

## Chapter 908

### Making Things Worse

Being less central had left Segurado vulnerable, lower priority meaning fewer resources and weaker troops. The same thing affected the more isolated messenger groups, making them ripe for Jason and his companions to strike. The team had zigzagged down the Pallimustus equivalent of South America, hitting targets of opportunity fed to them by the Adventure Society.

Their navigation continued to prioritise sightseeing over efficiency as they left the continent behind. Although their path would take them to the southern tip of what, on Earth, was Africa, they chose to take a wide curve over the south pole rather than a more direct route.

The Pallimustus version of Antarctica was not the icy wasteland it was on Earth. Known as the Dragon Lands, it was the native land of the large, scaled humanoids known as draconians. Rather than the populace, however, the island continent was named for its signature geological features.

Where Greenstone had many apertures to an astral space that provided the desert with water, the Dragon Lands had subterranean apertures to a realm of fire. The result of this was a land filled with active volcanoes, steaming hot springs and the flame geysers known as 'dragon mouths,' for which the region was named.

The whole team came out to watch as the sky ship approached the coast, giving them their first look. Mountains of dark stone jutted from verdant, green lowlands, a mix of sprawling forest and vast agriculture. From altitude, they could make out the outline of fields as if the land below them was a giant map with borders drawn onto it. The plant life was very different from the tropical and subtropical climates they had been passing through, reminding Jason more of Scotland or Ireland.

"There are a lot of active volcanos, right?" Jason asked. "Do they have an ash cloud problem?"

"We're definitely going to see them," Zara said. "But the magic leaking out of the astral spaces has earth affinity, along with fire. It draws the ash from the sky, and absorbs it into the group, creating the famously rich farmlands. If you want gold-rank cooking ingredients, there's no place better than here. It's how they make a lot of their money."

"I thought the draconians were all isolationist," Jason said. "They do a lot of trade?"

“Exports,” Neil said. “Agricultural products from the Dragon Lands are the second-largest trade that passes through the Greenstone port, after low-rank spirit coins. They use proxies outside their own lands, though, and aren’t very welcoming to strangers.”

“Their goods are heavily tariffed by most nations due to political issues,” Zara explained. “That makes it even more expensive than high-rank produce normally is. The quality is what gets people buying it anyway, but obviously that falls under the luxury food market.”

“I did hear the food they produced was good,” Jason said.

“Jason,” Neil asked. “Why did we come here again?”

“It’s a tour,” Jason said. “We decided on this route when we left Rimaros.”

“Before fifteen years of war with the messengers made an already xenophobic people even more wary of outsiders. Is this about anything other than you getting a line on cheap ingredients? Can’t you just make as much money as you want and buy this stuff somewhere more hospitable?”

“There’s a value in farm fresh,” Jason said defensively. “It’s going to be fine.”

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Astral kings rarely mingled their forces, to avoid confusing the most critical element of messenger culture: hierarchy. When operating on a large scale, like a planetary invasion, cooperation was managed through regular meetings between Voices of the Will, the commanders of each astral king’s local forces.

Navise Den Rigal’s astral king was a minor figure, compared to the Council of Kings, and secretly one of the Unorthodoxy’s rare astral kings. Every Voice of the Will paid close attention when they met with others of their kind, but Navise was especially sensitive to any change that might signal a danger to her king’s true allegiance. Slipping Boris Ket Lundi into Vesta Carmis Zell’s service had already been more risk of exposure than she or her astral king liked.

When she arrived at a messenger stronghold, she went straight for the meeting room. It was a spherical chamber accessed through a hole in the ceiling, and the group met by floating in a circle. She noticed a number of missing attendees, all Voices belonging to members of the Council of Kings. Looking around, she saw that others had noticed the same thing, and shared her wariness. It did not take being a secret traitor to be cut down by other messengers.

As the discussion began, it quickly became evident that this wasn’t related to the Unorthodoxy, but to a much more localised threat. The Voices stood around a projection

showing a zigzag pattern across the lower half of one of the planet's continents. Navise listened to a pair of her fellows argue without interjection, as did the rest of the group.

"There is no reason for us to not put together a force and strike them down. They are being allowed to rampage through our territories unabated."

"They have left our territories. They are someone else's problem now."

"Yes. Our failure to quash a handful of insignificant locals will be a stain on our names forever."

"I would hardly call the Heretic King insignificant."

"That is a fool's title to keep the pawns from getting confused."

"It's not working. There is talk of a traitor astral king and of what that means. That is the kind of thinking that leads to the Unorthodoxy. My astral king will not be happy if I have to purge most of my forces again."

