

Chapter 191

Looking Forward

In the waiting room of Jory's clinic, Jason chatted with Jory's assistant, Janice, until Jory emerged from the treatment rooms in the back with a patient.

"Jason," Jory cheerfully greeted, after sending the patient on her way. "It's good to see you in person instead of just hearing you through your voice chat power. You know that weird message popping up to say you want to contact me can be disturbing, right?"

"Disturbing?"

"Remember the other day, you tried to contact me and I refused?"

"I figured you were busy with a patient."

"I was in the bath! It felt like you were watching me. It was creepy."

"Sometimes I just don't have time for a personal visit. The team's been busy with training."

"That much I know. I've barely seen Belinda, lately."

"Can you spare me a few minutes now?" Jason asked.

Jory glanced around the waiting room, which was around half full, then gave Janice a questioning glance.

"A few minutes shouldn't throw things too badly off," she said. "A *few* minutes."

"Come on," Jory said. "I'll make us some tea. Would you like one, Janice?"

"That would be lovely," she said with a sweet smile.

Jory led Jason back into the room he and whatever healer priest was on duty used to relax if things got too tense. It had a large cooler box and cupboards full of snacks and beverages. A large window looked out onto the courtyard where Jason, Rufus, Gary and Farrah used to train. Far from the dirt yard it was back then, it was nicely tiled, with standing and wall planters adding pleasant greenery.

"We've come a long way," Jory said, following Jason's gaze. "It was only in the summer that you were hopelessly lost, madly training in a dirty back lot. Now this place is a thriving medical centre and you're a big-time adventurer."

"This is only the beginning," Jason said. "Now I'm looking toward bronze rank. I think I can get there before I've been here a year. For sure, if the monster surge comes. All those monsters in that astral space sent my abilities shooting up. Same for everyone who doesn't use monster cores."

“I know,” Jory said. His voice was a complaint to Jason’s enthusiasm, despite talking about the same thing. “Mine did the same. I’ve never had the money to go spending on monster cores and I’m definitely not interested in hunting for them.”

“You’ve got the skills,” Jason said, “but I think you’re in the right place. There’s plenty of us out there killing monsters. We need more people helping those who need it the most. I really admire you for that.”

“Thank you, Jason. That means a lot.”

“Also, I need forty gallons of crystal wash.”

“Wait, what? Forty gallons?”

“If I could get in it a barrel that would be good. Maybe one of those big kegs that Norwich uses, with the little tap. That would be convenient.”

“What? Are you insane? Are you trying to soak your whole houseboat in the stuff?”

“Actually, kind of yes,” Jason said. “Emir warned me that it would require certain additional materials, especially early on, to fuel the various amenities. The cloud-stuff automatically cleans itself and anything in it. Have you ever noticed how you get out of the cloud bed feeling like you’ve just had a refreshing shower?”

“You know I’ve been...”

“Jory, we all know about you and Belinda.”

“You do?”

“Jory, I’m connected to the houseboat. I know anyone who comes aboard and where they are at all times. Even if I didn’t, Humphrey and I have been watching you sneak off in a dishevelled state every morning. I don’t even know why you’re hiding it. There’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I wouldn’t want to impinge on her reputation.”

“Jory, she’s a convicted criminal.”

“I was raised a certain way,” Jory said defensively. “I was taught that there’s a proper process to courting a lady.”

“Why didn’t you do that, then?”

“I was working up to it. Then she kind of grabbed me and dragged me off to her room.”

“At least she’s sensible,” Jason said. “Anyway, the cloud beds. Like everything else on the houseboat, the cloud-stuff cleans whatever’s in it. Unfortunately, the houseboat has used up whatever resources it started with for cleaning. Emir warned me that a lot of resources would need topping off early and now I need a bunch of pure quintessence and a full barrel of crystal wash. Luckily, most the Purity temple’s assets were seized and Clive

reckons he can get his hands on the quintessence I need. That just leaves the crystal wash.”

“Jason, that amount is crazy. A whole barrel?”

“Now, come on, Jory. I know for a fact that you massively increased the production with all those fancy foreign nobles in town. I’m willing to bet you have a decent amount stockpiled away.”

“I sold most of it,” Jory said. “The visiting adventurers are all gone now. Except Prince Valdis, who buys almost as much of the stuff as you.”

Jory looked down, scratching the back of his head absently as he let out a sigh.

“I can probably make that work,” he conceded. “I’m going to use that production space currently on crystal wash for the lesser miracle potion, but I’m still sourcing the materials I need. “That will be the engine to fund the clinic going forward. I suppose I could keep production up until then. I could have that much crystal wash by the end of the month.”

“Thanks,” Jason said gratefully. “I’ll pay full price, instead of the usual mate’s rates. I’ll be taking up a good chunk of your production, after all.”

“That’s appreciated,” Jory said. “Getting the church of the Healer’s assistance has been great but we still run some tight margins. That miracle potion money will be coming in eventually, but I used the last of the leftover money from the renovations on importing the materials.”

“Seems like the more money we make, the more we need, right?”

“No kidding,” Jory said. “Where are your costs coming in?”

“Preparing for bronze rank,” Jason said. “I don’t know when I’ll be able to get back to a big city, so I picked up the materials to resummon my familiars at bronze. I thought I’d be flush with coin after auctioning off those essences but I’ve pretty much got it all earmarked for preparing new equipment, materials for the house boat, summoning rituals, it just goes on and on.”

Jason let out a weary sigh. “I should let you get back to it then,” Jason said. “I need to go spend some more money.”

“You aren’t training today?” Jory asked.

“Humphrey and I are both having our rank reassessments at the Adventure Society this afternoon,” Jason said. “We decided to give the others a rest day. You should knock off early, go see Belinda. In fact, the symphony is playing tonight. Take her and use my private viewing booth.”

“You have a private booth?”

“I go whenever I get the chance,” Jason said. “That hasn’t been as much as I’d like, lately. I’ll swing by and make sure they know to let you use it. You have a good suit, right Jory?”

“Uh...”

“Oh, dear,” Jason said, shaking his head. He took a carousel of recording crystals from his inventory, looking through them until he picked one out and told Jory to stand still.

“What are you doing?” Jory asked as Jason moved slowly around him, waving the crystal up and down his body.

“This is a specialised recording crystal to take clothing measurements,” Jason told him. “I know a guy who’ll do a rush job for me without compromising quality. You’re lucky he’s actually my next stop.”

“You carry around a crystal specifically for clothing measurements?”

“A good adventurer is always prepared.”

“Mr Asano,” Gilbert greeted as Jason entered Gilbert’s Resilient Attire For the Discerning Gentleman. “Excellent timing. I was just having Emil take everything to the fitting room.”

“You’ve reached iron rank,” Jason said, shaking Gilbert’s hand. “Finally picked up that last essence.”

“Yes, I finally went and did it,” Gilbert said. “All my cloth essence abilities hit bronze years ago but I was resistant to more essences for a long time. Never seemed quite right to take essences that others could make use of to help people. Age and health are humbling, however. With the market the way it is, right now, I was running out of reasons not to get the others. I’ve been absorbing monster cores but I’m still a long way from bronze and the extra years it will buy me.”

Gilbert led Jason into the generous fitting room just as his assistant appeared, pushing a long rack of clothes from the back room on a wheeled trolley. As Emil departed to fetch the next one, Gilbert started showing Jason the outfits.

“Your winter wardrobe,” Gilbert declared. “As requested, this is largely in the Vitesse style, with the flourishes we discussed previously.”

Jason had long admired Emir’s dress sense, which he discovered was largely down to Constance. She had been kind enough to consult when Jason decided to buy his clothes for the cooler months. Between her advice and Gilbert’s expertise, Jason’s winter wardrobe was sleek, fitted and sharp. The colours were more earthy and sober than local Greenstone fashion, which favoured explosions of bright hues.

“It was engaging to work with something different to the local palate,” Gilbert said. “I am quite satisfied with the result.”

“So you should be,” Jason said with admiration. “You’ve outdone yourself, Bert.”

