this monster surge, given what we've learned and what we've now seen for ourselves.”

“Besides,” Clive said. “We'll need the Adventure Society to find him since he could show up anywhere. Communications will be at a premium for a while but Adventure Society records are magically updated across all branches. Jason's a registered member of our team so we can put in a request to be notified of any change in status. Going from dead to alive is a big change in status, so as soon as Jason turns up at a branch, we get notified.”

“Jason's an adventurer,” Humphrey said. “It's not just what he does, but who he is. My mother once said that Jason was the most natural-born adventurer she's ever seen. She told me that because she said it would get him killed and, being Mother, she was right. We saw him die an adventurers death with our own eyes. Wherever he's been, whatever he's been through, I refuse to believe that's changed.”

“Humphrey,” Belinda said. “I warned you to snatch up Sophie before we find Jason and she gets turned around. I'm starting to think that I should have warned her.”

“That's not really a public conversation, Lindy,” Humphrey said. “Wait, what are you talking about?”

“Are you in love with Jason?” she asked.

“What? That's absurd.”

“You didn't just hear yourself,” Clive said. “If I hadn't spent the last year watching you and Sophie dance around each other like awkward teenagers, I'd completely believe it.”

Humphrey went pale.

“You know about... I mean, there isn't anything to...”

His shoulders slumped.

“Does everyone know?”

“Of course they do,” Clive said. “It's completely obvious. But only I had to watch it every damn day. I spend one more night around a campfire with you two swapping winsome glances, I'm going to start throwing rocks.”

“What about Dawn?” Belinda said.

“You think her and Jason?” Clive asked.

“Not that,” Belinda said. “Although, maybe, now you say it. But can't she have the Adventure Society find Jason? She has more pull than any of us. She could find where he is, we go there and register with the local Adventure Society branch there and everything works out.”

“Maybe,” Humphrey said. “If Dawn is willing, it depends on how far into the monster surge he arrives. We aren't going to wait around not participating. When the monster surge starts, you show up and do your bit. That's just how it works.”

“We should be doing our bit with Jason,” Clive said and Belinda nodded her agreement.

“The Adventure Society isn't entirely inflexible,” Humphrey said. “If he's somewhere Mother has been, they might let her go fetch him back. It's a question of whether the branch he's at permits him to go and if Mother gets enough time free. The demand on gold-rankers is especially heavy during monster surges.”

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Stash flew up to where Sophie, Neil and Jory were leaning on the rail of the open deck watching the land pass by underneath them. He turned into a puppy and landed in Sophie's arms to get a scratch behind the ears.

“Biscuit, please.”

“Did Humphrey say you could have a biscuit?” Sophie asked. Neil and Jory shared a look over how much she sounded like a woman who suspected her child had asked his dad for something first and was told to ask his mother.

“Yes!” Stash said. “I'm a good boy who helps out.”

Sophie matched the innocent puppy eyes with a suspicious glare.

“Alright,” she said finally and took a biscuit from the dimensional pouch on her belt. She smiled as Stash happily ate it from her hand.

“Look,” Jory pointed, Sophie and Neil looking up. A large orb was flying towards the two airships much faster than either one could move under even the best conditions. The orb looked like a snow globe without any snow, containing a full-scale quaint little cottage.

“Well, she did say she would contact us again before we reached the city,” Neil said. “It still seems weird that she flies around in a cottage, though. She's like the villain in a fable for kids.”