"Then let's kill the source. If we destroy his avatar, we won't have to deal with him again until we are done with this planet."

"Killing him has been tried before, when he was far weaker. More importantly, the Council of Kings had specifically instructed us not to provoke him."

"And none of our astral kings belong to the council. My king proposes that we collect our forces, set a trap and crush Asano."

The pair were unable to reach a consensus and would not let it go until each of the others said their piece. Most of the group advocated letting it go, moving any forces out of the Heretic King's path to minimise losses. When pushed, Navise took her usual path of following the group to avoid standing out.

"I say we simply allow the king to pass," she said. "In the end, the issue is one of being inconsequential."

The main advocate for killing Asano scoffed.

"If he is inconsequential, then what harm is there in killing him?"

"I speak not of him, but of us," Navise said. "He is not inconsequential to us, or we would not be having this meeting. We are inconsequential to him. He strikes at us incidentally, as opportunity presents. We should minimise his opportunities, reserving our forces, and simply let him pass. We can resume our operations once he is gone, having lost fewer people and revealed less information."

As Navise looked around the circle, all now staring at her, she realised she had made a mistake.

"We are inconsequential?" One of the others asked.

Anything resembling humility was not the thinking of an orthodox messenger. A wave of power flooded from Navise, slamming the others into the wall as she bolted for the hole in the ceiling.

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Anna took the coffee from the street vendor and started trudging back to her office. Once again, she was running on not enough sleep, but felt no concern for her safety as she took a shortcut through an alleyway. She might not have combat training, but she was silver rank. Anyone who could bring her trouble wouldn't need to use an alley.

"You aren't as safe as you think," a voice said, stepping out of the shadows, startling her.

"There are people watching me, you know, Mr Remore."

"No, there aren't."

"Oh. Will they live?"

"By silver-rank standards, they're practically unharmed. It's become hard to have a discreet conversation with you, Mrs Tilden."

"Everyone wants to know what's going on in your territory. We've seen your people reclaiming the area, but there's only so much that the many, many satellites pointing at your territory can show us. Then there's the vampires acting up, globally no less. Presumably in response to whatever happened to the vampire army formerly occupying your clan territory. An army that seems to have vanished entirely during some manner of surveillance blackout. Then there are the ongoing concerns about the System and Asano's potential return."

"Not potential. Six months to a year is the current timetable."

"How solid are those numbers?"

"Things can happen, especially with Jason. But he seems confident."

"He always does. You're in regular contact?"

"His power grows, and he can reach out to us with ease, now. When he returns, it won't be like last time he was here."

"If he's strong enough to settle old grudges—"

"That's not what he wants. He wants to come home without making things worse. For his return to be peaceful. He believes that you can help make that happen."

"And how does he expect me to manage that?"

"He is aware that his understanding of the political realities he's walking into is shallow. He wants to hire you to be his senior political advisor for Earth affairs."

"Does he have someone doing that for the other world's politics?"

“He does.”

“I don’t know what you expect from me. Nigel Thornton vanished into the Asano Clan and didn’t come out.”

“He wanted to. He considers himself to have an obligation to you, which I respect. But the moment he shows up in an airport, someone or other will try and take him into custody. They’d try to do the same to me, thus my discretion.”

“How badly did you hurt the people following me? I’m not sure ‘practically unharmed’ means the same thing to you as me.”

“What have I ever done that you would think me a savage?”

“I saw what your world did to Jason Asano.”

“And I saw what yours did. At least on mine, we stab people in the front. I did less to the people following you than I would have in my world. More than if they were here to protect you, instead of to watch for someone like me contacting them. But silver rankers heal well.”

Anna shook her head.

“I need to retire.”

“Perhaps just a change of employer.”

“That’s what you want? For me pack up my wife and move to the middle of vampire-infested Europe?”

“You did it before. You were the first UN liaison to the Asano Clan.”

“Yeah, and that position fell apart once the French realised the clan had no intention of giving back the chunk of their country they took. I don’t see the UN or anyone else being more accommodating once Asano is back.”

“Which is why Jason wants your help. France hasn’t existed for almost two decades. You can talk about governments in exile all you like, but the reality is that your world has undergone a fundamental change. The sooner the people who rule it understand that, the sooner they can stop fighting over the ashes of a world that no longer exists. It’s time to look to the future, and Jason wants to help this world understand that.”

“Is that his intention? To come back and fix the world according to his standards? It’s certainly in character.”