“Thank you, sir. With the mild winters, here, mid-weight fabrics are perfect. Included, of course, are some subtle enchantments to maintain the comfort level whether to day trends hot or cool. Off course, there is a selection of outfits that trend one way or the other. I have included an array of winter colours in the Vitesse fashion; dark greens and burgundies, the expected blacks, greys and blues. Some very nice browns; dark and rich as well as a deep caramel Miss Constance referred to as brandy. I’ve also included some lighter selections, of course, and the expected formal wear for various occasions.

Jason started putting the clothes away, opening the outfits tab of his inventory and placing each ensemble into its own set.

“Is there anything else I can do for you today?” Gilbert asked as Jason stowed one outfit after another.

“Actually yes,” Jason said. “A couple of things. One is rush job, just some basic formal wear for a friend that you can put on my tab.”

“You have his measurements?” Gilbert asked.

“Of course,” Jason said. “I picked up the crystal you suggested.”

“Very good.”

“The other job is non-urgent,” Jason said. “It’s time I started looking ahead and thinking about bronze rank. My combat robe is fantastic but I will need to upgrade.”

“Well-made adventuring garb is about matching material and craftsmanship to purpose,” Gilbert said. “You are wise to start thinking about it now, so we can put together exactly what you need.”

“Actually, there’s something I’ve been keeping up my sleeve for a long time on that front,” Jason said. He continued taking outfits off the racks and putting them away in his inventory as Emil hauled out more trolleys. Three were hanging racks while a fourth was a box trolley packed with underclothes and other sundry items.

“You got the love hearts on the boxer shorts just right,” Jason said as he rubbed the material between his fingers. “This texture is incredible. You were spot on to suggest the mist valley silk.”

“I import a large supply each year,” Gilbert said. “I’ve found it to be an exceptional choice for underclothes with our particular winter climate.”

Jason started looping ties around his neck, tying them before adding them to his outfits. He matched the knot to the outfit, whether a simple four in hand knot, a nice, clean

Pratt knot or a bold full Windsor. He even added a flamboyant trinity knot to a couple of the most outgoing outfits.

“I must confess, Mr Asano, I was uncertain about the noose but it does have a way of bringing an outfit together.”

“How many times, Bert? It’s a tie, not a noose.”

“I was concerned that your opponents might not see it that way should you find yourself in an unexpected engagement, Mr Asano. This shop provides *resilient* attire for the discerning gentleman, after all. I had an enchantment placed on the ties to prevent them from being used to choke you.”

“Very considerate, Bert.”

“Consideration is my watchword.”

“As it turns out, though, I don’t actually need to breathe.”

“Do you need to chant spells?” Gilbert asked.

“That’s a fair point,” Jason acknowledged.

He used the room’s full length mirror to adjust before putting everything away. then dark smoke manifested around him briefly, before vanishing to reveal Jason in one of his new outfits. He adjusted his tie slightly now it was incorporated into the ensemble.

“Well?” he asked.

“I may not be an impartial judge, Mr Asano, but I would say you look very dapper.”

To Jason’s eye it had more of a gothic flair, compared a suit from his old world. The patterned embroidery of the vest and the flourishes on the long jacket that swept in at the waist before reaching down to mid-thigh. He gave a little shuffle, finding his movement utterly unimpeded. The shoes looked stylish but felt like athletic footwear.

“Superlative, Bert. You’re a credit to your profession.”

“Thank you, Mr Asano.”

“I have meeting with the Adventure Society, so I think I’ll wear it out.”

“Of course. Before you go, Mr Asano, you mentioned having something up your sleeve?”

“Right, yes.” Jason said. He wandered over to a table at the side of the room and retrieved a large bolt of dark material from his inventory. “I’ve been holding onto this for a while. What do you make of it, Bert?”

Bert moved up next to Jason and ran his finger lightly over the material. It was dark, matte and cool to the touch.

“Snakeskin,” he said. “Umbral snake, probably the mountain variety. Strong affinities for darkness and poison. Bronze rank, and it’s infused with some kind of odd magic. It almost feels intrinsic, rather than externally imposed, but…”

Gilbert frowned. “Was this a familiar?”

“It was,” Jason said. “Is that a problem?”

“In terms of the value of the material, just the opposite,” Gilbert said. “My concerns are ethical. You don’t get familiars without essence users.”

“You’re aware of the people running around causing trouble in the astral spaces.”

“Cultists or something,” Gilbert’s assistant said from off to the side. “It’s almost all anyone wants to talk about, these days.”

“Yes,” Gilbert said, giving his assistant a nod. “The competition held by the gold-ranker distracted people for a while – congratulations again, by the way – but they’re back to all this unnerving talk. Strange forces from beyond reality and the madmen that worship them. It’s as unpleasantly disconcerting as it is monotonous. Fear isn’t a look that matches any outfit to be found in this store.”

“Fear is to be expected,” Jason said. “The threat is real and it falls to more powerful people than us to stop it. About half a year ago, however, I ran across one of those cultists and he tried to kill me. After he died, his familiar tried to kill me too.”

He patted the material.

“This is its skin.”

“Good riddance, then,” Gilbert said. “We should see if we can’t make something of it to help you deal with more of them.”

“If the familiar was bronze-rank,” Emil said, “then the cultist must have been, as well, right.”

“That’s right,” Jason said.

“You’re only iron-rank, though,” Emil said.

“Back then, I wasn’t even that. Didn’t even have my first essence.”

“Then how did you beat them?” Emil asked.

“I got lucky,” Jason said. “Things that attack me have this way of ending up dead.”

“Do go on, Emil,” Gilbert said, dismissing his assistant.

“Yes, boss. Uh, can I ask you something before I go, Mr Asano.”

“Emil,” Gilbert admonished.

“It’s fine,” Jason said. “Go ahead, Emil.”

“Did all those gods really appear to thank you in person?”

“Gods turning up is hardly a big deal,” Jason said. “Spend some time at the Divine Square; they pop up with fair regularity. And I’d hardly call it ‘all those gods’ when it was barely a half-dozen.”

“Out with you,” Gilbert said, shooing his assistant out of the fitting room.

“He’ll be telling that story all over, Mr Asano. You’ve built up quite the reputation with recent events. A local boy, beating out all those fancy foreign adventurers? Princes and princesses, no less.”

“I’m not exactly local,” Jason said. “In fact, I’m about as far from local as it comes.”

“You’re a local now,” Gilbert said with a laugh. “You’ve been co-opted. Nothing earns good will like success.”

“So, this material is something you can work with?”

“I certainly can. If you’re willing to leave it with me I can investigate the best options.”

“Good, because it was a pretty big snake,” Jason said, taking out a second bolt of the material.

“Oh, my,” Gilbert said. “There’s certainly enough for two sets of armour here, probably three. Possibly even four, depending on how we use it. Were you looking at spares, or do you want something for your agile lady friend as well? This material should be useful for something that would suit her.”

Sophie, like Jason, used highly flexible armour made from trap weaver leather. Gilbert only catered to the discerning gentleman, but had a lady friend of his own. On Gilbert’s recommendation they had taken the trap weaver leather to Brenda’s Massacre Emporium, elsewhere in the trade hall.

“Sophie might want something that better combines flexibility and defence,” Jason said. “Stealth and poison doesn’t fit her power set.”

“Then would you like me to take the liberty of keeping an eye out for appropriate materials? I can have Brenda do the same.”

“That would be great,” Jason said. “For the whole team, in fact. How about I have them come in for a chat so you know what to look for.”

“A prescient idea, Mr Asano.”

Chapter 192

Adventurers Are People Too

Jason rode the elevating platform up through the Adventure Society administration building, arriving on the fifth floor. There was a new reception desk, installed as part of the changed being implemented by the inquiry team. Behind the desk was a familiar face.

“Bert,” Jason greeted him. “They’ve moved you upstairs. Is it the new essences?”

“It is,” Albert said. “Getting the full set is the way off the bottom rung in the Adventure Society. Or anywhere else, for that matter. Seems the higher-ups liked that I didn’t let them take Miss Sophie away when she was locked up in the prison tower.”

“Miss Sophie and myself both appreciate it as well,” Jason said. “It’s nice to see integrity being rewarded.”

“Is that one of the suits Gilbert was making for you?” Albert asked.

“It certainly is,” Jason said.

“Well, if you don’t mind me saying, Mr Asano, you’re looking quite sharp.”

“Thank you,” Jason said. “We have a saying where I come from: the suit makes the man. In a characteristic display of Bertinelli family excellence, your brother has made quite the man of me.”

“Thank you for saying, Mr Asano. You can go ahead and wait in the conference room.”

“I know the way. Thanks Bert.”

Jason went through to the conference room and sat down to wait. In the meantime, he pulled out a hefty tome of magical theory, opening to where he had marked his place with a ribbon and started reading. It wasn’t one of the new books Gabrielle had handed over, as they were too advanced, but a more foundational text he inherited from Farrah.

The books Knowledge had delivered to him fell directly into Clive’s field of astral magic, all focused on one specific aspect: dimensional transgression. Portals, teleportation and even the basic theories of passing between worlds. Clive had almost exploded with surprise when he first perused the books to glean their purpose.

“I don’t know if this is enough to get you to your world or back,” Clive had excitedly told Jason, “but it gets us orders of magnitude closer.”

Clive had been spending every moment not spent training buried in the books. They turned out to build on work he found amongst Landemere Vane’s notes, seized back from the church of Purity.

Jason closed the book and put it away as the door opened to admit Elspeth Arella and Tabitha Gert, the stern-faced leader of the inquiry team. He stood up to greet them, Arella shaking her head seeing that Jason had been sitting at the head of the table.

“Arella,” he said with a nod. “Interim Director.”

“Actually,” Gert said, “Director Arella has resumed her full duties as the inquiry comes toward a close. You may address me by my regular rank of Inspector.”

“Very well, Inspector,” Jason said.

Jason took in Gert at a glance, from the tightly bound hair and prim, plain clothes to the way her cold eyes surveyed her surroundings and seemed to find them wanting. Her resting expression exuded disapproval, as if she had a general expectation that the world at large would fail to live up to her standards.

Given his style of interpersonal relations, Jason had learned to swiftly assess how certain people would respond to his particular brand of provocational insouciance. He recognised immediately that the inspector was the kind of person with zero tolerance for the informal affability that was his strong suit. With people like that he would either crank it right up or dial it right back. It was a matter of what he needed from the interaction and how much he felt they deserved a prod. From everything he had heard, Tabitha Gert was a rigid, but even-handed woman, carrying out her job with stark professionalism. As he felt that integrity was deserving of respect, he kept his normal inclinations subdued.

Gert waved Jason to one side of the table as she and Arella sat opposite.

“Mr Asano,” Gert began. “In the course of our inquiry in to the general culture of this Adventure Society branch, your name has been appearing significantly more often than is appropriate for an iron-ranker. Which is to say, at all. Garnering the attention of the influential and powerful too early in your career is an excellent way for that career to reach an early and ignominious end.”

“I agree,” Jason said. “All I can say in my defence is that I made what I felt to be the right choice at each stage. I recognise, of course, that such a course often leads to places I never intended or wanted to go. I’m told that is a common situation for outworlders to find themselves in.”

Gert nodded, although even that affirming action somehow came across as disapproving.

“Your rank was reduced as part of the initial sweep of demotions,” Gert said. “From our brief initial assessments, your promotions had a smell of politics to them. That they were part of some kind of game Arella was playing.”

Arella remained silent and impassive, not reacting to the mention of her name or the postulation on her motives.

“I have no doubt that was a factor,” Jason said. “I like to think that my capabilities made it an easy pill to swallow, but naturally that is not an impartial opinion.”

“Do you think you deserve three stars, Mr Asano?” Gert asked.

“From what I’ve seen of the demands on adventurers, yes. At least at iron rank.”

“I’m inclined to agree,” Gert said, surprising Jason. She seemed built for delivering news you didn’t want to hear.

“I read your report of the contract surrounding the land in the forestry district. It was thorough and well-recorded. I look very favourably on thorough reports. Delivering that report directly to the upper levels of the administration was also well-considered. Your handling of a politically delicate situation demonstrated sound judgement. You also took being excluded from a prestigious expedition with equanimity, putting your energy into completing contracts. At the iron-rank level, this is more than sufficient to warrant a three star promotion.”

“I don’t imagine things are quite that simple, though,” Jason said.

“Indeed. Frankly, you have demonstrated a capability above your rank. The problem is that in doing so, you’ve demonstrated that you consider your rank to be below you. I am aware that you surround yourself with bronze, silver and even gold rankers, but you are not one of them. I have no doubt that you will climb higher, but before restoring your promotion, I would like to see a demonstration that you understand that you are, for the moment, an iron-ranker.”

Jason nodded.

“I surmised that something like this would come up during the reassessment,” Jason said, “and I have given it some consideration. I think I have a proposal that will work for everyone involved.”

“And what is this proposal, Mr Asano?”

“A road contract,” he said.

“A punishment detail,” Gert mused. “Interesting.”

“My reputation is riding high, right now,” Jason said. “Ostensibly, I should be swimming in accolades. But if you assign me a punishment detail and I eat it without complaint, then it will be a public demonstration of my respect for the Adventure Society’s authority.”

“What’s in it for you?” Arella asked, speaking for the first time.

“My team has been undergoing an intensive training period. Going out and facing some real-world challenges is exactly what we need right now. In my world they call it a shakedown cruise. It will allow me to show some humility and help some people along the way, which is a win all around, by my count.”

“A well-considered idea,” Gert said. “I approve.”

“I’ll be choosing your scheduled route,” Arella said. “You can expect a lot more trudging through the desert than nice delta towns.”

“That’s fine. I would appreciate if it included North East Quarry Village Four, if that’s possible. I made some friends there a while ago and it would be nice to check in.”

Arella looked slightly peeved at Jason welcoming her condition.

“Are you sure you can get your team to eat being placed on punishment detail with you?” she asked.

“We’re already making plans,” Jason said. “If you don’t give us one, we’ll probably roam around clearing off adventure board notices anyway.”

“Very well,” Gert said. “You will be assigned a road contract. Contingent on it being carried out satisfactorily, your promotion will be reinstated on its completion.”

“Thank you, Inspector.”

“Thank me by doing your job and doing it well, Mr Asano. We are done, here.”

She stood up and departed without a further word. Arella followed, giving Jason a complicated and assessing look.

“I’ll have the details sent to you before the road contracts go out at the start of the month,” she told him and likewise left the room.

Jason made his own way out, returning to the reception desk.

“How did you find the head of the inquiry team?” Albert asked as he paused for a chat.

“Disconcertingly agreeable,” Jason said.

Albert raised an eyebrow.

“That’s the first time I’ve heard someone call her agreeable,” he said. “The Duke hates her more than he hates Arella.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes. She’s completely rigid when it comes to Adventure Society rules and authority but has a complete disregard for anything else. Locals laws and authorities mean nothing to her. I’ve seen the Duke march in here more than once, only to leave more angry than he arrived every time.”

“Something worth knowing. Good looking out, Bert.”

Valdis informed Jason and his team that they would soon be returning to the Mirror Kingdom and they arranged one final match in the Geller family mirage chamber. Jason and Humphrey gathered the team on the houseboat to discuss strategy.

“I really want to win, just once,” Neil said. “Sending him off knowing that we can stand along side the best.”

“That’s easier to plan than execute,” Humphrey said. “They’re all close to bronze-rank, more experienced and have been working as a team for much longer. They’ve been able to take apart every strategy we’ve attempted by staying calm and responding with tactics that make efficient use of their superior power and practised teamwork.”

“Then we disturb their calm,” Neil said. “Hamper their efficiency, disrupt their team work. Surely you have something, Jason? Disturbing people’s calm is your life’s work.”

“Well, I was thinking about something,” Jason said.

“Oh?” Humphrey prompted.