“You will find that Jason is not the blunt object he once was. That he wants your guidance should tell you that, but yes, he’s the same in many ways. He has power and wants to use it for good, and that hasn’t changed in all the time I’ve known him. What has changed is his realisation ‘good’ is a more nuanced concept than he understood when he was younger. He wants your help figuring out how to act responsibly, and that starts with

how he returns. The first job he would have you work on is figuring out how he comes back without the world deciding to go to war with him.”

“He could give them the things they want.”

“Tell that to him, Mrs Tilden. I’m just a messenger today.”

Anna sighed.

“My experience tells me that he wants me to smooth things over because he wants to keep his toys to himself. That he realises he can’t fight the whole world to keep them. But that’s not who he was, when I knew him. The man I knew *would* fight the whole world, if it came to that.”

Rufus chuckled.

“It seems that you do know him. Come to Europe, Mrs Tilden. You don’t have to make any decision now. Talk to Jason. Talk to Nigel.”

“Even if I was willing to consider it, you know I’ll need to clear this. I’m not going to sneak off with you in the night.”

“It’s ten-thirty in the morning, Mrs Tilden. And I suspect that your people will be more than happy to get some eyes on the inside.”

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The sky ship accelerated rapidly out of Dragon Lands airspace. Clive scurried down one of the airship’s hallways, casting anxious glances behind him.

“CLIVE!” Humphrey’s voice roared as he stormed around a corner and into the hall. “What in the goddess of pain’s needle pit were you thinking?”

Clive stopped and let out a nervous laugh.

“Did we get away?” he asked.

“Yes. And we’re not being chased, thanks to Stash being an actual dragon. Why did you go into that temple?”

“It wasn’t an actual temple. They venerate dragons rather than gods; there’s no divine power there. It’s more of an academic hall dedicated to draconic magic. I didn’t know they’d get so angry about me going in.”

“They had a sign out front that read ‘outsiders strictly forbidden!’ In adventuring circles, Clive, that is what is referred to AS A CLUE!”

“I actually went in at the side, not the front. And it wasn’t a big sign. More of a plaque, really.”

Humphrey conjured his sword and Clive bolted down the hall, Humphrey chasing after him. Jason, Sophie and Belinda watched them go, having been drawn by Humphrey’s yelling.

"I'm just glad it wasn't my fault," Jason said.

"I'm not," Sophie said. "My money was on you getting us chased off on the morning of the second day. How did you last a whole week without causing trouble?"

"I've been working on my diplomacy. Belinda, did you make a betting pool again?"

"Yeah, and Clive made me a bundle by beating you out. And if he'd just asked me, I'd have gotten him in there without anyone being the wiser."

"You know," Jason said, "people always accused me of getting us into these things, but I'm starting to suspect that all of you are the real troublemakers. Except Zara. I'm not the biggest fan of royalty, but at least she was trained to have some decorum."

Jason watched Belinda and Sophie share a look.

"What aren't you telling me?" he asked.

"So," Sophie began, "there was this draconian prince. Not much of a prince. One of those eighty-seventh in line for the throne types. He decided that Zara was going to be his fourth wife, and didn't see much point in consulting Zara on that decision."

"What happened to the prince?" Jason asked. "When things happen to princes, it tends to get around. I can't tell if not having heard anything is good or bad. Is this what it's like running around with me?"

Sophie and Belinda nodded in unison.

"Let's just say that we were on the way to suggest we skip town when Clive got in trouble," Sophie told him.

"Yeah, that imprisoning ritual is going to hold the prince for another day, tops," Belinda said. "And that's assuming no one finds him. I assume someone will be looking for him."

"Not his first three wives, if his personality is anything to go by," Sophie said. Belinda snorted a laugh.

"What's this about an imprisoning ritual?" Jason asked.

"Well," Belinda said, "I wanted to disappear the guy, but Stella thought killing him was a bad idea."

"I'm very confident it was."

"I don't know. Leaving him alive might be worse, after Zara's response to his proposal. I didn't even know you could put storm magic inside someone's—"

"No need to talk about that," Zara said, sticking her head out of a cabin door. "Humphrey doesn't need to hear anything about it."

She retreated into the room, only for her head to immediately shoot back out.

"Neither does my father."

Jason sighed.

“Her father is definitely going to hear about it, isn’t he?”

“Oh, yeah,” Belinda said. “She left stains in that room that I’m not sure crystal wash could get out. Why he had so much—”

“Let’s skip the details,” Jason said. “For now, at least, while I go talk to Danielle about this. I expect we’ll want all the grisly details later.”