“We’ve been thinking about Valdis’ team the wrong way,” Jason said. “We’ve been strategising as if they were collections of power and skill sets.”

“You don’t think we should strategise around their powers?”

“Of course, but we also need to look at them as people. Think about Valdis. We’ve been looking at him as a high-speed, high-impact melee attacker and using Sophie to contain him. Trying to take him out doesn’t make strategic sense because the effort to put him down would cost more than having him put down is worth, compared to Sophie bundling him up.”

“You think that’s wrong,” Sophie said.

“I do,” Jason said. “We haven’t been thinking about them as people. Valdis isn’t just a power set. He’s a prince of the Mirror Kingdom. The rest of his team were hand picked to stand alongside him.”

“Oh,” Humphrey said, eyes wide as revelation dawned. “I get it. Disturb their calm.”

“Would you mind filling in the rest of us?” Neil asked.

“Strategically,” Humphrey explained, “their team is built around their healer, Sigrid. She facilitates and directs strategy. We’ve tried pouring into her multiple times but they have tried and tested strategies to defend against exactly that.”

“This isn’t new information,” Belinda said.

“The strategic core of the team is Sigrid,” Jason said, picking his explanation back up. “The political core, however, is Valdis. Prince of the Mirror Kingdom. He’s the reason their team exists and I promise you that in their heads, the central figure of the team isn’t Sigrid,

but him. This is our last shot at beating them until we go to the Mirror Kingdom and kick the snot out of them on their home turf. I'm willing to bet it all on the bottom line of Valdis' team being that he has to survive, whatever the cost."

"But this is a mirage chamber fight," Clive said. "He will survive."

"Yes," Humphrey said, "but those instincts have been ingrained for years. I can tell you right now, they were being prepared for Valdis' team before they ever received an essence."

"Exactly," Jason said. "That disparity between the actual core of their team, Sigrid, and the core that's been drilled into them, Valdis, is the gap in their armour. If we go all-in on Valdis, right out of the gate, I bet they'll do the one thing we haven't been able to force out of them. They'll make a tactical mistake. Even if it's just a fleeting moment before their discipline kicks back in, it gives us a small but critical window."

"So we feint on Valdis but actually move on Sigrid," Sophie said.

"Exactly," Jason said.

"We're going to have to really sell the feint," Humphrey said.

"We can do that," Jason said. "The advantage we have on them is versatility. We can change things up faster than they can react. So long as we can get them to make that mistake, we can capitalise before they can cover for it."

"You think we'll win like this?" Sophie asked.

"From just this, no," Jason said. "There's a good chance they'll regroup and retake their formation, even in the face of everything we throw at them."

"Then we need to figure out how to stop that," Neil said.

"No," Jason said. "We try and stop them, because it would be suspicious if we didn't. We fight hard to keep them scattered, which will make them clump together all the more. If they're going to put so much effort into gathering up, it would be a waste not to use that against them. The advantage of never having our strategies work against them is that they haven't seen them through to completion. It's time we showed Valdis and his team some things they've never seen before."

Chapter 193

Valkyrie

Valdis wildly fended off Humphrey's attacks as behind him, Sigrid desperately healed their team members. Even using his smaller sword Humphrey couldn't match Valdis' speed but his strength was overwhelming. Valdis was more highly-mobile striker than defender and could not meet the barrage of special attacks leaving him to a slow retreat as Sigrid fell back behind him.

In their previous encounters, Valdis had always ended up fighting Sophie while Humphrey used his heavy sword style to pressure the heavy defender from Valdis' team. He had dismissed Humphrey's swordsmanship as all power, no finesse.

Now Humphrey used his smaller sword, stylised as an angelic wing. Despite the embellishments it was still a practical, single-edged sabre, flashing out with much more rapid attacks than Valdis had seen from Humphrey in the past. When he first moved to protect Sigrid, Valdis assumed his superior skills would compensate for being forced into holding his ground. Only now did he remember that Humphrey's mother was a famous swordswoman. Humphrey's swordsmanship was every bit as rigorously trained as his own.

If it were simply a duel, Valdis' mobility and experience at duels and lighter blades would have given him the edge. Forced to keep himself between Humphrey and Sigrid, the advantage fell to Humphrey, whose style was more suited to a standing clash. He pushed Valdis back step by step, with solid, unrelenting attacks.

While Valdis had the unquestionably stronger team, the one advantage Jason and his allies had was versatility. They had seen almost every trick Valdis and his highly efficient cohort had to offer, while they had more up their own sleeves. Their ability to surprise was what had forced Valdis into the position he was now in.

As the fight began, Sophie, who normally went after Valdis, had instead bolted away while the rest of her team had converged on him to sell the feint. Clive switch-teleporting her with the heavy defender guarding Sigrid was the signal to give up the feint and move on her instead.

The defender had not been worried. Displacing the defenders was a standard strategy he had faced before and his abilities included a rapid-movement power that allowed him to reposition as circumstances required. When he went to use it, however, he was yanked back like a chained-up dog trying to sprint and getting pulled up by the neck.

He turned to look at what had jerked him back. There was a crystal rod sticking out of the ground, with a force tether connecting it to him. He launched into a charging special attack, which bounced off a force field around the rod, although he felt the impact weaken the field. At first he failed to notice the sense that another of his abilities suddenly became unavailable, as if he had used it as well.

He was human and had no shortage of special attacks, so when he started unleashing them, the force field quickly starting to buckle. Only as the field neared collapse did he realise that for every power he used, another became unavailable. When the field finally gave out, the crystal rod exploded, blasting him backwards. He was far too tough for that much to stop him, although he certainly felt it. It was not his first experience with the armour-penetrating feel of resonating force damage.

He pushed himself swiftly to his feet, only then realising that for every attack he had used, another power had been expended, including his critical movement powers. He recalled it was the effect of a curse levied by the strange role-shifting woman on the enemy team. With a grimace, he started running back in the direction of the main battle, encumbered by his heavy armour.

Sigrid had suffered a near-fatal damage when Jason and his team had sprung their trap out of the feint against Valdis. As Jason predicted, her team had suffered a brief but critical moment of panic, leaving the most slender of windows in which Sigrid was exposed to attack. Their enemies were poised for that moment, Jason's team poised to switch gears while Valdis' team moved to protect him.

Sigrid had barely kept herself alive through the use of a potent self-heal that would not be available again for hours. Even then, she was left badly hurt and even suffering some afflictions. Humphrey's spirit reaper attack had pounded down her personal shield, giving Jason the chance to throw some quick spells her way before the shield snapped back up.

Both teams had six members although their make ups were very different. Compared to Jason's eclectic and versatile team, Valdis had a traditional healer and heavy defender. The rest of his team were mobile and attack-focused and they focused on swift blitz tactics. Along with Valdis himself was a spearwoman who specialised in potent, charging strikes. Their ranged attackers were an archer using a mid-range skirmish style and a spell caster with the wind and needle essences.

Those three attackers found themselves in a fast-moving dance with Jason and Sophie, startled to find the pair more than holding their own against superior odds. Sophie was even faster than they were and apparently impervious to harm. She deflected

projectiles with her bare hands, physical and magical alike. When they tried to catch her in area attacks, they hit empty air she had already vacated.

Like Valdis, the trio were startled by the skill of their enemy. While they were frustrated at the inability to inflict any real damage, they were relieved by her lack of powerful attacks. They turned their attention to Jason but found him just as much trouble. Their own shadows had come to life, draining their mana as Jason moved in and out of them at will. At any moment he could appear or disappear right next to them, slashing out with his black and red dagger or quickly chanting a spell on the move.

Although the reach of his dagger was short, Jason's deceptive style proved a tricky opponent. His cloak floated around him, shrouding his movements as a dark arm reached out, carrying his dagger past the reach of even the spearwoman's lengthy weapon, while being far more flexible. He wasn't landing critical hits but he didn't need to.

The fight drew out as Jason's powers filled his enemies with a growing sense of dread. His afflictions carried their horrifying work on their flesh, only Sigrid's stream of healing holding it back. Their own shadows seemed to have turned against them, an intimate and unnerving form of attack.

Between rapid-fire shadow jumps and raw speed, Jason and Sophie flickered around the trio of enemies like mating hummingbirds. Jason was more aggressive than his normal in and out style, his quick attacks left only superficial wounds but each one was a clock of doom counting down on his enemies. He even cast the odd spell in the direction of Valdis and the defender madly sprinting back toward the fight. It was only the efficient healing of Sigrid being spread around the battlefield that kept things under control, although she didn't have time to spare to cleanse the afflictions.

Jason's more aggressive approach left him more exposed but he trusted Sophie to cover him. Every time their enemies thought they pinned him down, suddenly Sophie was there. Most teams preferred a traditional, heavy defender but Sophie was demonstrating the true value of the mobile guardian archetype.

When all three of their enemies came too close together, Jason unleashed one of his trump cards in the form of leeches spraying from a cut he sliced on his hand. That could well have spelled the end of the fight if not for Sigrid. Using another of her long cooldown powers, every member of her team other than the distant defender gained a short-lived shield that exploded out from inside them, blasting away the leeches covering their bodies.

Many of the leeches were destroyed on the spot, others being scattered across the battlefield. Even the brief exposure left more afflictions behind but Jason was taken aback.

Once he actually caught enemies out, the deployment of Team Colin was normally the finisher. Never before had his familiar been so thoroughly and immediately countered.

With all their members caught up in fights, Valdis' team faced one more threat from where Clive, Belinda and Neil were gathered behind a protective wall of summons and familiars. The bunker strategy was one of many the team had developed, a place for Belinda and Clive to launch control and attack powers from safety. It also freed Neil up to throw out shields and healing without the pressure Sigrid was being subjected to.

Neil had frequently sought out Sigrid over the past weeks. Their ability sets were similar and her experience was far more extensive than his. He had confidence in her abilities, but could not help but admire the equanimity with which she directed her team, even as Humphrey pressed in on her.

Even as Sigrid's team was thrown into chaos, caught up and scattered, they were slowly moving to regroup. Their discipline and experience showed as they slowly returned to formation, even caught up in their individual fights. If not for the dangerous spells pouring out of Clive, they might have turned the fight already. The need to shield her team was a key reason Sigrid was too busy to cleanse Jason's afflictions.

The minion wall made going after Clive, Belinda and Neil an infeasible option for Valdis' team until they had regained a semblance of order. The only attackers they could spare were their own familiars and summons, which could do no more than initiate a distracting monster brawl.

On Jason's side was the ominous figure of Gordon, whose blue and orange beams poured relentlessly onto the enemy minions. Belinda, Clive and Humphrey's familiars were likewise present, along with Neil's summoned chrysalis golem and Humphrey's summoned dragon-tooth warriors.

The golem looked like an ogre carved out of diamond. With every attack against it, a rune appeared on one of its many facets. Clive's familiar, Onslow, fired off elemental attacks from the runes on his shell as Clive periodically recharged them with his own mana. Onslow was back next to Clive, as was Belinda's lantern familiar that fires bolts of force at the enemy. Her other familiar, the illusory echo spirit, was dancing around the enemy familiars, distracting and baiting them.

Humphrey's dragon-tooth warriors were normally humanoid figures with bodies of ivory, decked out in conjured equipment provided by his personal space power, magic armoury. In this case, however, the summons were affected by the summoning die Jason had gifted to Humphrey that randomly affected the form of summoned creatures. What

were normally three ivory soldiers were instead a trio of hulking bone gorillas, covered in heavy conjured armour. They even wielded hefty, iron-shod clubs.

The final members of the wall of minions was Stash. Like Gordon, Stash was smarter than the summoned creatures, with the added value of being versatile, like the team to which he belonged. He moved wildly through the brawling familiars and summons, his form rapidly shifting from one shape to another. One moment he was a resilient bark lurker, soaking up an attack aimed at the gorillas. The next he was a darting bird, quickly repositioning.

The summons and familiars on the other side were, like their owners, fast and attack-oriented. A were wolf-like creature fought alongside a sleek metal humanoid figure, covered in sharp edges. There was a ball of needles with chitinous spider legs and a scorpion that fires spines from its stinger. Floating amongst them was a small lantern, projecting shields to protect them. They were outnumbered by the familiars and summons of Jason's team, making little headway beyond forcing Clive, Belinda and Neil to keep an eye on them.

Behind the minion melee was the key reason Valdis' team had not yet managed to regroup. Clive's offensive potential was primarily contained within in a single, potent spell, wrath of the magister. He could charge it up and unleash powerful attacks, on a one minute cooldown. With Belinda's ability to reduce an ability's cooldown by that same amount, both with an ability and her tattoo, Clive unleashed a mana-hungry but incredibly potent series of attacks. As his mana pool was greater than any two of his teammates, however, he had the freedom to do so.

More than anything else of the battlefield, Sigrid was poised to respond to Clive's spell, throwing out her strongest shields to intercept. Even then, the spell burned through protections, forcing Sigrid to follow up with her strongest heals. As with Jason unleashing Colin, it was only the consummate skill and power of Sigrid's healing and shielding that prevented the fight from already being over.

For a while, at least, Belinda's ability to loop Clive's potent spell was a defining force on the battlefield. She even copied the spell and cast it herself when he was done. It was another strategy they hadn't used against Valdis before and his team couldn't be certain how long Clive and Belinda could maintain the barrage. They were too busy to do any more, however, and were forced to endure.

The failure of Jason's team to finish off Sigrid with their ambush was the defining point of the fight, as there was no question she was the most impactful person on the field. Standing bloodied and unbroken with her Valkyrie blond hair, her piercing blue eyes took

in every part of the fight. She was the glue that held her team together in the wake of the enemy's divide and conquer strategy; the critical factor in every part of the battlefield. Through the chaos, she fought desperately to bring her team back into order, barking out directions between spell chants. Their practised teamwork and extensive experience allowed them to make subtle moves to coordinate, even caught up with more immediate concerns.

Jason's team had defined the pace of the fight, but the arrival of Valdis' defender turned the enemy's six on five advantage into an even fight. The defender's cooldowns were finally back up and he erupted into the battlefield at Sigrid's direction. Jason and Sophie were pushed back, Jason not daring to dive into the formation Valdis and his team were falling into. He recalled Shade's bodies to himself as Valdis started attacking them with disruptive-force special attacks.

The reformation of Valdis' team came as they realised that the spell barrage from Clive and Belinda was finally over. They knew they had to seize the moment and turn the tide as Jason had placed them on a clock. Jason's afflictions were past the point that Sigrid could eliminate them while still healing the team. They took one of their sweeping attack formations and started moving on Clive, Belinda and Neil. If they could take out the healer along with Clive before his cooldowns ended, the fight would be over.

Valdis launched forward at the head of his team, flashing a triumphant grin at the chance to finally fight on his own terms. Then he saw an uncharacteristically hungry smile of Humphrey's face and concern flashed through his mind. Sigrid had also intuited that something was wrong but the warning to scatter came too late.

A crystal rod rose up from the ground in the space between the two teams. The air shimmered as tethers of force yanked Valdis' team toward Jason's. Then Jason's team vanished. Cold, dark energy flooded the area, the merest touch opening terrible wounds as their flesh rotted away like it was recoiling.

Belinda's tether had brought the teams close enough for Neil to catch both teams in the six hour cooldown power he obtained from his reaper awakening stone. Reaper's redoubt placed his team safely in a dimensional space and flooded the area with death energy. Given Valdis' team were all afflicted with Jason's necrosis-enhancing curse, it was a finishing move that closed out the fight. In the strange, dark dimensional space of Neil's power, the team started receiving messages.

-
- You defeated [Valdis Volaire].
 - You defeated [Sigrid Freyn].
-

As the most capable members of the team, Valdis and Sigrid had put themselves on the line to cover the others, making them the first to fall. The others soon followed and moments later, awoke in the mirage chamber control room.

Valdis sat up on his platform, glancing between Sigrid and the still bodies of the enemy team still inside. He let out a relaxed laugh.

“That was unexpected,” Sigrid said.

“And just think, Sig,” Valdis told her. “You didn’t want to make friends.”

Chapter 194

Departures

Danielle Geller played the recording of the mirage chamber fight for her important visitor.

“They used my son’s status against him,” the Mirror King said. “It seems your son has picked up your knack for spotting people’s leverage points.”

“No he hasn’t,” Danielle said. “My Humphrey’s a good boy.”

“I see,” the Mirror King said. “You teamed him up with someone who thinks more like you.”

“The man is good at making friends,” Danielle said. “Just ask your son.”

Valdis was deeply regretting his insistence on joining Jason in drinking bronze-rank liquors. It was the farewell party for his team on Jason’s houseboat and when he saw Jason drinking the higher-ranked stuff he had joined in over Jason’s warnings. He didn’t remember anything between that and waking up with a pounding headache and his father at the end of his bed. Now his team were making final farewells on the deck of the houseboat, although he wasn’t saying or listening to anything as he struggled with a throbbing head and unruly stomach.

Valdis and his team were packed and ready to leave via portal, having spent the night in the houseboat after the raucous party. They had only travelled to Greenstone via boat originally because of the arrangements made by Emir. He liked big entrances, as evidenced by the grandiose arrival of his cloud ship days after Hester had quietly portalled him to the city.

There was also the problem of actually opening a portal to Greenstone. Whatever other nuances a dimensional transport power might have, the requirement to have visited the destination was universal. Most of the teams had been portalled as close to Greenstone as their people could reach that was in the path of Emir’s transport ships.

“It’s for the best,” Sigrid told Jason, nodding a head at Valdis. “If he was in a better state then he’d be making a last-minute attempt to poach your team members.”

Valdis looked like he was going to say something, then looked like he was going to throw up, giving up on the former to avoid the latter.

“You’re not going to make a recruiting pitch on his behalf?” Jason asked.

“My job, first and foremost,” she said, “is to keep Valdis out of trouble. You are definitely trouble.”

Jason laughed. "Next time we see you, we'll all be bronze rank. We might come visit that kingdom of yours and give you a chance for revenge in your local mirage chamber."

"You do remember that we repeatedly beat you, right?" Sigrid asked.

"You're only as good as your last fight," Jason said. "That makes us the winners, leaving you to return home in disgrace."

She shook her head. "I still can't fully parse you, Jason Asano. Are you a fool, a genius or a monster?"

"Yes," he said with an impish grin.

Suddenly every member of Valdis' team dropped to one knee, except for Valdis himself. Jason's own team followed a beat later. Jason turned around to find a man standing on the deck that he hadn't sensed, even through his connection to the boat. The man was dressed well but not extravagantly, looking to be somewhere in his late thirties with a neatly-trimmed blond beard.

The man's appearance was unremarkable, but his aura was something else entirely. It was not overwhelming, in fact, just the opposite. Jason could hardly tell where the man's aura stopped and the rest of the world began, as if the very world around him was simply an extension of his power.

Another man walked across the cloud-stuff gangplank and onto the deck from the marina. His positioning and posture marked him as subordinate to the first man, despite his own powerful, gold-rank aura. He was glaring unhappily at Jason.

"You should kneel," he told Jason.

"Why?" Jason asked.

"To show your respect. You stand before the king."

"I've always felt that if someone wants you to kneel, it isn't respect they're after, whatever they might tell you. Also, *the* king? I mean, he's *a* king, I'll grant you. Certainly not my king, though."

"Do you even have monarchs where you come from?" the Mirror King asked. His voice was deep, rich and tinged with amusement.

"Kind of," Jason said. "We sort out our own business, but old folk like to have a royal or two floating about, so we borrow someone else's queen from time to time."

"You borrow a queen?"

"Yep," Jason said. "We pop her over, wheel her down the street so people can have a wave and then send her back. It works out for everyone."

"That's madness," the Mirror King's offsider said. "He's telling strange outworlder stories to disrespect you."

The Mirror King laughed. “What he’s doing is poking the nest to see how aggressive the wasps are. You remind me of Danielle Geller when she was young and precocious.”

“Thank you,” Jason said.

“You’ll have to forgive my friend Hastor,” the Mirror King said. “Among his varied and valuable roles is protocol officer, at which he very much excels.”

“Thank you, your majesty.”

“Sadly,” the Mirror King continued, “the traits that makes him an excellent protocol officer serve him less well in more informal settings. If there isn’t a chart so seat everyone in the room by relative rank, he starts getting snippy.”

“Your majesty!” Hastor protested.

At that moment, Valdis, who had been lurking behind Jason, lost his battle with his stomach. Lurching to the side of the deck, he vomited loudly over the side.

“Good thing I ranked up by poison resist power,” Jason confided in the Mirror King. “It soaked up just the right amount of alcohol. Also, I apparently don’t have a stomach. I was going to ask my mate Clive about it – that’s Clive kneeling there – but I figured the answer would be pretty gross. Which may sound odd, coming from the guy with the flesh-rotting powers, but there you go.”

“It seems my son has learned a lesson about limitations,” the mirror King said with a chuckle. “Those can be hard to find for princes.”

Valdis staggered forward to stand next to Jason.

“Dad,” Valdis croaked in greeting. The Mirror King gave his son a wry smile.

“Having fun?”

Valdis let out a wordless groan and the Mirror King chuckled again.

“Thank you for putting up with my son, Mr Asano. I think it’s time to go.”

“No worries, your kingness. And you can call me Jason.”

The Mirror King grinned and threw an arm around his son’s shoulders, who groaned.

“Come along, boy; you can explain the state you’re into your mother. If you would, Hastor?”

Hastor called up a portal that looked like a sheet of glass and the Mirror King marched his son through. Just before he passed through, Valdis shared a put-upon look with a grinning Jason, departing with a wave. Once the king was gone, Jason and Valdis’ teams stood up, Sigrid politely moving to greet Hastor. The disgruntled look on Hastor’s softened with their brief and formal, yet somehow still warm interaction.

“It’s good to see you, father,” Sigrid said after her formal greeting.

“Wait, this guy’s your Dad?”

“He is my father,” Sigrid confirmed.

“And he doesn’t get a hug? That’s cold.”

Sigrid giggled, shaking her head.

“Thank you for the hospitality,” she said to Jason’s team. “I look forward to the next time we meet.”

She led the rest of her team through the portal, leaving only Hastor with Jason and his team.

“Thank you,” Hastor said, to Jason’s surprise. “While I cannot agree with your gross deficit in etiquette, the young Prince doesn’t have a lot of friends who will stand beside him instead of kneel.”

Hastor didn’t wait for a response, stepping through his portal, which vanished.

“That was unexpected,” Jason said. “So, Emir’s portal lady is Hester, and that guy’s portal guy was Hastor,” he mused. “Are portal powers a name thing?”

“Of course not,” Clive said. “You need to watch your decorum around royalty.”

“Do I?” Jason asked. “I was more thinking that I need to get powerful enough that they have to watch their decorum around me.”

The keg of crystal wash was much larger than the cloud flask, yet Jason emptied it into the flask without any sign of the flask being full. He had returned the houseboat to the flask in preparation for their departure, which left Rufus and Gary once again stripped of accommodation for the duration of the road contract. With the conflict with the Builder cult at an uneasy pause, Gary and Rufus turned to other endeavours. Gary would be rejoining Emir at Sky Scar Lake, while Rufus would lodge at the Geller estate as he refocused his attention on the training annex project.

The fight against the Builder cult was at a lull after the raid on their island outpost and the Purity church was in something of a limbo while everyone waited for word from on high, be that the main branches of the churches or the gods themselves. In the meantime, the church of Purity’s people were comfortably but thoroughly detained under the authority of the ecumenical council.

Once he had drained the cask of crystal wash, restoring the cleaning functions of his magical abode, it was time to head out. It was a short walk from the marina to the loop line station for Jason and his team, which carried them to the Adventure Society campus. Waiting for them outside the jobs hall was Humphrey’s sister, Henrietta.

Henrietta was a statuesque and handsome woman whose short-cropped hair swept back dramatically. In practical leathers and with a dimensional bag slung over her shoulder

she had the confident ease of an experienced adventurer. Her eyes were a bright shade of purple, a sure sign of a summoned familiar inhabiting them. Belinda's lantern familiar, Shimmer was likewise subsumed into her eyes, turning them silver instead of purple.

Henrietta was a minion specialist and Jason knew that she would have her three summoned familiars inside her body. Her fourth familiar was bonded to her like Stash was to Humphrey. It was a phoenix, the classic variety native to the desert. Rare and elusive, people lived whole lives and died out in the desert without ever seeing one. It was a gorgeous creature with feathers like living fire, which stood out even when familiars were a common sight. As the phoenix could not disguise itself the way Stash could, she largely left the mystical bird to its own devices, since she was always able to sense and communicate with it.

Summoned familiars had a number of practical advantages over bonded types, but the bond was not without its perks. A bonded familiar could be sensed at all times in a way summoned familiars only could be while subsumed within the summoner, which was not a practical advantage. The closest Jason had to this was Shade and his three bodies. While Shade's other bodies were out and about, Jason could sense them so long as at least one copy of Shade took the place of his own shadow. It also helped make Shade a useful spy.

"I've already picked up the contract," Henrietta said. "Let's head out."

Every road contract consisted of a group of iron-rankers, usually a team, with a supervising bronze ranker. In the current, uncertain times, Henrietta had appointed herself to look after her brother and his team. Danielle had also made sure Henrietta had certain expensive magical consumables to use in a pinch.

The team turned around and headed back for the loop line. After leaving the station, they prepared to head out for the desert. Clive had arranged for a heavy duty skimmer that could handle rocky terrain to be waiting for them at the edge of the delta. Skimmers specialised to sand were relatively cheap, but the magic that kept them aloft became less effective over less smooth, sweeping area. Knowing they would be ranging far and wide, Clive had requisitioned a more robust model designed for all kinds of terrain.

To get to the Magic Society outpost at the edge of the delta, the team started deploying their various means of transport. After returning from the trip to Jayapura, the team had new means of transportation available to them.

Humphrey already had Stash, who would happily transform into a heidel. Stash didn't like the colour of regular heidels though, leaving Humphrey riding a bright pink animal. Jason's familiar mount was Shade, who could transform each of his three bodies into horses due to Jason's dark rider power.

The hair of each horse was black, with white, glowing hooves, eyes and mane. White mist, shining against the black coat of the horses rose up from the hooves. Jason would have been satisfied so long as Shade didn't turn into a heidel, but what delighted with the glorious form he took.

"Looking sexy, Shade."

"I believe," Shade said, "that comment is inappropriate on numerous levels."

Clive had purchased a floating disc during their trip away. It was much the same as the ones they had used in Jayapura, but could function in low-magic areas like Greenstone. As with most such cases, it required someone with a special power to use magical tools to function.

Neil has no such power and no shape-changing familiar. He ended up in a floating trolley, towed behind Clive by a magical tether.

"This doesn't feel dignified," Neil said as Clive towed him along like a child. He looked over at Henrietta, riding a heidel-like construct creature, strangely crafted from what looked like folded paper. It would not hold up to the rigours of combat but could fold itself down small enough to carry in a pocket, like a two-headed origami horse.

"I should have bought one of those," he lamented. He had seen them for sale in the Mystic Quarter in Jayapura but had balked at the price. Given the money he still had from the essence auctions, he was now regretting his own prudence.

"I watched the recording of your fight with that Prince and his team," Henrietta said as they rode through the city streets.

"What did you think?" Neil asked. "Beating that team is impressive, right?"

"Impressive?" Henrietta asked dismissively. "It was a travesty. You lined your familiars and summons out like they were bricks in a wall. Do you have any idea how much potential you squandered?"

Henrietta had already spent some time with the team, training them in the use of their familiars and summons. She was, it turned out, unhappy with the results.

"During this trip I'm going to drill you all until you stop wasting your familiars. Jason is the only one of you even starting to use his familiars properly and he still has a long way to go."

"Thank you," Jason said.

"I wouldn't get too happy," Henrietta said. "Your performance was only decent compared to the rest of this lot. You left one of your familiars standing around with the others, too. You'll be drilling as hard as anyone."

"I don't mind a bit of hard work," Jason said.

Henrietta grinned at him.

“You will when I’m done with you.”

They were making their way down Broadstreet Boulevard, one of the main artery roads between the Island and Old City’s north east gate when they all felt a surging aura. Looking in that direction, they could see rainbow light shining over the rooftops from several streets away.

“A manifestation,” Henrietta said darkly. “Right in the middle of the city.”

“Maybe it’ll just be an awakening stone,” Neil said.

“Not with light display of that size,” Clive said. “That’s a monster. Probably silver rank.”

“Silver rank?” Neil said. “Do we go?”

“Of course we go,” Jason said. “We’re adventurers.”

“I’m not,” Belinda said. “I haven’t had my assessment, yet. Does that mean I get to not go?”

Jason flashed her a grin. “No.”

He urged his shadow horse to a gallop, roaring ahead of the group. Trailing behind him was the sound of hooves on the packed earth of the street, mixed with the sound of Shade’s voice.

“I would like to remind you that I can talk. You could just ask me to go faster instead of digging in with your heels.”

Chapter 195

No Pot of Gold

The people of Old City were reacting in one of two ways to the rainbow light shining in the air. Many were fleeing as fast as they could, rushing past Jason and his team as they rode toward the source of the commotion. Other members of the populace were trying to find a spot to watch from a safe distance. At worst, they would get to see some adventurers in action. Even better would be if it turned out to be an essence. Maybe they would even have a chance at grabbing it for themselves.

Jason and his team were not the only adventurers in the area to come running. There was another team of iron-rankers in full gear, plus a handful of people with iron and bronze-rank auras that, from their casual clothes, were just in the area on civilian business. Jason and his team dismounted their various means of transport.

“Once the monster manifests,” Henrietta said, “everyone follow my direction. If there are lower-rank secondary monsters I’ll have at least some of you on them. Otherwise I’ll put you on crowd-wrangling. The onlookers won’t be willing to go until things get dangerous, so we’ll need to keep them from panicking and trampling one another.”

The rainbow light turned out to be emerging from the ground. Chunks of street had broken apart and were floating in the air like dandelions on a breeze as the light rose up from the holes left behind. The assembled adventurers moved up to peer into the holes, seeing through the light that there was a good-sized space below.

“Some kind of hub for the water utility tunnels,” Clive said, taking a stone tablet out of his personal storage space. The magical map etched into it shifted as he pushed his fingers across the surface of the tablet.

“That’s troubling,” Clive said after finding what he was looking for. “There’s a wastewater treatment hub right underneath here. It’s probably been damaged by a manifestation his strong.”

“You think that’s troubling?” Jason asked. “I think you’re missing the main point.”

“What do you mean?” Clive asked.

“Monsters take forms according to their environment, right?”

“Oh,” Clive said, realisation dawning.

“What is it?” Henrietta asked.

“There’s no pot of gold at the end of this rainbow,” Jason said, “I think we’re about to fight a poo monster.”

Even as he said it, filthy water started geysering up from the holes in the ground. The gathered crowd started recoiling loudly as gobbets of viscous water rained from the sky,

bringing with it a terrible stench. Jason quickly pulled out his magic umbrella and the wastewater rain avoided the bubble that formed around him. Belinda and Sophie immediately ducked into the bubble with him as the others looked on in envy as they were rapidly drenched in filth.

“I think we might need another keg of crystal wash,” Jason said.

The splashing water did not lay inert after landing. Like a living creature it crawled over the ground, buildings and even people it landed on, seeking to congeal into pools.

“The rain is the monster,” Henrietta called out. “Some kind of elemental.”

As the rain congealed into pools, the pools started radiating auras. The biggest pool was condensing a silver-rank aura, the smaller ones either bronze or iron.

“Start attacking if you have anything that will be effective,” Henrietta called out, not just for Jason’s team but all the assembled adventurers. “Anything explosive or any resonating-force powers will be most effective against a water-type elemental. Avoid ice or anything else water-based it can absorb unless you can freeze and shatter all at once.”

Elementals were forming anywhere that the water was pooling, from the middle of the street to the flat rooftops and even on shopfront awnings. Globulous masses of thick, rancid liquid congealed into gelatinous chunks, until an accumulated pile started undulating in the direction the closest living thing. They oozed across the ground, spilled over walls and tipped out of whatever the wastewater had been accumulating in, splattering to the ground. Jason spotted one elemental secrete its way out of a fruit cart, flowing between the fruit like some unholy juice.

“Like a less-awful kale smoothie,” he muttered to himself.

Gordon, who inhabited Jason’s aura, was much easier to draw out than Colin, who lived his bloodstream. All Jason had to do was project his aura the right way for Gordon to appear at his side and soon blue and orange beams of force were gouging their way through elementals.

Jason’s afflictions would be worthless against the elementals own powers so he drew his sword, although he knew he would be more use directed elsewhere.

“I’ll be better off on crowd control,” he told Henrietta. “This is a bad match-up for me.” Henrietta nodded.

“You know your team better than me,” she told him. “Set the roles.”

Jason had Sophie join him on crowd wrangling as her speed was more useful than her fists against the ambulatory sewerage monsters. The others he assigned to a elemental hunting. Humphrey’s powerful attacks could smash an elemental apart, rendering the magically-infused water inert once more. Clive had his legendary staff tucked under one arm and his legendary wand in the other hand, blasting out force energy

from both. Neil kept an eye on the whole field, shielding and healing anyone who needed it, from their own team to other adventurers and civilians. Belinda chained her force tether to collect elementals together where all the adventurers could lay on area attacks.

The other adventurers had also leapt into action as elementals emerged across the sprawling area of streets, alleys and rooftops where the wastewater rain had fallen. That included Henrietta, who called her familiars into play. She let out a breath that became a dervish of ash and cinders that charged into the liquid elementals, evaporating them into clouds of foul, choking steam.

Purple light poured out of Henrietta's eyes, from which manifested a huge, bizarre floating eye, held aloft by leathery wings on each side of the orb. It flew around projecting a beam of purple energy that blasted apart the elementals. The last familiar was a lantern emitting soft green light that healed any living thing it encountered. She sent it floating off in search of civilians caught up and isolated by elementals.

Even Henrietta's previously absent phoenix appeared, diving out of the sky like a burning spear. In a series of swooping strikes it punched through elementals, their watery bodies exploding with sprays of filth and steam.

Having put her familiars to work, Henrietta employed a power not unlike Clive's ability to draw ritual circles. Hers, however was specifically for summoning creatures. Where most people would have to lay out a circle of salt or other appropriate substance, she drew a simple magic circle in the air with her finger, which was traced out in silver-blue light. She was done in moments and the circle transmuted into a shimmering portal, through which came one summon after another.

The first was a crow made of golden fire, superficially similar to the phoenix but formed entirely from golden flames with burning red eyes. It soared out of the portal and joined the phoenix in its swooping strikes. Next through the portal was a winged centaur, clad in armour and carrying a shield and lance. It galloped into the fray, smashing apart elementals with sweeping shield bashed and crashing blows from its own wings, used as bludgeons.

The third entity to come out looked like a strange, dark angel. It had no arms but four wings, two black and two white. Around it floated four disembodied hands. It flew into the air, looming over the chaos and started sending out the floating hands. Where they touched an ally, the ally was healed. Where they touched an elemental, the elemental was desiccated. The hand would push into the elemental as it reduced down to a dry, hard nugget of waste before floating off again.

The final one was a golem made of crude iron, glowing with internal heat. Similar to the forge golem Jason had seen Gary summon in the past, this furnace golem had flames behind the metal grill in its torso, rather than molten metal.

There was no shortage of elementals to go after as more and more kept forming. The geysering wastewater continued unabated and the filth rain kept coming down. As some focused on eliminating the elementals as quickly as possible, Jason, Sophie and some of the other adventurers spread out to help people. The rain had come down further afield than anyone had anticipated, seeping under doors and into the buildings around them.

After designating roles, Jason couldn't spare any more attention to what the rest of the team was doing. He used the voice chat to keep in touch, but mostly it was left clear for Humphrey, Clive, Belinda and Neil to coordinate.

It was his evolved map ability that he relied on the most, which now had the ability to pick out friends, enemies and neutrals. Jason ran around, Gordon trailing behind. Jason kept one of Shade's bodies with him to communicate with the two he sent scouting. The mana draining power of Shade's even turned out to be effective against the elementals, which were basically magically-infused physical matter. Draining the magic out of them had a strongly deleterious impact on their integrity.

He fought elementals as he had to, with his sword and proving sufficiently effective. It was sufficient to at least extricate people from where they had been boxed up so he could find them a path out of the rain. He relied mostly on his familiars to begin with as he accumulated power on his sword until it was slicing through elementals at a blow.

People were scattered, panicking and making all the wrong decisions. Elementals were coming into their homes and businesses, they were running exactly the wrong way and it was generally like herding cats in a thunderstorm.

With the spread of people and the rain coming down a whole range of streets, alleys and buildings, he didn't always reach people in time. Some he found dead, drowned in viscous filth. He didn't have time to reflect on how inured he had become to death, already looking for the next person he could save.

It seemed like the geysering wastewater would never come to an end. More and more of the foul fluid poured into the sky, raining down to form yet-more elementals. The smaller, iron-rank ones coalesced first, followed by the larger bronze-rank ones. The adventurers had mostly cleared out the panicking innocents by the time the largest pool congealed into a towering silver-rank elemental. At the height of a two-storey building, it loomed over the adventurers battling its lesser kin. Fortunately its formation finally saw the geyser of filth peter out.

More adventurers had arrived as the battle continued. Henrietta and the other bronze-rankers were gearing up to confront the giant elemental when the first silver-ranker arrived. With dark, waving hair, broad shoulders and huge hammer, he leapt from the roof of a nearby building. He had arrived after the filth rain stopped but was quickly coated in muck as great chunks exploded off the elemental with each swing of his giant hammer. It was a huge lump of metal, even the handle, but he waved it about as if it weighed no more than a stick.

The arrival of the silver ranker and the end of the rain forming new elementals signalled the turning point of the fight. Each rank of adventurer turned to the matching rank of elementals, which were cleaned up in short order. In the wake of the battle, the adventurers gathered up, mostly covered in filth. A few had shielding abilities that protected them, while others were already using crystal wash or similar items to clean themselves. Jason tossed a bottle of crystal wash to the silver ranker who was now covered in muck.

“Thanks,” the adventurer said as he tipped the bottle over his head, which restored his square-jawed handsomeness and lustrous, wavy hair. “From that cloak you’re wearing, I’m guessing you’re the Jason Asano people have been talking about.”

“That’s me,” Jason said as the adventurer looked over the team forming around Jason. His eyes fell on Sophie and Belinda.

“That would make one of you two Sophie Wexler?”

“Why would you have heard of me?” Sophie asked as she took one of the crystal wash bottles Jason was handing out.

“The Adventure Society director had a friend of mine following you around in secret for months. He was the one quietly intervening to help you avoid being caught. He wasn’t allowed to talk about it at the time, of course. A bit ethically shaky, but there you go.”

“I met him briefly,” Jason said.

“Oh, I know,” the adventurer said with a laugh. “You got him told off, so he hates you.”

Henrietta approached the group, nodding to the silver-rank adventurer.

“That was good timing, Bert.”

“Henry, It’s been a while,” the adventurer greeted back.

“Wait,” Jason said. “You’re Bertrand Bertinelli?”

“You can call me Bert,” Bertrand said.

“Wow,” Jason said. “You really are the handsome one.”